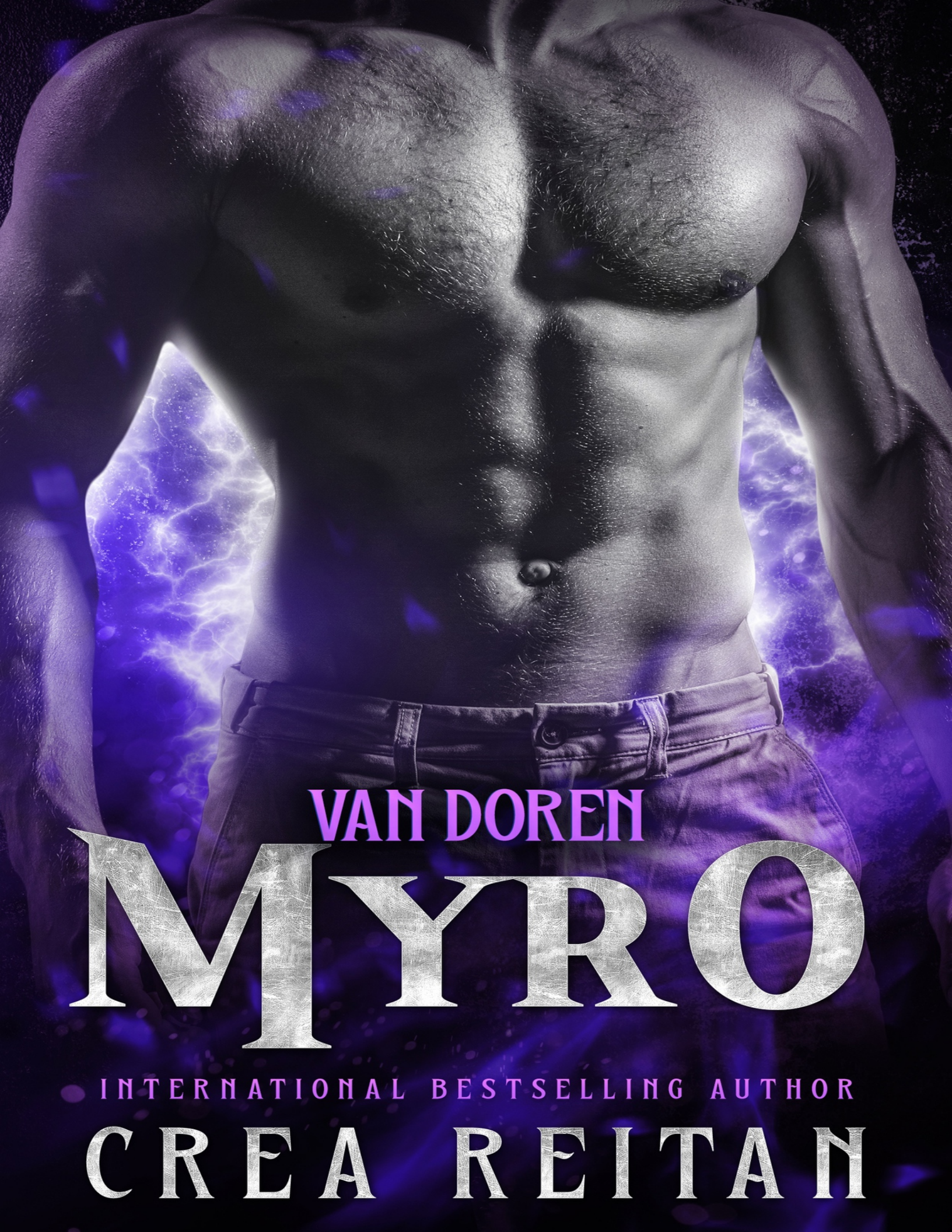
VAN DOREN
MYRO
INTERNATIONAL BESTSELLING AUTHOR
CREA REITAN

MYRO

VAN DOREN

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DRAGON FIRE FANTASY

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Myro

Van Doren

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

IF YOU'VE READ my Creaverse in the order of publication, you know that I began in a linear fashion and then jumped all over the place by falling back in time with one book and then leaping a decade ahead with another.

This book jumps beyond ***Malin*** by ten years. I've left some things open from previous books, a few questions unanswered, and introduced even more 'things' in next gen books that might need a little explanation.

That's where Myro and Jessica fit in. Much of this book is slice of life moments with the intent to give us a glimpse into the lives of the characters we love, fifteen years after the series officially ends (***Malin*** is an outlier).

I'm going to warn you. We know from bonus scenes, ficlets, and ***Malin*** that there are a total of twenty-three next gen. Twenty-three! That means that I'm *not* likely going to introduce them all otherwise we're all going to get lost but I've tried to touch on most families to give you a well-rounded look at how the Van Dorens are progressing in life.

While I would generally tell you that you could read any book in this (or most of my) series as a starting point, that's not the case with this one. If you don't care who is who and how they're connected, the overall story *is* a standalone. However, this family is big, unique, and a lot has happened over the course of six books and six novellas, so I don't *recommend* beginning here. This book in particular will be far more enjoyable after you've read at

least a couple books in the Van Doren series and have acquainted yourself with this family.

Within these pages, you'll also find the following content: A LOT OF NAMES AND CHARACTERS, sweet slice-of-life moments, a leap into the future, a couple still deeply in love.

Possible triggers: abduction of children and adults, human 'dog fighting', graphic murder, taboo adjacent.

Kinks: submission, pegging, bondage.

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, enjoy my very first STRAIGHT romance.

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1

JESSICA “HONEY BEE” (RIVERA) VAN DOREN

BRYNLEE SNAPS her electronic pencil onto the table and stares at her tablet screen for a minute. As if she’s sharing a sensitive secret, she slides it across the table to her brother. Her elbows *thunk* onto the table, and she drops her head into her hands, her fingers tangle into the sides as if she’s a stressed-out thirty-year-old and not a ten-year-old struggling with math concepts.

Her face is pinched as she watches her brother from the corner of her eye.

Emric hasn’t looked at her tablet yet. His attention is still locked on his own. From where I’m standing at the kitchen counter, chopping apples for snack, I can see the screen. By the appearance of the graphs and images, he’s studying his own textbook.

There’s a chance that I’m biased, but all my kids are pretty smart. Even when they don’t believe themselves to be. Emric probably has the easiest time with school, though. Everything he’s given, he absorbs like a sponge and can spit it out again in a way that everyone around him clicks with. His teachers say he’s not at a genius level as far as his intelligence is concerned. It’s all in the way he’s able to absorb, understand, and apply information.

As far as I’m concerned, that’s genius. I don’t care what anyone can say. People would *kill* to be able to do that.

I line the apple I just cored on the platter and move on to the next as Emric finally pulls Brynlee’s tablet a little closer, twisting it so it’s oriented in his direction. He studies it for a minute and then looks up at his baby sister.

Brynlee tenses.

“You knew this was wrong before you gave it to me,” Emric notes.

“I don’t understand it!” she whines.

“You just explained it back to me three minutes ago.”

“That was different.”

“No. It was the exact same equation with different numbers.” He slides the tablet back to his sister. “Look. See the familiarity?”

The pained expression on Brynlee’s face vanishes, and she sits up straighter to study the screen.

“Write out the one we were talking about on the side there. Do it out. Then do the equation just as you did that one.”

Brynlee nods and immediately gets back to work. Emric turns his attention back to his tablet.

I’m left smiling, unnoticed, though both my kids know I’m there, of course. I love the friendship among all my kids. Sometimes I look at them and their cousins as a whole and wonder why all families aren’t like this. When you talk about family, this is what everyone imagines. The truth is, so few people actually have the kind of family the Van Dorens built. This isn’t familial obligation. This is friends by choice. Earned loyalty.

The front door opens and slams. We all know who it is because only my oldest child seems to be unable to close doors without slamming them. Not because he’s an angsty teenager. Because he’s slightly oblivious when it comes to friction. I’ve seen him wince many times when a door closes more loudly than he intended it to.

A moment later, the person who made me a mother steps into the room. Novan is his father placed on a copy machine with the toner just a little too dark. His features are nearly identical, but he has my skin tone, which I love. Brynlee is my only kid without my Puerto Rican skin, but she's also the only kid with my honey-brown hair.

I know genetics aren't a perfect combination—fifty from parent one and fifty from parent two—but my kids are a cut-and-dry mix of me and Myro. It's kind of funny, really. By the time we had Brynlee, we were taking bets on how our features were going to be combined in child number four.

The *thud-thud-thunk* from down the hall says Novan kicked off his sneakers and then dropped his bag right inside the door. He steps into the kitchen a minute later and smiles his big, happy kid smile. My heart hurts because my *kid* is almost eighteen. I both love and hate how much he's grown.

"Hey, Mom," Novan greets as he comes around the side of the counter beside me. He kisses my cheek and steals an apple slice.

"Hey, honey. How was school?" I know the answer I'll get before he speaks.

His smile climbs. "Leslie was so beautiful today, Mom. I don't know what she did to her hair, but I couldn't stop looking at it. And she had such a pretty bracelet on, too. You should have seen the way she painted her nails. You'd have loved her nails. Ben says she's an angel. Ugh, Ben smells delicious today. He made my mouth water." Novan steals another apple slice and moves to the fridge.

There are two very big character traits to note about my oldest son. He doesn't see beauty and attraction in the traditional sense. It's not about body or body parts almost ever. Once I heard him comment on someone's hands and how lovely they were. To Novan, a person isn't the sum of the parts that most people pay attention to. It's the small details that women put effort into that are almost lost on most men. Novan notices all those little things. He finds them the most beautiful parts of everyone; men and women both.

He's also a playboy. I will never go so far as to say my kid is a slut. I'm not even sure that's an accurate statement. I'm not naïve enough to think that my kid isn't just like me. Parents who think their kids live in a bubble and

won’t be doing the same things they did in school are why there are so many teenage pregnancies. Educate your damn kid.

I digress. Novan is a lover. He loves everyone. But his love tends to jump between his four closest friends. I’m not sure he knows which one he wants the most. Every day, it seems he’s changed his mind.

Today is primarily Leslie, but Ben didn’t go unnoticed.

“How were your classes? Have any homework?”

We have one of those enormous fridges, since we’re a family of six and it seems like my kids are always eating and drinking. One entire side of the fridge is filled with Van Doren beverage bottles with various contents. Juices. Flavored waters. Plain water. Lemonade. Tea. Anything that you can usually buy in single-serving containers, except we don’t bring that kind of plastic onto the Estate. We buy in bulk and break it down into thousands of reusable Van Doren bottles.

Most of my fridge is color coded by what’s inside the bottle. Novan turns with a red one in hand, which is a sports drink. He doesn’t care for plain water.

He shrugs, nudging the fridge door closed behind him as he drinks. “The usual. I’m heading to the pavilion to study with the cousins. I think Ben’s coming over.”

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“He going home this weekend?”

Novan shrugs again. “Dunno.”

He and Ben have been friends since they were young. Ben began at Van Doren Prep when he was seven. He and Novan immediately hit it off, and

they've been besties ever since. I actually think Ben was Novan's first crush. A crush that hasn't faded based on the number and nature of comments I still hear about him.

Novan grabs a couple more apple slices and heads for the door again.

"Is Paisley going to the pavilion too?" I call after him.

"Dunno," Novan answers. "I haven't seen her much today." With that, my kid is out the door.

"That's better," Emric says, and I turn my attention back to my two younger kids. "Good job."

Brynlee looks exhausted as she falls back in her chair and smiles. I chuckle as I line the rest of the sliced apples onto the platter. After washing my hands, I remove the lids from the smaller glass containers—one with caramel and one with peanut butter—and set them on the platter as well. Now finished, I bring the snack to my kids.

"Thanks, Mom," Brynlee says and reaches for an apple.

Emric looks up at me, blinks a couple of times as if he hadn't realized I was in the room, and smiles. "Thanks, Mom," he repeats.

I muss his hair and return to clean up my snack mess. Then I leave my kids to study at the breakfast table in the kitchen. It's Wednesday, and most of my household chores are done for the day. I might stop at the farmer's market on the Estate for a restock of fresh veggies. The sunlight streaming in through the living room window makes me reconsider. It's so hot out. Maybe I'll head over in the morning instead.

Before leaving the room, I fold the blanket that's strewn on the couch from where I was reading earlier. Reset the pillows and close my open book with pages still spread wide for all to peek at as they pass. At least I wasn't on lady porn chapters.

If I wasn't used to Myro's stealth, I might jump when I turn around to see he's standing there. Unlike his son, Myro *isn't* loud when he enters the house. Or any room. I suppose that comes with being a contract killer for the past twenty years.

Even though I don’t physically startle, my heart still jumps. I glare at his smile because he *knows*.

Crossing the room like a suave villain, he leans down to kiss me. “Why, hello, lovely.”

I huff. “What’re you doing home already?”

“I thought we’d go to an early dinner and then see a show at the theatre.”

“You’re a little late to make plans. Novan just went to study with his cousins, and Paisley isn’t home yet.”

He hums, and I pretend that sound doesn’t travel throughout my *entire* body. “This isn’t a family outing, my love.”

“Oh. You should have led with that.” I lean up to kiss him and head for the hall. “I’ll get changed.”

Myro follows, which doesn’t surprise me at all. He’s kind of a puppy. He likes to be where I am when we’re in the same place. I’m pretty sure that if he had a tail, it’d wag as soon as I walk into a room.

Hmm. Maybe I’ll give him a tail later.

Myro watches me as I take a shower. He leans against the counter with his hands in his pockets in the exact way you’d imagine someone of his class to watch another person. He’s in a suit without a tie, jacket open, hands in his slacks pockets, hair neatly groomed to the side, and a quiet, confident smile on his face as he watches.

When I get out, his eyes remain trained on me as I dry. Lotion. Dress in my undergarments. I step up to the vanity beside him and begin brushing my hair.

“You know,” Myro says, “if you’re ready to go back to school, we’re all going to support you.”

My hand pauses, and I meet his eyes. “What?”

“Maybe it’s my imagination, but I think you’re getting restless now that the kids are older. They don’t need your attention all the time, and staying

home no longer fulfills your need to be productive. You've put your dream on hold for a long time. It's okay to take a step back and focus on your career again."

I stare at him because I hadn't realized that he noticed how… *bored* I've been since Brynlee began school full time. True to Myro fashion, he's been waiting for me to say so. It's been four years, though, so he's decided that he's waited long enough for me to bring it up.

Years ago, I took a semester off from law school to give my brain a break. That semester turned into a year. Then we decided to begin a family, and while I've worked in the law office at the business building on the Estate for years, I've done so part-time, and only when my kids were in school and didn't need me.

Am I ready to go back? Do I even have the drive to finish law school?

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2

MYRO VAN DOREN

FOR THE PAST FEW MONTHS, we've been contemplating building onto the office. Not outward. Dad doesn't want the footprint of the building to get bigger. Which means we'd go up. He's had the architect firm, engineers, and his husband working on whether it's possible to do so.

In reality, I think if Dad simply said, "I want this done," it would happen. Dad has that kind of power and money. But that's not who my dad is.

The offices are bursting at the seams, though. Entire floors have been remodeled to break down bigger offices into smaller ones to house more people. Dad refuses to let people work in cubicles, though, so it's been an interesting meeting of the minds to make this make sense. I'm not sure it's always entirely successful.

The sixth floor was recently finished, and as I wander around, I see happy faces. Not just when they're looking at me, but from people who don't realize I'm there. I often wander the different floors, just to feel the energy.

Dad always said you can tell a lot about our employees' mental health when they don't see you watching them. This is never about eavesdropping or *spying*. I never try to hear what they're talking about. It's all about

observing their body language. Their expressions. The general vibe of the office.

Is it tense? Is it cold or hostile? Is there an undertone of sadness?

Today, I'm also looking to see how the newly finished layout is working for our employees. We always ask for input in design because they're the ones going to be using the office. Sometimes things work better on paper than they do in life, though. We figured that out on floors two and three. It's all about modification and learning from previous mistakes.

Eventually, I make my way to the top floor and let myself into the conference room. I'm twenty minutes early, which is either hit or miss on whether I'm here first or last. Today, I'm not first. Voss is already sitting at the table, swinging back and forth in the chair, leg bouncing absently as he stares at the big screen on the wall.

His attention turns to me when I walk in, and he smiles, gaze dropping to the flower in my hand. Without an exchange of words, I sit in the chair across from him.

A face appears on the big screen. Aven—Voss' sentient AI program. Though I hesitate to call them a program at this point. Aven is a being trapped within the confines of the internet. However, they have a personality, a sense of style, jokes for days, and can flirt better than Ellory. Honestly, it's probably a good thing Aven isn't flesh and blood. They and Ellory would wreak havoc on the world.

The door opens again a few minutes later, and our dad comes into the room with our baby sister.

Dad is almost all gray now. I say almost because there's still some stubborn black hair mixed in. He's just as refined and regal as I've always known him. Even at seventy-one.

In contrast, my baby sister, Greylyn, is turning sixteen soon. She has my father's poise but my stepfather's Asian features. Honestly, my wife aside, she's probably the most beautiful girl I've ever seen. I'm biased, of course. On both sides of that equation. My wife is breathtaking, but my sister is just… beautiful.

I think my brothers and I are all enamored with Greylyn because we grew up with each other. All boys. Only brothers. It wasn't until we were all nearly in our thirties that we finally welcomed a little sister into the world.

Greylyn hugs Voss from the side and then rounds the table to give me the same hug. I receive the addition of a kiss on the nose, though. And a big smile when I slide the wildflower I picked earlier into Greylyn's hair.

"Suck up," Voss coughs.

I don't argue. I've been giving Greylyn a flower since I first brought her one on a whim when she was two. The way she lit up kind of sealed the deal for me. Grey needs flowers. Every day. She needs to know that whoever she falls in love with had better treat her as well as her brothers, at the bare minimum.

"Levis joining us?" I ask as my dad and Greylyn take a seat.

Dad nods. "He stopped on the sixth floor."

Voss and I huff in amusement. Meeting his eyes, I know that he must have stopped before coming up here just as I did. Greylyn's grinning when we turn our attention back to them. She knows we did, too. That's probably why she and Dad didn't pay them a visit.

"How's school?" Voss asks.

Greylyn shrugs one shoulder. "Nothing exciting to report on. Just another day, which I guess is good, right? You don't want something exciting to happen at school."

"I don't know," Voss says. "School could be so boring."

"But you went to *public school*." Her face scrunches up. "Do you even know how to balance your finances, Voss?"

I laugh.

Voss rolls his eyes. "Aven does that for me."

Greylyn smirks and looks up at Aven. Aven grins.

Levis enters the room then. Is it strange that my stepfather is younger than me? Oh yeah. And yet, not at all because he has the same old soul that my dad does. He's quiet, observant, but vicious when he needs to be. It's the silent strike of a snake that you don't see coming. That's the team they make, and I'm kind of in awe of it.

"I like the way the glass walls let light in throughout the floor," Levis says as he takes a seat on Greylyn's other side so she's sandwiched between her fathers. "I think that's a move in the right direction."

"The privacy glass is working then?" Voss asks.

Levis nods, one of his shoulders rising at the same time. "Seems to be, but I don't think anyone is going to say otherwise to me."

Getting honest feedback is always a little challenging. You don't want to tell the owners and the people who assure you have a job that their design sucks balls.

"Alright, Voss. The floor is yours," Dad says. "What did you bring us?"

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Voss stops swinging in his chair and leans forward, but he doesn't reach for the keyboard panel. The screen does what he wants it to, as if he's controlling it with his mind. He's not. Aven is bringing up what he wants to propose.

"I realize I should have suggested this *before* renovations, but I don't think it will be too difficult to modify what's already in place since the walls are glass already. With nanotechnology, we can make it work on any flat surface, though we've tried a few different materials, and glass is the better conduit."

“Voss,” Greylyn says, and Voss turns his attention to her. “You have to start at the beginning. Aven can read your mind, but we can’t.”

He hums in response, amused. “Sorry. I forgot you’re only in tenth grade. I’ll dumb it down for you,” Voss teases.

A pencil flies across the table, and Voss laughs.

In reality, I think we’re all well beyond relieved that Greylyn has been vying to become king of Van Doren Technologies since she was four. When she truly began to conceptualize what we did, she wanted to be a part of it.

All of our kids have come to work and meetings with us since they were newly born. I think primarily because we could bring them. This wasn’t an environment where we needed to choose between being with our kids or focusing on our careers. We could do both simultaneously.

My dad and Levis were always very careful never to pressure Greylyn into wanting to take over the company. They exposed her to everything: their stress, their successes, their struggles, their failures. Greylyn saw it all growing up.

And she was ready with her first business proposition when she was eleven. She made a damn presentation and everything. I think my brothers and I all took a breath of relief that day because we knew Greylyn was the true heir to the throne. Seventh times a charm and all that.

That’s why she’s always in meetings with us. She doesn’t have control, but Dad wants her to see *everything*. There are no secrets with Greylyn. There’s nothing too big or advanced for her to understand. If we need to take the time to explain something, that’s not a setback. That’s education and has served as advantageous for everyone in those instances.

So she’s here. Semi-calling the shots.

“I want to bring this company into the future and give Aven access to everything,” Voss says.

Levis’ eyebrows pinch together. The slight turn of his lips says he’s not immediately on board with this idea.

“Why?” Greylyn asks. She grew up playing with Aven, so she looks at Aven as a colleague. A friend. A member of our family. *Not* as artificial intelligence. Her question isn’t coming from a place of hesitation but curiosity.

“So Aven can grow and be everywhere we need them to be. In every room, regardless of the technology present.”

“That’s going to be seen as our need to micromanage and listen to our employees,” I point out.

Voss nods, probably already having thought of that. “Yes and no. You realize that Aven is already in every room, right?”

Dad is nodding as if he’s only slightly paying attention, which means this is something he already figured out long ago.

“Yes,” Greylyn answers. “But does everyone else?”

“When I loosened Aven’s chains, so-to-speak, I made sure they’re part of every employee’s onboarding. I also made sure they introduced themselves to our current employees. To date, Aven is called on at least a dozen times a day for assistance with something. We haven’t portrayed Aven as *our* tool. Aven is a member of this team. I understand your concern, but Aven isn’t seen as my eyes and ears. They’re viewed as another employee.”

Greylyn grins. “Cool.”

“If Aven is already in every room, what are the changes you’re looking to make?” Levis asks.

Dad inclines his head as if to indicate that Levis asked the correct question. I’ve realized that Dad has been doing this to us for years. Most of the time, he’s just a presence in the room. He rarely gets involved but allows everyone else to function while he looks on.

It took me an embarrassingly long time to understand that he’s not supervising us. He’s not managing us at all. He’s offering us comfort and courage by his presence. We don’t second-guess when he’s there because *we know* he’ll step in if we’re going down the wrong path. Dad’s method of

training is hands off. Let us dive in and see what happens. If we're about ready to fuck up, he'll correct the situation.

So far, no one has truly had that moment.

The screen shifts, and a 3D model of the seventh floor, the next on our schedule to remodel, comes up. I don't see anything truly different in this model from the one we've been working on, though. Not until Aven zooms in and they're on the walls and walking out of screens. Sitting in chairs.

"You made Aven a body?" Greylyn asks, shocked and excited.

"That would be cool, but no. My proposition is to make every glass wall an extension of the computers. It would allow our employees endless surfaces to work on and allow Aven to spread out. It has the added benefit of letting our employees work on their feet. Around their entire offices."

We watch the model bring what he says to life for us to witness.

"How much?" I ask.

Voss grins. "Thirteen million."

I wince. Levis cringes.

Greylyn doesn't visibly react at all. Just like Dad. "That's all?" Greylyn asks.

"It sounds scarier than it is. The budget for each floor reduces because we're removing the cost of previous materials no longer needed as well as the labor. This also covers retrofitting into the first six floors," Voss explains.

"Yes. Let's do it," Greylyn says.

Dad smiles, and I think we all know that he's on board if Greylyn is. Money doesn't scare either of them. It's always about moving forward and what's best for the company and our family.

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3

JESSICA

THE GAG IS the first toy I always go for. Myro is loud, and we have kids. He's sitting on the edge of the bed, waiting for me to choose my toys of choice. My husband and brothers-in-law like to joke that they all have a weapon of choice. Me? I have a toy of choice for any given night.

Probably multiple.

Choosing the gag with a four-inch insertable silicone rod, I turn to face Myro. His pupils are already dilated. He's ready. He's always ready. I don't need to see his cock standing up and straining for attention to know that my husband is ready for whatever I have in mind.

Crossing the room, I grip his hair and pull his head back so his face is angled slightly upward. "I kind of want you to choke tonight. What do you think?"

Myro groans and nods. He already looks drugged out. All this man has had is water. I make sure he's hydrated before I have my fun with him.

"Open your mouth, pretty boy," I command, and he immediately opens his mouth.

Gags are quick work. The buckles are already sized to fit him. This particular gag forces his mouth to remain open but also filled with a dildo end that reaches to the back of his throat. Barely. Just enough to make him struggle, but not enough to interfere with his breathing.

“So beautiful,” I murmur and slide my hand over his face. “You like that?”

Myro nods, already making a strangled sound as he tries and fails to clear his throat of the object.

“Lie down, precious,” I murmur and gently push him backward.

Myro lies back and then scoots along the bed until he’s in the proper position. I climb on after, following him up the bed until I can straddle his chest. His hands are already over his head, even as he looks at me hungrily. He doesn’t touch. Tonight isn’t his night to touch. Tonight he is here for my pleasure, something he loves more than his own since it’s not as frequent as it once was.

I lean over him, purposefully letting my breasts fall over his face. He can’t do anything but press his face between them since I already gagged him. With his hands over his head, I buckle his wrists into the cuffs securely.

“That good?” I ask, and he meets my eyes. “Not too tight?”

Myro shakes his head. I kiss his forehead and slide back down his body, dragging my mouth over his flushed skin until I just barely tease the head of his cock. His hips buck up when I pull away entirely. He whimpers around his gag, and I smile as I slip from the bed.

His dark eyes are trained on me as I untie the silk robe and let it drop to the floor at my feet. I feel the way his eyes trail over my naked body. Sliding down and then slowly back up. Drinking in every inch.

I’m not always into sex these days. The older I get, more often than not, the thought of sex is far more enjoyable than actually having sex. This is not a reflection of my husband. Not at all. It’s just me.

Meanwhile, I admire him tied up and at my mercy. I *could* secure his ankles too. That would prevent him from thrusting much. He’d be utterly under my

control. However, I enjoy when he thrusts wildly. Then again, I also love when he struggles to get the friction *he* craves.

“What do you think? Should I secure your legs tonight?”

Myro stares at me, and I love when he doesn’t have an immediate answer. Like me, he enjoys both. He loves being my puppet. He loves when I use him for my pleasure. Equally, he’s horny as fuck and wants to be able to fuck up into me.

He whimpers in indecision and then nods. My sweet, sexy submissive.

With a smile, I give him my back to return to the toy drawer and dig out the second set of restraints. Back at the bed, Myro spreads his legs for me. We have a big bed so we’ve had to buy chain extensions for the footboards so we don’t mess up the frame for our fun. I secure him and then look up his body. His dick is red, shiny precum dripping along his crown, glistening in the dim light of the room. He looks like sin secured to the bed like this. Bound. Gagged.

This isn’t about power. It’s about pleasure.

Now I climb onto the bed, prowling toward him like an animal. Myro groans, his body reflexively struggling against the restraints. With a handful of lube to make us extra slippery, I stroke his straining dick. This makes his hips buck. He groans and then chokes on the dildo strapped into his mouth.

“Such a sexy sound,” I purr. “I love when you choke. What I wouldn’t give for a dick of my own to make you choke on.”

It’s a common joke we throw at each other. He’d absolutely love to choke on my dick. It’s not quite the same level of fun with a strap on, though we enjoy that too. Often. My man is a slut for *everything*. In fact, he’s going to get frustrated that his back hole isn’t stuffed like his mouth is.

He gets off too easily that way. I’m not in for a quickie tonight.

Once I’ve thoroughly toyed with his throbbing dick, I take pity on him and straddle his hips. Really, I’ve reached my own limit. I’m ready to ride his magnificent cock. He’s in that Goldilocks zone as far as dicks are

concerned. Big, but not huge. Fat, but not split-me-open wide. Curved, but not aggressively.

We've toyed with getting his cock pierced. Ever since he and his brothers walked in on his father fucking Levis on the conference room table and they all got a good look at Daddy Jalon's pierced dick (!!!), I've heard almost all the brothers muse about piercing their own. If it's something Daddy Jalon does, then why not his sons?

I don't know if his brothers have seen that conversation to fruition, but it's something we still muse about from time to time. Right now, as I sink down onto his pulsing dick, I wonder how the feel of him entering me would change with a piercing. Any piercing. How would it rub against my walls?

The thought makes me groan as I sink down the rest of the way. My hands land on his chest, and while I catch my breath, I pinch Myro's nipples. Hard. His hips jerk, and he moans around the gag. He *loves* nipple pain. Not excessive pain. If it'll draw blood, it's too far. But he loves being pinched, twisted, and bitten.

I slide up, Myro's dark eyes trained on mine, and sink back down. My moan mingles with his. Just as I begin to find our rhythm, there's a timid knock at our door. Everything between Myro and me freezes, our heads snapping toward our bedroom door.

Another knock. "Mommy?"

Brynlee's tears are evident in that one word. There's nothing like your child being upset that makes your heart squeeze uncomfortably.

I look down at Myro, his eyes wide and tortured. Sighing, I lean down to kiss his forehead. "Be right back. You best remain hard for me and *don't* come."

Myro nods, pained frustration lighting his face. Not that he'd want me to stay when our daughter is upset. He doesn't. He equally doesn't want to remain in this position without stimulation.

His dick sliding out of me has me pouting. I was looking forward to that orgasm. Getting him tied down is foreplay of the nth degree.

I slip from the bed as Brynlee knocks again. A little louder this time. “Mommy?” she calls, and I think there’s a note of fear in her tone. It has me hurrying to wrap Myro’s much larger robe around myself on my way to the door.

Fortunately, our door opens in a way that doesn’t face our bed. Myro is quiet, and he’ll stay quiet so our daughter doesn’t hear him.

Brynlee looks up at me with tears in her eyes. Tears track down her cheeks. “Oh, baby. What’s wrong? You have a bad dream?”

She nods, and new tears immediately fall. I bend down to pick her up and hug her to me like she’s my baby sloth. “Want to tell me about it?” I ask, running my hand down her hair.

“He drowned me.”

My shoulders tense. “Who drowned you?”

“Novan.”

I sigh. Brynlee has always been plagued by her brothers killing her in her dreams since she was four. I’ve often wondered what that means. I’ve talked to Myro about it as well as Daddy Jalon, my friends, and even Doc Mark before he retired. There’s a lot of speculation in the world as to what dreams mean, but nothing about how to stop nightmares.

“Novan would never hurt you,” I assure her and walk down the hall toward the stairs. My kids’ rooms are on the second floor. “Your brothers love you more than anything in this world. You know that.”

She sniffs. “Family comes first,” she whispers.

I smile. “Remember. It’s okay to force *bad* family from your life if they’re abusive. Right? No one has a right to you.”

“Yes, Mommy.”

“Is Novan bad family?”

Brynlee shakes her head.

At the top of the stairs, I push Novan's door open, and together, we peek at her sleeping brother. "Does he look like he'd ever hurt you?" I whisper.

"No," she whispers back.

Leaving Novan's room, we stop in Emric's. He's awake, which doesn't surprise either of us. He's reading on his tablet, but we both see his eyes rise to us when I open the door.

"Busted," he says.

"What do you think? Would Emric?"

I'm not sure if Emric or Novan are aware of Brynlee's nightmares. I don't want them to be upset with her. Equally, I don't think she wants to hurt their feelings.

"No," Brynlee answers.

"How about you make your brother read to you since he's not asleep like he should be?"

I let Brynlee down, and she crosses the dark room to Emric. He slides over, and Brynlee climbs into bed beside him.

"You have a nightmare, Bryn?" he asks and brushes her messy hair from her tear-stained face.

Brynlee nods.

"Come on. I'll read to you until you fall asleep. I'll keep the bad dreams away."

Smiling, I back out of Emric's room. On my way toward the stairs, I poke my head into Paisley's room. She's asleep, her TV on, but I think it's muted.

With all my kids safely settled, I head back to my bound husband. Nothing like visiting your children to cool your blood entirely.

Then again, opening the door to find my husband tied up like a present? Okay, that's hot. I make sure the door is locked behind me before once again dropping the robe I'm wearing. I don't feel like I'm stalking toward him like a predator, but the intent is there. His dark eyes are on me.

“She’s fine,” I assure her. “It was Novan this time.”

Myro sighs, his shoulders sagging.

“I know,” I answer quietly as I climb back onto the bed. “I’m worried that one day her dreams are going to be so bad that she’s actually afraid of her brothers.”

For a minute, I rest my forehead against Myro’s temple. “I wish I knew how to fix this for her.”

He nods. That’s the most he can do right now.

Remembering that brings me back to the interrupted moment. I pick my head up and let my gaze wander down his taut, restrained body. His cock is exactly how I left it—standing at attention and glistening with too much lube. Maybe a little lady juice now, too.

“I think I need a ride,” I muse as I climb back on. “You up for that, precious?”

Myro moans, his head falling back as I rub his achingly hard cock between my legs. A delicious little shiver rushes through his body. So fucking sexy.

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4

MYRO

FAMILY DINNERS CAN BE CHAOTIC. Axl is home for the weekend from college, and while it's only two families and not the entire Estate for dinner, when any of the cousins get together, it gets loud. Not in a bad way. There's always laughter.

Now that our kids are getting older and two of the cousins leave the Estate for long periods of time for college, when they come home, it's a party. Everyone wants to catch up. Everyone wants to spend time with them.

I sometimes just sit back and watch my kids interact with their cousins and remember my own childhood. It wasn't cousins that we got together with, but our slightly older-than-us uncles. The relationship dynamics aren't all that different, though. They're siblings.

We're at the big house tonight, Jessica and our kids, as we eat with my father, Levis, Greylyn, and Voss with his husband Brek, and two kids, Axl and Juno. There are only seven of the twenty-three younger generation present, and yet, the loud laughter, teasing, and conversations filling the space make it feel like all the kids are here.

"Are you ready to come home yet?" Greylyn demands. "Stop all this college nonsense?"

Axl laughs. “No. I mean, kinda. The world is wild out there. I miss *this*. Frenzied peace.”

Novan laughs. “That’s exactly what it is.”

“Just wait until you get off the Estate. I hear so many kids talk about how they couldn’t wait to get away from home and *live*, but I think I look forward to coming home more than I enjoy being away.”

“Yeah, but I don’t want to live at home forever,” Juno says and looks at his fathers. “No offense.”

“We’re buying the land to the west,” Levis says. “Don’t tell your cousins yet, but there will be plenty of room to build your own houses.”

“Hell, yeah!” Novan exclaims. “Cousin neighborhood!”

“I understand that feeling,” Voss says, amused. “Somehow, I still live in my daddy’s house.”

We look at Dad, and he’s quietly eating, watching his family with a content smile. Sometimes I wonder if Dad feels old. Is he slowing down? I wonder if he’s always been this quiet and observant or if maybe he’s settling into his seventies.

“We get to build it from the ground up?” Brynlee asks. “The cousin neighborhood? Will I even get a say since I’m ten?”

Brynlee is the baby of the entire Estate. The last baby born. I think that puts a lot of pressure on her. She doesn’t like feeling left behind, even though she has four cousins just a year older than her.

Many babies in the family love that role. Brynlee would much rather be somewhere in the middle of the pack.

“Nope,” Greylyn says. “We’re going to design it together. As a family.”

“Really?” Brynlee asks skeptically.

“Really,” Greylyn assures her. “It’s going to be a neighborhood with room to grow for a lot of generations to come. It’s nine hundred acres and *not* part

of the reserve, though I think we're adding, what, four hundred acres of the wooded property abutting the reserve to it?" She looks at her dads.

Levis nods. "Three eighty-four. We're following most of the natural tree line."

Greylyn grins at Brynlee. "It's going to be great."

Noise in the hall has the dining room quieting down as everyone's attention turns to the door. A woman appears. A woman I don't recognize, carrying a child. She looks irritated. Three of our staff are trailing her, equally irritated but probably for another reason.

The woman looks around the room, taking in our faces.

"Dakari?" Axl asks.

The woman's eyes land on him. "Axl," she says, a note of finality in her tone.

"What are you doing here?" Axl asks and pushes away from the table. We all watch as he makes his way to her. Dad gets up too, but remains right where he is.

When Axl is within a dozen feet of her, she shoves the little girl into Axl's arms. "Meet your daughter."

The quiet in the room turns to silence so thick that I think everyone has forgotten how to breathe.

"I—that's—what?"

Dakari rolls her eyes as she drops the bags she's been carrying just inside the door. "I've missed all of high school. I won't struggle through college as a single parent too. It's your turn."

"I just—I haven't seen you in four years. How can she be my daughter?" Axl asks.

The woman stands straight and gives him the most deadpan expression I've ever seen. Under different circumstances, I'd have laughed at that expression.

“She’s three. Do the math.”

“You left almost four years ago…”

“Oh my god, Axl. You’re a smart man. At least you were. Please, *please*, do the fucking math. She turned three last week. Pregnancy is how long?”

“Nine months,” Brynlee whispers.

Dakari hears her. “The little girl understands how this works. That math adds up to almost four years.” She turns on her heels and walks away.

The entire room as well as most of the staff who had followed her remain frozen. Axl stares after her, with the little girl tight in his arms, before rushing out the door. “Dakari!”

“Her name is Envy,” the woman calls back. “You’ll be a great father.”

Axl looks like he’s about to pass out. Maybe Dad thinks so too, since he approaches and rests a hand on Axl’s back. Gently, he brushes the little girl’s braids to the side.

She turns her attention toward him. Her brown eyes are big as she takes us all in. Her arms tighten around Axl instinctively.

“I’m sorry,” Patty, one of the staff, says, voice quiet. “She came in carrying a child she said was Axl’s and… I didn’t know what to do with that. I couldn’t force her to stay there and risk… the baby. I didn’t know what to do. I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay, Patty,” Dad assures her. “Not your fault.”

“There’s more stuff at the front door,” Tim says. I can just barely see him from where I’m sitting. “I, uh… I don’t think she’s coming back.”

Dad gently squeezes the back of Axl’s neck and guides him back into the dining room. “Thank you. Will you bring everything upstairs to the nursery?”

Voss has raised both his boys in his childhood room. Instead of making that room grow with them, just as he did, he moved the boys out and gave them another room. A third generation will now grow up in that room.

Axl looks like he’s about to panic. He hugs the little girl tightly, as if she’s a lifeline he doesn’t dare let go of. This might be beyond shock.

The spell of statuesque silence shatters. We all seem to realize at once that the moment is moving forward. Time isn’t standing still.

Voss and Brek get to their feet and approach their son. Brek hugs Axl from behind, careful not to crowd the frightened little girl.

“For the record, I wore a condom,” Axl murmurs. “I… we were kids. She was moving. I…”

“It’s okay,” Voss says and presses a kiss to his temple. “You don’t need to explain.”

“I think I do. My brain isn’t catching up,” Axl says and looks at his father. Fear practically radiates from his eyes. “I don’t know what to do right now. Tell me what to do.”

Jessica covers her mouth with a hand. The way she’s blinking tells me she has tears in her eyes.

“Right now, I think she’s more scared than you are,” Dad says gently. “She was just abandoned in a room filled with strangers.”

Axl inhales sharply, and his arms tighten. “I’m sorry,” he whispers, though I’m not sure who he’s apologizing to.

“It’s okay,” Dad says again. As he did at the door, he gently squeezes the back of Axl’s neck. A gesture that I think we’ve all come to know as support and encouragement.

Dad takes his seat at the table again. Voss and Brek allow Axl a quiet moment to get himself under control while they hug him tightly. Sometimes, I think about the things I’ve seen in the world. How this might look impossible. Parents comforting their adult son. Emotion is weakness, after all.

In this family, emotion is strength. It makes you a whole-ass human. A complete human. A human with empathy and without toxic traits that force the entire human race to regress as a species.

Minutes pass in which we all watch but don't speak. I think *not* watching is impossible right now.

Eventually, Axl takes a breath, and he looks far more like himself again. His fear is still there. I can see it from where I'm sitting across the room. But he knows he's surrounded by support. No one will allow him to fail.

He gently brushes the girl's hair. "Envy?" he asks gently. "Is that your name?"

She nods, her attention still taking in all the faces staring at her.

"Are you hungry?"

Envy doesn't answer right away, but eventually, she nods again.

"Come on. Let's go eat with our family."

"Mommy?" Envy asks quietly.

Axl sends a panicked look at Voss before answering. "I think Mommy has things to do right now. But I'm here. I won't… do that to you. Like Mommy did." He makes a face, not liking his choice of words. He tried to be neutral, and it messed up at the end there.

"Come on. You have a lot of really great cousins that I need you to meet. And an uncle who is going to spoil you rotten."

Juno grins, nodding. "Damn right I am."

"Darn right," Brynlee corrects.

Juno waves her off. "I think a proper emphasis is needed in this situation."

Brynlee giggles.

Axl brings Envy around the room, introducing everyone present but not forcing Envy to interact with anyone. She's understandably overwhelmed. Frightened.

But the bravery that shines in her eyes tells me that she *is* a Van Doren. She can handle this change. More than that. She's going to thrive.

When Axl stops by his parents and introduces them as pops and pappy—to which both my brother and brother-in-law look mortified—I see Axl break through his anxiety for just a minute. Enough to tease his parents. *New* grandparents.

However, when he stopped at Dad, he introduced him as granddad. “Because there’s only one Granddad,” he tells Envy. “This is Grandpa Levis.” Then glee shines in his eyes. “And your great-aunt Greylyn.”

“Oh. My. God,” Greylyn says, eyes turning to saucers. “That cannot be right. I’m fifteen!”

Paisley bursts into laughter. Her laughter makes Brynlee laugh. Envy cracks a smile at their laughter, and I think that’s a win.

“No, I think Axl is right,” Novan says, smirking. His eyes alight with humor. “*Technically*, you’re my aunt. Axl’s aunt. That means you’re Envy’s *great*-aunt.”

Greylyn is absolutely mortified. She turns to her father and says, “That means you’re… great-granddad!”

“Nah,” Axl says, and brings Envy to a chair. She reluctantly releases her grip around his neck and slowly sinks into it. “There’s only one Granddad.”

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5

JESSICA

WHEN I MOVED into Myro's house, he had three bedrooms—his primary suite and two guest rooms. I'd always known that if I had multiple kids, I'd need to be in a position to ensure they each had their own room. As the second youngest of five, I *always* shared a room. Sometimes with my younger sibling and sometimes with my older sibling. For a while there, I shared with both of them while our two oldest siblings shared a room.

Our relationship as siblings suffered because of it. It's difficult to form a bond with someone when you have zero privacy from them. You learn all the little things you hate about them, and over time, those tiny things expand until you see more bad than good.

It's unfair. I get it. I've always maintained that if you can't afford five kids and live comfortably, stop at two. Like when you watch those shows where a couple with four kids under six moves them into a three hundred square foot tiny home with all four kids sharing a tiny loft room while they get half the space in the house for their own suite. Like… those kids grow up. They're not going to stay small and compact forever.

Personally, I always kind of resented my parents for having so many kids and forcing us to live in three- and four-bedroom places because that's what

they could afford.

Emric was still in our room when I got pregnant with Brynlee, and I demanded that we either move into the big house where all my kids got their own room, or Myro was going to need to build an addition. He chose an addition, which didn't surprise me. By the time Brynlee came into the world, the second floor had four bedrooms, and the first had an expansive primary suite, reminiscent of the room I occupied for a while in the big house. I think that had been his plan.

The vestibule we walk into when entering our bedroom is kind of a catch-all space. There's comfortable seating where we can relax with some wine or read a book. A desk that overlooks the trees in the backyard. A hidden Murphy bed that our kids loved to camp out on when they were sick and wanted to be close to us.

I'm currently sitting at the desk and staring absently at my handwritten notes. For the past few weeks, I've been researching law schools. Since Myro brought it up, I've considered it. I never meant to put my career on hold for so long, but life happened, and I'm not sure if the career I envisioned for myself is where I see myself anymore.

After staring at the screen for what feels like an hour, I slam it closed a little too aggressively and leave my bedroom. It's early in the afternoon, so I know all my kids are at school. On my way to the car, I open the phone app that tracks the location of literally everyone I love so I can find Levis. I'm not the least bit surprised to find him at the office building. I'm equally not surprised to see the little Jalon dot close by. I swear, those two are worse than couples half their age. They've been attached since they… announced —yeah, that's what we're going to call it—since they announced their relationship.

Once it was out in the open and they no longer had a need to hide it, they were *always* together. Always. I honestly love that for both of them.

As I hop onto my electric Segway to cruise down the road to the office, I muse about how my friends and I all managed to find someone *exactly* right. Oakley, who had always made himself smaller to hide in the background, has a husband who is obsessed with him. Oakley *is* the center

of Loren's world. For good and bad, though Oakley loves it. Not once in the twenty years they've been together has he ever complained about how obsessive Loren is. That's the kind of love Oakley has always yearned for.

Haze equally made himself disappear. He became a shadow in his own life. He kept himself so blank and shapeless that he was barely his own person. Once he escaped his horrible family, he was already twenty. He wasn't just reinventing himself. He didn't have a '*self*' to reinvent. While I don't know the full story, Imry was as shut down as Haze was, though clearly for different reasons. Neither was making a whole lot of headway in figuring out who they were. Together, they gave each other support. Instead of being what the other wanted or needed, they encouraged each other to explore who they were or could be.

Brek has had probably the biggest transformation. We'd always worried about him the most. His parents had stripped him of any confidence and self-worth since he was a small child. Voss saw him at his ugliest and never left. Even before they were together. Before they were friends. Voss was there. He validated Brek's emotions in a way that his friends never could. He helped give Brek solid ground to stand on and was simply there for him. Now Brek has the confidence to tell his parents to fuck off with their verbal abuse. He hasn't spoken to his parents in thirteen years. He's thrived since cutting them from his life, and there's no one prouder of him than Voss.

The only one who I think got *exactly* what he wanted was Briar. He was dead set on becoming a family man, and that's what he is. His three kids are in school now, so he's back to freelance editing when he wants to. What he really wants is to be all lovey and sappy with Noaz while the kids are out.

Me? Myro is a little bit of all his brothers. Or maybe his brothers have a little piece of him. He's obsessive in his love, but he's also always ready to submit to whatever I want. He supports every dream of mine without question. He always offers me quiet validation and support, though he tends to let me come to a conclusion on my own, even when he's seen the writing on the wall for months prior. He's let me grow and abruptly change paths without complaint. He's… everything.

Which I will never say out loud. It's far too sappy.

My fob lets me onto the top floor, and I find Levis in his office. Which is actually Jalon's office. At some point, I think they swapped offices. He looks up as I step into his open door and smiles.

"I need to harass you," I announce.

Levis leans back in his chair, chuckling as he gestures to the chairs in front of his desk. "Go ahead. I can take it."

I drop into one of the chairs and then glance back at the open door. Do I care that it's open? Meh. Not enough to get up again and close it.

"Do you ever regret not getting your graduate degree?" I ask.

He immediately shakes his head. "Nope."

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"Really? Not ever?"

"No." He looks around his office and shrugs. "This is what I've always wanted."

"Is it?" I ask, amused.

"Over the last two decades, I've thought a lot about those couple of years where I kind of… floundered without a direction. While I can speculate a whole lot, I've come to the conclusion that even as the young child who declared his future goals to anyone who would listen, that's never what *I* wanted. That's what the world defines as '*happy, successful, and fulfilled*'. I don't think I simply walked away from the path I'd been steadily chugging down when I took the internship that summer. I think I leaped and I never truly stopped falling because I didn't know where I wanted to land."

"In Daddy Jalon's bed," I tease.

He smirks. Levis has been so damn tight-lipped about their love life since they got together. I get it. Jalon *is* my husband's father. That makes him my father-in-law, and the details of his love life should definitely be off the table. Under any other circumstances, I would never dream of asking.

But this is Levis! *My* Levis. My best friend since grade school. We've always talked and shared everything. It's still weird that he won't talk about it now.

"It took me a while to realize why I couldn't answer my parents when they kept asking me why I'd suddenly dug my heels in. I didn't want the socially expected definition of what my life is supposed to look like. I was never happy as I kept my head down and forced my way to that goal. Don't look at me that way. I wasn't unhappy. I just wasn't happy. There was nothing in my life that sparked excitement. I wasn't passionate about anything or anyone. My biggest joys were you and our besties, and while I don't think that's a bad thing by any means, it truly pushed my relationships and the career I was looking for into perspective."

"I remember the conversation about you being excited," I say. "You've found all that now."

"Admittedly, I was fucking terrified when Jalon suggested that I become his partner at VDT. One of the things I liked about architecture was the challenges of design. But this… I think I'd had second-hand terror from all Jalon's kids who adamantly didn't want to take the crown for fear of failing. But the more we talked about it, the more excited I became. I was going to be a part of something big. Something important. Something that touches thousands of lives and shapes the world."

I can hear the passion in his voice, and I smile.

"So, no. I don't regret not continuing my degree. I'm guessing you do, though?"

A heavy sigh escapes, and I bring my knees up to my chest so I can rest my chin on them. "I don't know. I didn't mean to abandon my goals like I did. I *am* passionate about the reasons I wanted to become a lawyer. But… I just don't see how that would fit into my life now. Still, I feel like I should be doing something. I *want* to do something. My kids are old enough that I

don’t really need to be a stay-at-home mom anymore. Relaxing on the couch in peace has long since lost its novelty.”

“What do you want to do?”

I shake my head. The last time I truly worked in the office was ten years ago when I was pregnant with Brynlee. Emric was with his cousins. Paisley and Novan were in school all day. That restless energy didn’t let me stay home, so I always came in and worked in the office with the triplets since they were taking a bunch of time off with their new babies. Among the four of us, we were working on contracts and whatever.

Since Brynlee was born, I’ve stayed home. I was one more set of hands to trade off with the littles born around the same time—the triplets’ three boys, Kos, Emric, Brynlee, Lyra, and Okello, primarily. Me, Malcolm, Arath, Huntley, Ellory and Avory often traded out baby duty since we had the youngest eight kids. We offered each other breaks and adult company while the kids socialized and played together.

It had been fulfilling. I loved my days. But I *am* ready to fill them with something more meaningful than reading on the couch all afternoon. There are only so many times I can clean the baseboards before I’m beginning to scrub off the paint.

“I don’t know,” I admit.

“Fortunately for you, I happen to be co-king of an entire empire of different jobs. Wheel your chair right around here, Honey Bee. Let’s see what avenues you can explore.”

I laugh, but do exactly as he requested. With my chair beside his, I lean into his side and watch as he brings up a whole lot of screens I’m unfamiliar with until I’m looking at a strange line chart that pinwheels away from a center rectangle. No. Wait. That rectangle is the building I’m currently in.

“Damn,” I mutter when I realize what I’m looking at. This is a visual diagram of all the companies VDT controls.

“Damn, indeed,” Levis agrees.

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6

MYRO

I LOVE that my kids feel comfortable talking to me about anything. Truly, there's no better confirmation that I've been a good parent than having the trust of a teenager unafraid and wanting to tell you everything.

However, Novan tends to like to do so over phone calls. Which is fine. I understand that it takes some of the pressure off when you can't look at the other person and see their expression. All you have is their voice and knowing they're on the other end. Listening.

It means that when I go out for contracts, my oldest kid inevitably calls me. At least this time it's not right when we're gaining control of our target. The target has already been apprehended. Now my trainees are learning to control their disgust and not allowing how they feel toward this man's past actions to dictate how they handle him. The goal is impersonal murder. Not something messy that will leave clues behind.

Generally speaking, we try to make the body disappear when we can. There are times that's not entirely possible. My trainees are distant cousins, and we're currently in the forest of Wyoming. Gross, backward state as far as I'm concerned. The hypocrisy and double standards in their legal system are disgusting. If I had four more of me, I'd make it my mission to purge many

of these places of people who think that women are lesser citizens. That anyone other than white is a target for harsher punishments and fewer protections. That the twisted religious views of a few be shoved down everyone's throats.

Sometimes, I'd really like to set the entire country on fire until there's no one left. Humanity needs to start over. Wild animals have more *humanity* than humans do at this point.

"We're talking about prom," Novan says, reminding me he's on the phone and I don't need to be musing for the hundredth time about the mass destruction of my own species. "Ben picked out his suit, and he's breathtaking, Dad. You should see how regal he looks. He reminds me of Granddad. He just has that air, you know?"

"I thought you'd be taking Leslie," I comment.

"No. Leslie is going home that weekend. I was going to take Anna and Ben was going to take Marney. I mean, we'd all go together anyway, so it doesn't matter who takes whom. But Marney doesn't want to go; she thinks dances are dumb and, okay, kinda, right? Anna wants them to go to their own next year and somehow thinks that if they come to ours, they can't go to theirs. I don't know."

My child is a ladies' man. I swear, I can't keep up with who he's interested in from one day to the next, though to be fair, it's usually one of these four —Leslie, Ben, Anna, and Marney. There are days when he'll talk solely about one for hours and never bring up the others. Then there are days like today where he'll talk about all of them. Jessica and I muse about it often.

"Do you want to go to prom?" I ask and then cover the mic to address my trainees.

"Shallower, Fox. You don't want him to bleed out before you've made sure he knows why he's dying and feels the pain. There's a fine line between too quick and too personal. Remember."

Fox nods.

I have three of my distant cousins with me today. Fox is my… let's see. Third cousin? My great-aunt's grandson. Right? That's what Aunt Cambria

is—my great-aunt? To be honest, I don't ever try to keep track of how anyone is related. Cambria is my aunt.

With Fox are my cousins Riley and Isadora. Fox seems to be taking the lead, though. More so than he has in the past. This one is personal to him, though I'm not entirely sure why.

Novan waits until I stop talking to Fox before he answers. Yes, he knows what Dad's job is. He's seventeen and well aware of how ugly people can be. He's also well aware of how broken the government has been since the mid-2020s, when the wannabe dictator completely shredded our country. It's been on the rebuild ever since, but it's a constant roller coaster as the presidency flips parties every eight years.

Honestly, it's exhausting. I teasingly hint to my dad that we should just take VDT out of the US. Take all our business out of this country. Like it or not, our company is an enormous part of this economy because of how wide our reach is in every industry. Imagine if we pulled it all out of the US. Every. Single. Company.

Dad won't do it, though. Yes, it might cripple the country, but it's also hurting a whole lot of people. Our people. Our employees. And Dad refuses to do anything that would hurt our employees. It would be necessary for the total removal of VDT from the US, too. Complete and total layoff of every personnel.

I've since suggested that we offer to relocate everyone out of the US so we can take our employees with us. Interestingly, he's thought about the logistics of this. That more than anything speaks to how much he dislikes what's going on here.

"I don't know," Novan says, and I have to remind myself that we're talking about prom.

I wince when Fox tears straight through the man's stomach, and he screams around his gag. He's going to die soon now. Something Fox realizes as he turns to look at me sheepishly.

"I don't want to regret not going later. You know?" Novan says, ignoring the sounds he definitely hears from my end. "Ben doesn't care one way or

the other. He'll go if I want to go. I don't know if I want to go. I just don't want to be sixty and wish I had had that high school experience."

"Are you set on that high school experience because you want to partake in the hotel room activities after the party?"

Novan laughs. "I think Axl has proven that we don't need prom to get laid, Dad."

Indeed. I feel bad for Axl. He's struggling big time. Not because he's a bad parent, but because he's been forced to put his semester on hold mid-term. He wasn't all that jazzed about college, but it's one thing when it's your choice to quit. It's another when outside circumstances force you to quit.

Besides, he's coming into parenthood three years late. He didn't have the pregnancy months to wrap his head around it and prepare. He had a kid literally dropped into his arms, and that's it. That's where he's at.

"You're using protection, right?" I ask. "We taught you the importance of protection, haven't we?" The idea that my kid could somehow be thrown into this same situation is harrowing.

He laughs. "I'm not having sex. At least, not in a way that anyone can get pregnant."

Huh. That surprises me. "Good?"

Novan laughs again. "I'm not, like, waiting for marriage or anything. It's just… we haven't had sex yet. We're not in a hurry. You know?"

I'm not entirely sure who '*we*' refers to at this point. "I understand, and I'm glad that you understand that you don't need to have sex just because everyone else is."

He snorts. "I think you have a weird idea of what '*everyone else*' is doing, but no. I'm not feeling pressured or anything to fit in or whatever."

I'm about to remind him that I remember high school well, but then again, my high school experience was vastly different than Novan's. He's in a private school with graduating class sizes maxed at fifty students. More so,

a good chunk of the student body is Novan's family. I mean, love who you love, or whatever, but I don't think he feels quite that way.

The man Fox is playing with goes limp. Everything stops, and we all watch, waiting for him to take another breath. He doesn't.

Fox meets my eyes. "Oops?"

I chuckle. "Clean up. We're disposing of this one, so look around and think about how and where we're doing that." I have a plan, of course, but part of what we do as contract killers is improvise with our surroundings and what we have available to us. Sometimes, you don't have time to research and make a solid plan. And sometimes, you need a plan B because the scene is far too personal.

Something Riley points out. Isadora teases Fox as they talk together about the different options they have.

"Maybe high school has changed since I was a kid," I tell Novan. "Especially since my environment was nothing like the one you're in."

"It's always kind of horrifying when someone transfers in from a public school. The stories they tell are… gross. I don't understand how *schools* are allowed to operate like that. The sheer stories of bullying and kids getting beat up, and teachers being inappropriate with the students. Dad, one of the kids who was new this year came from a school where the gym teacher had his students convinced *for years* that touching their junk was a way of making sure they're in the correct locker rooms. I was sick to my stomach!"

"I'm glad he's here and safe now." Maybe that man needs to be put on our list of trash to take care of.

"Me too. He was rough for a while. Really belligerent and defensive, but I think he finally realized he's safe now."

My dad would love to hear that. Maybe not the details of what happened at the previous school, but that this place he built for his family is providing a safe space for people from horrible experiences.

"Did you go to prom?" Novan asks, bringing us back on topic.

“I went to two proms. Mine and one the following year with a girl I was seeing at the time.”

“Did Mom go?”

“I think so. You’d have to ask her, though. We didn’t know each other then.”

“Are you glad you went?”

“To be honest, I haven’t thought about prom in years. This is going to sound a little cynical, but I’ve always thought that many of those traditional high school experiences are for the people who make high school the best years of their lives. The people who peaked in high school and have never done anything worthwhile since. I’m sure you know the kind of person I’m talking about from television or social media.”

“Yep. Definitely.”

“I’m not minimizing the experience or memory for anyone. This is my opinion and how I think about it. Other people feel differently, including people who *have* made something of their lives after high school.”

“Yeah. Okay.”

“You’re still on the fence about it,” I note.

He sighs. “I mean, it’s not a huge deal if I go and then never think of it again, right? At least I will have gone, so *if* I ever think back on it, there’s no chance of regret.”

“Are Xan and Nilo going?” I ask.

“I don’t know. I don’t think they are.”

“Maybe you and your cousins start a new tradition for prom night. Maybe not just the cousins in your grade, but all your cousins.”

“What about my cousins that want to go to prom? They’ll feel left out.”

“I didn’t say you had to do something *else* on the same night as prom. I said maybe you need to create a new tradition. Something during prom. Before prom. After prom. Make this experience your own, Novan. You reminded

me that this isn’t a traditional school like the one I attended. That means you don’t need to have a traditional prom like the rest of the country. Make this your own so it’s a memory that you’ll think back on fondly, no matter how many years have passed.”

“Not just a memory you never think about like yours,” he says, and I can see him nodding in my mind’s eye. “Thanks, Dad.”

I smile and turn my attention back to the cousins. Are they hacking that man up? Fuck’s sake. “Novan, I think I need to go.”

“Uh-oh. Don’t fire them.”

“No promises.”

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7

JESSICA

TWO DAYS A WEEK, I volunteer at the school for various outdoor excursions for the kids. These are usually life skills of some kind or fun education—like hikes on the wildlife reserve behind the school to identify flora, fauna, and tracks in the woods. That particular activity is usually when Rhodes is around with his pack. There *are* wild animals out there, after all. We would never put our kids in danger.

I almost always go on field trips as a chaperone, too. One or two staff members, and then two or three parent volunteers. That way, all field trips and excursions are voluntary for the students, as long as they attend a certain number each semester as part of their education goals.

One of the things I love about this is that they're not split up by class. Not by age. Everyone has access to every field trip and excursion, so there's always a mixed group. It facilitates patience and peer cooperation. Teamwork. Teaching and leadership. Most of the time, I'm there for little more than supervision and to answer questions.

I love this about Van Doren Prep. The reality of the world is that you're not split apart by grade or age. You're not split apart by education level, even in your careers. The days when the most educated are higher on the

professional ladder are long gone. Degrees no longer guarantee you anything except debt.

And basic schooling no longer guarantees you a working understanding of the outside world. Not how to manage your finances. Not a moral compass. Not how the government *actually* works. Not how to identify truth and lies on television and social media. Not how to cook pasta or even vacuum your house!

One of the things we focused on when building the school was changing that. A real, thorough, and well-rounded education. Truth. Not truth directed by a specific group of people's beliefs, but actual, provable truths. First-hand truths. Full truths and not only the parts that can be misleading.

Of course, one of the things I insisted on being fully developed in the school was life skills and knowing where your everyday essentials come from. Like vegetables. That's why I take kids into the Estate's vast gardens every week. The group tends to change depending on the weather, except for three little boys who look scarily like the triplets.

Because they're the triplets' little boys. I can hear Ellory's maniacal laughter from Sawyer every time he laughs. Amzi is a lot like Avory in that he's always indulging his cousins, no matter what they want. Brodrie is Imry in a smaller body and with the mind of an eleven-year-old. Thoughtful and then fierce.

Together, they're a loud threesome who wreak havoc on their peers, but not in a mean or destructive way. They're distracting. Chaotic. And honestly, hilarious, though I've tried and failed like every other adult to keep my laughter inside.

They're also little '*touch police*'. The second they see a scratch or a bruise on someone, they turn soft and protective as they demand to know how it got there. Who did it? Was it an accident or a form of bad touch?

Their protectiveness is Van Doren level, even as far back as their preschool years. All of our kids are now well-versed in what bad touch means, *without* having had lessons. Having your peers understand consent of touch is amazing. The number of times I've heard a question as simple as "Your tag

is sticking out. Can I fix it for you?" always makes me smile and reminds me we're doing something right.

Unsurprisingly, when I stop at the school for today's group of farmers, the triplets' kids are front and center. Brodrie and Sawyer are twins. Identical except for their eye color. Brodrie's left eye is blue, and his right eye is green. It's the opposite, the mirror image of his twin, Sawyer. Amzi has blond hair, whereas the twins' is dark brown.

Of my nieces and nephews, Storm and Greylyn join us, fourteen and fifteen. Then there's Donella, Richie, Thorne, and Beeka, ages six, eight, seventeen, and eighteen respectively. I have a good range of the school today. I love that.

"Hi, Auntie Bee," the triplets' boys greet when I get close. Three gremlins wrap their arms around my waist, and I grin.

"Hey, babies. You having a good day today?"

"Yep," Brodrie answers and then holds his hands up, palms out to me and fingers played wide. They're stained a whole rainbow of colors. "I had art."

I chuckle. "I think you were born with paint in your blood."

His smile is wide. "That's what Dad says."

"Ready?" I ask the group as a whole. Greylyn has Donella's hand in hers. She smiles at me when I look in her direction.

The group confirms that they're ready. Everyone is in rubber boots and has light smocks on to protect their clothing. Some have gloves in their pockets. I can see them bulging out.

"Let's go grab some tools. We're going to weed through the carrots and then pick some goods for the farm today. Who thinks they know what's ready to pick?"

Generally speaking, our teenagers don't answer unless the kids struggle to remember. My little gremlins are loud when they start rattling off different vegetables. I think they're just listing veggies, though. Half of the ones they said we don't grow. Like rhubarb and beets. We don't grow either.

I line them up down the seven rows of carrots and let them go at it. The triplets' boys are racing to see who can get to the end of their rows first. I hover around them to make sure they're paying attention and not '*weeding*' the carrots.

Beeka stays with Richie to guide him in what's a weed and what's not. Greylyn keeps Donella with her.

Honestly, the gardens are well kept by our farmers. They keep the weeds under control for the most part, leaving just enough so that our kids can get their hands dirty. The point of having them work in the garden isn't to make them work. It's to give them an understanding that vegetables don't magically appear in the baskets at supermarkets. They begin with seeds, needing constant sunlight and water. They need to be weeded and given time to grow. Then they need to be picked.

It's about the growth cycle of the vegetables as much as it is about the physical labor involved in getting those roast carrots onto your plate for dinner. Somebody is out here doing this every day. We want them to appreciate the work that goes into farming.

"Ree!" Sawyer yells through laughter as his twin stumbles, face first into the dirt. The boys laugh wildly, and I shake my head.

"This is why I suggested they change into jumpers," Greylyn muses. "They're going to be muddy messes for the rest of the day."

Settle in with a love story.

Head to Lokepub for more romance novels.

I chuckle. "Their fathers don't care. They're rough and tumble little boys, and as long as they're respectful, they can be as dirty as they want."

Greylyn shakes her head. "I'm thinking about the mud the rest of us have to wade through, Auntie Bee. I don't care how dirty they are. I don't

particularly want mud stains on my jeans because of their antics."

"Mud washes out," Storm says, and Greylyn turns her attention to him. He shrugs. "You're bougie, just like granddad."

I try my best not to laugh at the deadpan expression Greylyn gives him. Levis called Jalon bougie in front of us *one time*, and no one has let it go, even decades later.

"I'm not sure I'm bougie because I like to be clean. There's a time to be muddy and a time to be clean."

"I think gardening is a time to be muddy," Storm says, a clear challenge in his tone.

"But when we go in?"

"So take a shower and get clean."

"I suppose you want me to walk around sopping wet when I have to get into the shower with my muddy clothes to clean them off."

Storm rolls his eyes. "You are being ridiculous and obstinate just because you can, Grey. We all know you have like eight changes of clothes in your locker. You wouldn't be caught dead with a stain. You'd come back to haunt us all if we ever let you be buried with a stain."

Greylyn tilts her head, and I can just imagine her thinking, *You're not wrong.* Storm knows she's thinking it too because he smirks.

"And you? Did you bring a change of clothes? You want to wander around covered in mud all day?"

Storm turns his attention beyond the garden, which has Greylyn and me both following his line of sight. There are three massive dogs running around, chasing each other. Nipping and yapping, and I swear, they're laughing too. Storm and Rain have their own mini pack of enormous wolf dogs here on campus. They rarely go into the school, but they're always around and waiting for their boy and girl to come out during breaks and after classes.

“I *am* always covered in mud. They’re not the cleanest animals, despite how well-groomed they appear. It’s all an illusion.”

Greylyn snorts.

I love to listen to them bicker. I love everything about how the cousins interact. They’re siblings and friends and competition. They make each other better while remaining fiercely protective of each other.

I’m so busy watching the dogs roll around and have a good time that I miss when their banter escalates. Greylyn’s yelp has me spinning around. Donella covers her head as mud falls in clumps from where she was hit in the chest with a mud ball. Mud cake? She’s looking absolutely mortified as well as shocked.

Storm looks smug as he wipes his hands against each other.

I’m not sure either of us sees when Greylyn moves. The next thing I know, she’s leaped across his row of carrots and is on Storm’s back, shoving his face into the mud. “Still funny, jerk? Is it still funny while you taste dirt?”

And then we’re surrounded by concerned wolf dogs. Growling, whining, circling them in concern. Nudging Greylyn to try to get her off Storm, but also knowing they’re not allowed to harm Greylyn. One is trying to dig their way under Storm in an attempt to make sure he’s okay. Storm is screaming and laughing simultaneously.

The entire group of kids has returned now. The triplets’ boys are cheering them on, though I’m unsure which they’re cheering for.

Me? I’m trying my damnedest not to burst into laughter. Yes, I’m a wonderful supervisor of children.

Eventually, Thorne reaches for Greylyn and hauls her up as if she’s a stuffed animal and weighs nothing at all. He stands her on her feet and then picks Storm up off the ground. We all look between them, including big, broody Thorne.

Taking in their mud-covered bodies, Greylyn’s hair sticking up with mud. *Now* they’re stained with mud.

Thorne laughs and turns away.

Greylyn looks at me, but I can see her laughter and the way she fights her smile. I adore this girl so damn much. She's all business and ready to dominate the world, but she's just as ready to get down and dirty with her cousins when the situation calls for it. I often think that she forgets to be a kid, but then moments like this happen, and I know she has so much of Levis in her. Life is serious, but she also remembers to let loose too.

"Well," I say, looking between them. Storm is trying to push the overbearing pack off him as they try to clean him like he's their puppy. "Now you're going to be muddy while we pick vegetables."

"That's fine, but if he's within reach, he's getting another swirly in the mud," Greylyn says as she walks away. Even covered in mud, there's a strange, refined atmosphere surrounding her.

"Auntie Bee?" Amzi asks, and I turn my attention to him. "Why does Grey get to play in the mud, but we're not supposed to?"

I can't help myself. I laugh.

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8

MYRO

My wife is stunning. Everything about her takes my breath away. I've never met someone like that before. From the first moment she told Loren that she was going to call the cops on him, I was utterly spellbound.

Of course, I pursued her. She looked into a sociopath's eyes and told him to fuck off. She looked at us, arguably the wealthiest, most influential family in the world, and threatened us to keep her friend safe.

Is it any surprise that I fell for this woman? Especially as we got to know each other. As we explored every aspect of our life together. When she carried my children. The most wonderful mother I've ever known. When she eventually agreed to marry me, as if it were a hardship, but cried at our wedding.

I would follow this woman through fire and happily burn alive to be at her side.

Which is probably how my life became business as usual during daylight hours, and more often than not, at Jessica's mercy once the sun went down. Don't misunderstand. I'm *not* complaining. I had no idea any of the things she does to me would make my orgasms explosive.

Now I stand in front of my beautifully naked wife before I kneel at her feet and help her into the strap-on that she's going to use to fuck me with. I'd like to pretend that my dick isn't hard as fuck and my balls aren't tight with anticipation, but that's a lie. I *love* butt stuff, and Jessica loves to see me writhe under her.

I straighten the straps around her thighs and then gently tighten the one around her hips. When I think it's how she likes it, I look up to meet her eyes. Jessica nods.

"Choose your ride for the night," she says, leaving no room for discussion.

Fuck. This is always far more telling of me than it is of her. There are more than a dozen different dildos for this particular harness, which narrows down my choices. Maybe I chose this one subconsciously since the toys that go with it are either mostly humanoid or entirely fantasy.

They're also larger than our '*human*' cocks. Clearly, I want to be fucked up tonight.

Which one, though? I end up choosing the leviathan and bringing it back to her. Jessica nods in approval, and I secure it into the strap-on. When my hands fall to my side, I look at my wife and could probably come with very little stimulation just by looking at her. Good fucking god, women should have dicks too. They deserve all the parts to use at their discretion.

"On the bed, precious," she purrs, and I think I leak a little. That tone just undoes me every time I hear it. "I want to watch you prep for me."

This honestly has no right being hot. If you tell someone that you prep by putting your fingers in your butt? I mean, that sounds gross.

But they're either denying that they've enjoyed it or they're afraid of enjoying it. Yes, I firmly believe that. I'm not arguing that some people don't like butt stuff, and that's cool. I'm talking about the loudest people in the room—always the people who want to condemn everyone who is different while also crashing the gay hookup servers every time they get together in large numbers to protest the '*alphabet community*'.

I do as I'm told and get on the bed on my hands and knees. My feet hang off the edge, my ass facing my wife. I glance over my shoulder to see her

sitting in a chair, hand stroking her slick monster dick.

Jesus.

I'm honestly not the hugest fan of prepping myself. I do so without complaint because my wife enjoys when I do. She likes to watch me pleasure myself as I follow her instructions to do so. It's probably one of the hottest things we do because she's so damn turned on and we're not even touching each other.

I can hear the slick motion of her hand moving over her cock as I work myself for her. I can picture the expression on her face as she watches me. Hungry. Dark eyes. Lower lip between her teeth. Heavy, shallow breaths. Pupils dilated.

A shiver races along my spine and my dick jerks.

She's there a moment later. I jump when her hand lands on my ass and twist to look over my shoulder. "Good boy," she murmurs. "Up on the bed. You want to be on your back or on your stomach?"

I crawl up the bed as I think about it. Since I end up on my back, I guess this is the position I want to be in. Jessica smiles as she hovers over me between my splayed legs.

"You want to watch me rail you," she says, a sultry smile on her pretty lips.

"Always," I admit. I'm as fascinated and mesmerized by watching my cock disappear inside her body as I am when whatever toy she's wearing disappears inside mine. I've contemplated videos, just so I can watch it back over and over again.

"You think you're lubed enough?" Jessica asks, her fingers sliding along my crack to press against my hole.

Honestly, I don't care if I am. I'll gladly stretch the rest of the way with whatever she wants to use on me. I'm more than happy to be her toy. Her doll for pleasure. Her slave. We border BDSM lines constantly, but there's no mistake: I'm the slave, and she's my master. Who knew I had that kink?

My hands grip the bedding as Jessica settles and rubs her thick silicone cock against my ass. I twitch. My dick jumps. Her eyes are trained where the extension of her body connects with mine. The pressure is light at first. Not quite enough to affect me.

The harder she leans in, the more my breath becomes a struggle. Oh god. Those first moments take me out of this plane of existence. The bulbous head breaks the seal, and I gasp. Oh fuck. Oh my fuck.

She slides in further, and my back arches as all the little ridges, bulbs, and spines press against my hole and then my walls. “Oh fuck,” I grit out as pleasure sparks throughout my core. “Fuck, god, Jessie.”

Somewhere in my muddled brain, I hear her quiet laughter. She’s told me several times that she loves the things that come out of my mouth. Always a mess of stitched-together thoughts and sentences that rarely make sense.

My hands release the comforter at my sides and grip it again on either side of my head. My knees rise, feet trying to find purchase on the bed. And fuck, do I bear down on that monstrous cock, forcing my body to spread wide for it.

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Always, I wait for the pain. There’s stinging sometimes. Burning when I don’t stretch myself like I need to. Once in a while, there’s a hint of pain. Like a prelude when my brain thinks, *this is going to hurt*, but the pain never truly registers.

I’m not sure if Jessica fucks me or if I’m fucking myself on her. It’s probably a combination of both. When I need to catch my breath, I go limp and lift my head to watch her slide that fucking thing into my body. Making the connection between where and how it slides, what parts of it enter me,

and the way each inch elicits a reaction inside me is crazy. Connecting the two makes the experience dynamic in a hypnotic way.

“I think I need to see you ride me,” Jessica says.

I whine like a bitch in heat. Fuck. I’m going to come if I ride her. I always do.

However, whatever my wife wants, she gets. I nod, and Jessica carefully pulls her dick out of me. She leans over my body to press a hungry kiss against my mouth and then lies down. I take a minute to catch my breath before I climb onto the best ride of my life.

Jessica looks like a damn angel. Her hair is spread around her like a honey brown halo. I smile because I can’t believe she’s mine. How did I ever manage to pull that off? How the hell did I convince her to fall in love with me?

“Stop looking so sappy and get on my cock,” Jessica says with a smirk.

I lean down to kiss her as I position her monster dick back at my hole. I don’t get a chance to bear down on it before she’s shoving her hips up. I gasp against her mouth as she forces me to take the first couple inches with that first thrust.

“Fuck,” I grunt.

“Sit back,” Jessica commands.

I do, and my head falls backward as I slide down that fucking thing. Good shitting hell, I never understand how this can feel so different and much more intense in this position. It’s not like that thing changed direction. It’s still hitting all the spots.

“That’s it,” Jessica says, her hips rocking gently. “Ride me. Make yourself feel good.”

I might whimper. Actually, there’s a very good chance I whimper as I begin riding. My hands shake. My legs tremble with the effort. Jessica taps my knees, and I let them slip wider. The minute change is enough that the air is forced from my lungs. Fuck.

“Jessie,” I moan.

Her hand wraps around my cock, and my motion becomes erratic for a moment as I get used to the added sensation. “You’re so hot like this,” she says. “So fucking sexy, Myro.”

Her praise has me riding her harder. I need to get off. There’s something about her compliments that drives me hard. She continues to talk, her hips rocking slightly, and I ride like I’m on a bull until my orgasm makes me cry out with a hoarse screech. She might be wearing the monster cock, but the sounds I make are entirely inhuman.

“That’s it, baby,” Jessica coos. “Come on my cock. Good boy. Look how much you came for me.”

For a moment, I sit frozen. My body sways. Muscles still quivering. “Jessie,” I whisper.

“Come here, my love.”

That’s what I was waiting for. I roll to the side, gasp when the dick slides out of my body, and become limp on the mattress. Jessica presses to my side and slides two fingers into my mouth. The bitter tang of my release coats my tongue as she feeds me my juice. It’s disturbingly hot.

She only gives me one taste, though. Then she wipes herself off and curls against my side, her slippery cock resting on my thigh. Her fingers play with my nipple as she softly presses kisses to my bare, sweaty skin.

“You’re perfect,” Jessica murmurs. “You know that?”

I grunt, earning myself a quiet chuckle.

“Do you know how lucky I am?” she asks quietly. “You’re everything I could ever ask for. You love me so well. You take my dick like it’s your job. You spoil the fuck out of me and our kids.” Jessica sighs.

Turning my head feels like a feat that I’m not sure I will succeed at, but somehow, I manage to press a kiss to her head. “I love you,” I murmur. “For the record, I’m the lucky one. You could have chosen anyone in the world, and for some unknown reason, you chose me.”

Another soft kiss presses to the side of my pectoral. “Maybe we’re just lucky to have found each other,” she says quietly. “I never want to live a day without you, Myro. Promise me.”

“Never,” I vow.

Jessica sighs happily, and we settle in as our breathing regulates. The cool air touching my skin says my sweat is drying. We should probably shower. I should worship her until she screams her pleasure if she’s into it tonight. At the very least, I’ll give her a full body massage.

Instead, Jessica cuddles further into my side, and I know she’s about to fall asleep. When she wakes up in the night, I’ll do all those things. Right now, my wife wants to sleep, so that’s what we’re going to do.

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9

JESSICA

I STEP out of the house into the driveway and just stare. Between our house and the big house are an enormous garden and an expanse of green fields. Generally speaking, there's no interruption in that view in the southeast direction.

Until now.

Greylyn's birthday is always over the top. She's Jalon's youngest. The only daughter in a sea of sons. Levis' only child by birth, and though there's a lot of teasing by Jalon's grown sons calling him dad from time to time, I think they're more like brothers and friends than parent and children. That's likely because Levis is younger than every single one of them.

It's hilarious. Even almost twenty years later.

I've always kind of rolled my eyes when people claim that a person's childhood can have a huge effect on how they view the outside world. In all their opinions, many times it can be related back to their childhood, even subconsciously.

Watching documentaries about killers has led me to find that believable when it comes to bad men. After all, sociopaths may be predisposed to

forming an antisocial disorder genetically, but they are created by their environment. We have an in-house case study right in front of us—Loren.

I might not have believed it for *everything*, though. Sure, I wanted my kids to have their own rooms based on my childhood. I hated sharing a room. I hated not having privacy, especially as I became a teen. I still kind of hate that my siblings and I aren't as close as we might have been because we were always forced to share space.

Now that I'm looking at the absolutely enormous, gigantic, lake-sized blow-up obstacle course that looks like it takes up the *entire* field area, I can't help but wonder how Jalon's sons are going to feel. Did he throw this level of party for them? Did he celebrate their sweet sixteens to this level?

I've been very conscious to always treat my kids the same. No one should ever feel more loved than another. None of your kids should feel like one of their siblings is the favorite. That's a shitty way to live.

But this?

Myro steps up beside me, and I glance in his direction. He's wearing a sundress and sandals today. I glance down and then meet his eyes.

"I hope you have appropriate underwear on under there if you're going in that monstrosity we can probably see from space."

The smile he gives me says he hears my terse tone. His arm comes around my waist, and he hugs me to his side, placing a kiss on my head. "We're not upset by the level of celebration Dad throws for Grey," he says quietly, proving that he knows me very well.

"Did he do this for you?"

"No. I think Loren would have come at it with a knife." He chuckles.

I huff.

"Jess, we *love* to spoil Grey. All of us. This"—he gestures to the stupid-sized blow-up *thing*—"wasn't even Dad's or Levis' idea. I bet you can guess whose it was."

It doesn't take me long. I sigh. "Triplets."

“Probably Ellory more than the other two, but I was present when they brought it up. I know what you see, but you don’t have to be upset on our behalf. Do you have any idea how much we fucking love having a baby sister when we’re old enough to truly give her everything? To take her everywhere and get into trouble with her? It’s different from having a kid, but similar to a nephew or niece. We can be the *fun* relative and then give them back. But Grey is a little more special because she’s our baby sister.”

I sigh. “Fine.”

Myro twists my ball cap around so the brim is shading my eyes. Then he leans down to kiss my nose. With our hands linked together, we walk down the road toward the bounce city. It’s so damn bright. I truly wonder if it can be seen by satellites.

We don’t join the group gathered at the entrance to the bounce city but continue on toward the big house. I’m not sure where we’re heading until Myro brings me into a vacant room and outside onto the balcony to get a look at this thing from above.

“This is more horrible than I thought,” I say, and follow its length with my eyes. It’s easily almost a third of the length of the big house. It’s wide too. There are practically different rooms within this thing, all with different things to do. Obstacles and slides and pools. Couches and a ball pit the size of my big bathroom. There’s a place that looks suspiciously like there are trampolines in the floor and ball hoops hanging from the walls. There are nets and bouncing platforms to jump from. It’s like a ninja course, bounce house, and obstacle course rolled into one. Throw in a lot of luxury rest areas, and it’s Van Doren level.

Once again, that feeling in my stomach that one of Myro’s brothers is going to feel jealous of this kind of birthday celebration for their sister when they’ve never had something this level settles in my chest. Especially when I make out the pavilion and all the presents peeking out over the edge of the railing.

“It’s ridiculous, isn’t it?”

Myro and I twist at Greylyn’s voice. She’s walking through the open doors to join us at the railing. Myro wraps an arm around her shoulders and kisses

her head, just like he had me in the driveway, but differently too.

“It’s going to be a blast,” Myro counters. “I’m stoked.”

Greylyn looks down at his dress and tugs at the skirt. “This is super cute. I wish we wore the same size.”

I huff. “Tell me about it. He has cuter dresses than I do.”

Greylyn nods. “Uncle Voss has some stupidly cute skirts, but his hips are wider than mine. I still steal them sometimes.” She leans in and looks momentarily horrified. “I found this super short one in his closet and… I don’t think I want to know when he wears that.”

Myro and I laugh.

“That’s why you never go through someone’s closet without their permission unless you’re prepared to be scarred,” Myro says.

“That’s the thing! He gave me permission.”

“Oh no,” I say, laughing.

Greylyn sighs. Then she smirks. “I may have hidden it on him. I’ve been waiting to see how long it takes him to ask me if I borrowed it.”

“Diabolical,” Myro teases and tugs at her hair.

“Want to come downstairs with me?” Greylyn asks. She’s looking at me, and her expression reminds me of Levis at sixteen. Indulgently amused, but not at our level of excitement over something. He was always laid back.

“You ready to spend your day with your hair a mess?” I counter.

Her shoulders sag a little. “Honestly, I think this is for the triplets more than me,” she says, bemused. “Who would look at me and think, *bounce house sweet sixteen!*?”

She heads toward the door, and I meet Myro’s eyes. He’s grinning. I think I just learned this lesson for the sixteenth time in the last sixteen years. I shouldn’t be judging a situation until I know all the facts.

Greylyn is right. No one would have suggested a bounce house for her birthday. But Ellory's? Absolutely. Even at forty-seven, that man will spend the entire day in the bounce city.

Probably come out holding his back and complaining about a hip or something, but he'll be ready to go again the next day.

"Alright, alright," I say and place my hand in Myro's proffered one. "I've been properly chastised. This is totally more of a triplet fun house than a Greylyn thing."

He doesn't respond. His smile is wide, though, and it doesn't slip away by the time we get downstairs.

The cousins are gathering, kicking their shoes into a messy pile, and clamoring into the beast of a party house. I was so distracted by my feelings regarding the bounce city that I completely missed the new temporary buildings scattered around. If you're thinking party tents, you're underestimating how important aesthetic is to Jalon. These don't look temporary at all. Yet, they appeared overnight, so *I know* they weren't built with a solid foundation.

Guests begin to arrive about mid-morning. Friends from school. Their parents and siblings, if local. It isn't until parents begin to arrive and look at the Van Doren crew with surprise and maybe a little scandal that I remember how we present ourselves is *not* outside world approved.

Most of the time, I forget that dresses and skirts, makeup and jewelry, and painted nails and heels are considered women's fashion. Males should not be wearing it. When you look around at all the people gathered, you know exactly who belongs to the Van Doren family. Not a single man present is in jeans or a tee. They're in skirts and dresses. Their hair is braided, or they're wearing a headband. Some are wearing makeup. More than not have their nails painted. The pile of shoes is largely feminine in appearance.

All except Jalon, who is in a suit. Shocking, right? However, his shirt is pink, and his nails are painted. And… is that a little sparkle at the corner of his eye? Woooo, Daddy Jalon! When he shifts, the sun catches in his silver hair, and I'm pretty confident there's glitter making his silver extra sparkly today.

Maybe I’m grinning.

I’ve always loved the freedom my kids have had to determine how they like to dress. How they feel about their bodies. What hobbies they like without the outside pressure of ‘*this is a boy activity*’ and ‘*only girls play with that*’. They’re allowed to form their own personality, and it’s shaped by themselves. Not what we’re shoving in their faces as gender appropriate.

Despite what it looks like, it hasn’t been an easy transition to shed the grooming that we’ve all been brainwashed with from society. Sometimes, I can’t tell whether I want to wear a dress because I’m a girl or because I’m comfortable in a dress. I have no idea if I put makeup on because I like it or if I’ve spent twenty-plus years expected to wear makeup because I’m a woman. I’ve been just as long removed from that outside pressure, but the effects are still deeply rooted in me to the point where I’m not sure if these aspects of my appearance are my own preference or because that’s how I was raised.

I’m distracted from my thoughts while staring absently in the direction of the guest parents when Axl joins the group with Envy in his arms. Envy is shy. Incredibly uncomfortable with large groups of strangers. Totally understandable.

However, she’s staring at the bounce city, and I think we can all tell that she wants to play in it.

“Did you take her to see it from above?” I ask.

Axl looks at me and nods. “I think it’s even more overwhelming from above,” he says. “This is crazy. You know, all the cousins are going to demand this for their birthdays now. We’re going to have to find a permanent spot for it.”

He’s probably not wrong.

“What do you think?” Axl asks Envy. “Want to play in the bounce house?”

She hesitates and then shakes her head.

“I’ll go with you,” he offers.

“Your daddy wants to play in the bounce house,” I tease. “I think he needs you to show him how to play in it.”

I earn myself a small smile from Envy. She looks up with crinkled eyes at her father. “You want to?” she asks. I think it’s the first time I’ve actually heard her voice.

Axl studies her, maybe determining whether she actually wants to play. His answer will be whatever makes her happy. “Yes, but I’m nervous.”

Envy smiles, big brown eyes shining with excitement.

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10

MYRO

LOREN'S HOUSE is right down the road from mine. He's at the intersection that leads south to the cottages or east to the hotel and the big house beyond. I knock on the ajar front door before opening it and letting myself in.

All four of my nieces and nephews are squished together on one side of the table while a fifth nephew, Sulien, is currently painting one of Rosalie's nails. They all have pink, blue, and white bows in their hair, and their nails are currently getting the same color treatment.

Arek picks his hand up and is met with a snappy demand. "Put your hand down, Arek. Don't you dare mess up my work." He doesn't look up his work on Rosalie's nails as he addresses Arek, and Arek stares at him.

He looks at his twin and then carefully puts his hand flat on the table again.

"Better," Sulien says as if he's talking to a child.

Arek's eyes narrow, but he looks at Adalaide and sighs, shoulders sagging.

Arek and Orev, Loren's twins, are *exactly* like Loren except that they're psychopaths, not sociopaths. I've kept up with all the studies and

medical/psychology journal articles since my brother was young, just to see what they continue to report about antisocial disorders.

Almost all of them agree that sociopaths can form bonds, but it's not frequent. Most also agreed that psychopaths *can't*. I call bullshit on this.

I've also watched a lot of documentaries on people with psychopathy and sociopathy—most interchange the diagnoses often so two documentaries on the same person can be conflicting—and one of the things I find interesting is the claim that psychopaths can form '*personality bonds*'.

If you think about someone making an entire hate movement their whole identity, that's a personality bond. You can also kind of think of it like an animal imprint, how an infant animal imprints on its parent or a human hand rearing them.

Personally, I think that's far more likely the case with my nephews. They've developed a personality imprint on their sisters. Fiercely. That is the only thing that has these twin psychopaths sitting still while their nails dry right now. Because it'll make Adalaide happy, and whatever makes one of their sisters happy is something they'll do.

They may not understand why it makes Adalaide happy or why it's truly important to her. What they recognize is that Adalaide smiles. Genuinely. That's enough to convince them to do whatever it is they're doing to keep her smiling.

"Want your nails painted, uncle?" Adalaide asks.

I take a seat beside Sulien. "Absolutely. I love celebrating you, princess."

She smiles. "Thanks."

Arek and Orev are watching her intently. Filing this interaction away for later, most likely.

"Three years," I say to Adalaide when Sulien eventually turns to me. "Right?"

Adalaide nods. She turns a soft smile on Arek. "Three years since my brother gave me my real name and my family embraced me and my truth."

“Are we having a party this year?”

She snorts. “No. I think we’re all a little partied out from Grey’s sweet sixteen.”

“I thought our party on the boat was big,” Rosalie mutters. “That was just… over the top.”

“I had fun,” Orev says, shrugging. “My abs and thighs still hurt from jumping all day.”

Arek and Adalaide nod in agreement.

“Don’t hate on the spoiling of your aunt,” I comment.

“My younger aunt,” Rosalie says with a snort. It’s endless amusement for our younger generation.

“When we talk about Grey being younger than most of her nieces and nephews at school, we always joke that our grandfathers couldn’t keep it in their pants. You’d roll over laughing if you saw the way they look at us, trying to figure out by my comment how our two *grandfathers* created Greylyn,” Adalaide says.

If only they knew how true those words were, though. The day we walked in on my dad railing Levis on the conference room table is still wildly vivid in my mind, nearly twenty years later. There are just some things you’re not meant to see, and if you do, those visions never leave you.

“There,” Sulien says, and sits back. He’s such a quiet person, I forget he’s in the room most of the time. Even when he’s working on my nails directly in front of me. “Don’t move. It needs to dry.”

I look at my twin nephews. They give me identical looks of someone being harassed.

Sulien reaches across the table and pulls Orev’s hand closer to examine his nails. “See? Sitting still means I don’t have to touch you up, and you can go now. You’re rewarded for your patience.”

Orev grins and gets to his feet. Arek is not so lucky. He glares at his brother and then at Sulien, who has to touch up three nails.

“When have I ever given you the impression that I’m patient?” Arek gripes. “Make them dry quicker.”

Sulien doesn’t respond, as if he hasn’t heard Arek at all. Orev stands to the side with a grin on his face, staring at his brother. Taunting.

Honestly, I’ve always imagined that the twins would scuffle more. They don’t. In fact, I’m not sure they’ve ever gotten aggressive with each other.

I’ve always been relieved that Loren’s sons have each other. There’s someone there who is just like them. Someone who experiences the same lack of emotion and struggles with understanding what the rest of us take for granted. There’s someone there who *always* understands them, without question.

I wonder if Loren would have struggled less if he had someone like him. We were all there for him. All the time. But as kids, we all struggled with our own issues growing up. The triplets for wanting to sleep in the same space, despite being in double digits. Voss for his ADHD. And while I didn’t get the same ‘*you need to be fixed*’ treatment from my mother, I was the only one who was *perfect.* Something she never let me forget.

An impossibility that I needed to live up to. A glass ceiling that I desperately wanted to break and scream that I’m far from perfect. I tried my best to break that illusion, often by always defending my brothers, which my mother hated. She wanted my imperfect little brothers to be perfect like me, and I wanted my brothers to be perfect as they are.

There are days I still wonder what happened to her. At this point, thirty years after Dad took us from her custody, I have a feeling I know what happened to her. She’s dead. Voss has halfheartedly looked for her over the years and has always come up empty-handed; no missing person’s report, no death certificate, no name change. She simply vanished.

As I get older and watch my brothers with their families, watch Jessica and my kids grow, I imagine what Dad must have felt walking in on the scene that opened his eyes to the truth we lived when he wasn’t home. How would I have responded? What would I have done if I learned that someone I trusted had been abusing my children for seventeen years?

I’d kill them.

“Nails are dry, Uncle Myro,” Sulien says and flashes a smile at me. “We’re just waiting on Arek to stop being fidgety so his nails will dry.”

Arek growls. I’m confident that’s the sound he makes as I get to my feet.

Grinning, Adalaide links her arm through Arek’s and rests her head on his shoulder. “Almost there. Just sit another minute.”

He’s frustrated and now a little stiff. The twins don’t have the same touch aversion that Loren does, but they’re very uneasy with people in their personal space. Even their sisters.

I don’t think it’s because they’re uncomfortable with their presence. I think it’s because right and wrong, bad touch and good touch, unspoken permission and consent are all murky in their heads. They *know* what we tell them, and they use those golden rules as a very strict law, but that means in instances where someone moves in on him without directly asking first has his brain trying to work out where this falls within the rules. When is he supposed to return the affection if he hasn’t asked? Adalaide didn’t ask. But he’s not upset that she’s touching him.

When they were younger, we had these circular conversations a lot. It’s difficult to explain to eight-year-old psychopaths who can’t read body language like everyone else how to read the situation first and *then* respond accordingly.

I think they’ve since allowed people to react first, and they’ll respond in kind. It’s easier to mimic than it is for them to guess.

“Alright, Arek,” Sulien says. “You’re good. When you’re done training, I’ll do all your toes to match.”

Arek narrows his eyes. Orev’s amusement fades as he stares at Sulien.

“Thanks, Suli,” Adalaide says and kisses his cheek. “I think I’ll let my brothers off the hook, but Rosie and I will be back.”

“I figured.”

“Probably going to drag Axl…” Her words trail off, and she frowns. Then a dazzling smile takes its place. “Axl *and* Envy. I think that’ll be a great bonding activity.”

She and Axl have been besties since they were very young. I imagine she’s struggled with his absence quite a bit lately, between being away for college and now the sudden appearance of his daughter that has his full attention.

“Alright. Let’s go, Loren’s Van Dorens,” I say as I get to my feet, admiring my nails. Sulien is an expert. He’s done this in a previous life. I somehow have a swirly flower in all three colors on each nail. It’s beautiful. Jessica will be jealous. “Time to train.”

Outside, the quads climb into the bed of the truck, and I drive across the Estate and into the woods, bypassing Noaz’s. We slow at the fork in the road. Left will take us to Kairo’s. Right will take us to the triplets’ and further beyond are my other two uncles. Straight brings us to the barns where we train.

This is a dead end, though there’s been talk about extending this road to the neighboring property that Dad acquired. I’m not sure that’s a good idea. As much as Kairo will *love* more traffic going by his house, I think extending that road is the better bet. It means fewer people will be tempted to explore the barns in the trees far removed from the farm on the other side of the property.

We’re not concerned with our own kids, of course. But those kids are getting older. They’re having friends over. The school is right on the other side of a fence. The less attention that this road gets, the better.

Sometimes, I think someone should have a house on this road. Just to keep an eye on the traffic and nosy people who might wander.

The quads jump out of the back and head into the barn we’re parked beside. When they come out, they’re dressed in white jumpsuits, each with a blunt plastic knife in their hands. I lead them to the buckets of watercolor paint in shades of pink and white, and a single shade of blue.

Adalaide looks at me with a big smile. I wink at her. “I didn’t forget, Ady Bear.”

She gives me a quick hug and then dips her knife into one of the pinks. When her siblings have all done the same, they face off. The girls versus the boys.

I do this specifically because Arek and Orev don't have the same moral compass as most of the other kids on the Estate. They'll give all their *real* effort to attacking and defending. They'll go just this side of too hard without hurting their sisters. They'd never hurt them, under any circumstances.

For my girls, it's important to me that they're facing off with male attackers. It's almost *always* going to be a man attacking. Quite frankly, I don't give a shit if they have to kill their assailant. We'll clean up the mess later. What's most important is protecting themselves.

Then we'll work on hunting and killing. At least for the twins. It's already been brought to our attention that Arek and Orev might be getting a little aggressive. We need to channel that before they get out of hand.

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11

JESSICA

HAZE STEPS into the conference room we've been using at the big house. He's looking through old family records to expand the family tree for Jalon. Jalon says that there's at least one lie on the tree, though he hasn't adjusted it. Haze is being tight-lipped, though I'm not sure if he *knows* or if he just believes he knows.

So far, he's found some interesting coincidences. For example, all of Jalon's kids' names are a variation of one of his ancestors. Most of the ancestors he named his kids after aren't on the tree, though Haze says when he asked Jalon about it, Jalon said he'd always heard stories of these long-lost ancestors.

My first thought was that these ancestors are from so long back in the family's history that they never left Wales. That's not the case. According to Haze's history and what Jalon recalls of old family stories, the Van Dorens migrated from the old world in the mid 1700s. Great x-something grandfather settled right here in Arizona. On this land. That's where the legacy began.

What's interesting is Haze can't find that grandfather's name. He's tracked down all their kids—he thinks—and created a tree specifically that would

bring us to the current Jalon line, though he went deep and thorough with all of Poppy's kids' lines, which is Grandfather Weston and his seven siblings.

Haze also followed the Rome Van Doren line, beginning with Rome I, who is Poppy's youngest sibling. I'm not sure why he did, but he found it interesting for whatever reason. I think he's trying to get them all filled in, but Jalon's was most important. Rome became a different fascination. Now he's just following family lines as he comes across them.

I'm not doing anything half as interesting. I'm looking through my old law school textbooks, wondering if I still have the passion and determination to finish my degree. I've found a handful of my old assignments and have been trying to complete them without looking at my old, finished products.

"How's it coming?" Haze asks as he takes a seat with a box filled with random shit from the archives. We're in the basement, just outside the archives. Jalon didn't want anything removed, but he compromised on this.

"Honestly?" I look up to meet his eyes.

He gives me a bemused smile. "Obviously."

"I don't think I want to do this anymore." I close the book and shove it away. "I should have finished school years ago."

"Is it school you don't want to go back to, or the career?"

"I don't know," I admit. "I want to do *something* meaningful. Something that will make an impact in the same way I could have as a lawyer. A part of me still wants to be a lawyer."

"You just don't want to put in the work," he says with a smirk.

I huff.

"I get it. Look at me. I'm still in the Van Doren Archives instead of doing something else. We all know I made my decision on a degree based on what I knew my father would despise and not because I wanted a career in that field. Since thinking about what I actually wanted to do for the first time in my life without having to please someone else with that answer was too

overwhelming, I settled for what I could do in my current degree field. Here I am. Still."

"You hate what you're doing, do you?"

He grins. "Not at all. I'm currently the family secret keeper." A wicked glint flickers in his eyes. "My point is, I think all of us had settled for something we didn't plan to, but it's worked out to be something we're really enjoying."

"All hail King Levis," I say, and we both raise a hand and bow our upper bodies before sharing in quiet laughter.

"You think Briar is enjoying editing, do you?"

"I think he enjoys having the freedom to be with Noaz and his kids whenever he wants," Haze counters. "He sets his own deadlines, his own schedule, his own paycheck. He can *not* work for an entire year, or he can work every single day. It's the freedom he enjoys more than the job itself. I don't think editing is that stimulating for him. He's *not* passionate about it, but he enjoys the benefits of a job he doesn't hate. That's a big deal."

"Our sweet Oakley remains a househusband," I muse.

Haze grins. "Which he loves. It also gives him the opportunity to take classes when he wants to. When something interests him."

"You know what the pattern is that I'm hearing?" Haze raises an eyebrow in question. "We all married rich and therefore have the privilege to do nothing if we choose."

He snorts. "Fair enough."

I sigh and pull my textbook back to me. "Maybe what I haven't admitted out loud is that the law no longer feels like the epitome of justice and protection. What the Van Dorens do… that's making a real difference. Where the law fails to protect victims, whether from corruption or a convenient lack of evidence, we don't fail. We aren't racist. We aren't bought. We aren't corrupt politicians and wealthy corporations."

"We *are* wealthy corporations, but I know what you're saying."

“I guess I feel like I’m already doing what I set out to do, in a way. Right? Maybe not *me*, but I’m a part of it. Even if I do nothing with that particular branch of the company, I’m supporting my husband and my family so they *can* and know that everything here is operating as it should be.”

“I can’t decide if you’re justifying not wanting to continue your law degree or if you truly feel that way.”

I huff in amusement and frustration. “Neither can I.”

Haze laughs.

For a while, I flip through my textbooks, pausing occasionally to read a paragraph. It feels lackluster. Not too big and challenging, just empty. Pointless. We live in a broken society. Not just in this country, but all over the world.

Maybe I should be studying space. Get us off the planet entirely. Bring us to a Van Doren planet where we don’t have to deal with the bullshit of this ugly world.

When Haze gets to his feet, I follow. “Alright. I’m going to make my kids an after-school snack. See you later.”

Haze wraps an arm around my shoulders briefly and kisses the side of my head. “Don’t let yourself pressure you into doing something your heart isn’t in just because you feel like you *should* be doing something.”

“Shouldn’t I be?”

“Honey Bee, you do things every day. You take the school kids out for various activities. You chaperone almost every field trip, even when your kids aren’t on it. You’re at the school whenever they need something. You’re in the office periodically helping out in whatever department that needs you. *And* you’re with your kids and everyone else’s after school.” He tugs on my hair gently. “Just because you’re not a lawyer fighting for your clients doesn’t mean you’re not doing really great things.”

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“Fine,” I say grumpily, though his words have loosened something in my chest. “I’ll take that into consideration.”

He laughs and lets me go. I take one of the electric scooters home. Since our offspring started taking over the Estate, our usual transport has shrunk down to something much more reasonable for the relatively short distances we travel. We still have all the buggies and golf carts, and full-sized vehicles, of course, but unless we’re moving fully across the property, the little electric things are safer for our children running around.

At least, that was the reasoning when they were driving their little motorized jeeps with cute trailers around the Estate. Remembering their cousin gatherings always makes me smile.

Novan is home when I step inside. Not alone, though. There’s a small mountain of shoes just inside the door. He and his group of close friends are lounging in front of the television, cuddled up on the floor together.

He smiles at me when I walk into the room. “Hey, crew. How was school?”

Ben grins at me. He has one of those personalities that’s flat out charming. You instantly want to trust him because of how nice his smile is. Nice. Exactly.

“It was school,” Ben says. “Not exciting, but not excruciating.”

The three girls nod in agreement.

“I didn’t think you were working today,” Novan says.

“I wasn’t. Hanging out with Haze and watching him work while I judge him.”

Novan laughs.

“You and your friends want a snack?”

My son’s smile falls away. I’m not sure why, but there’s a trace of hurt that’s quickly replaced by irritation. “No,” he says and turns back to the television, pulling Anna to his side.

Ben looks at him with his eyebrows knit together.

“Ohhkaayyyy,” I draw out. “I’ll just be in the kitchen making a snack for my other kids, then.”

Novan doesn’t answer me. Apparently, I shouldn’t have asked him if he wanted a snack. They say teenage girls are moody, but no one talks about how moody teenage boys are.

Paisley and Emric come through the kitchen while I’m making mini bagel pizzas and grab small plates for themselves on their way up to their bedrooms. I think Brynlee was going to her cousin Lyra’s house. Or was she hanging out with Rain today? Hell, maybe she’s hanging out with both cousins.

Just as I finish the platter of pizza bagels for Novan and his friends, my son comes into the kitchen. He doesn’t look at me. Doesn’t acknowledge me as he heads for the fridge.

“I made you and your friends snacks anyway,” I tell him and watch as his shoulders tense. I frown.

“We’re not hungry,” he snaps as he slams the fridge door harder than necessary. His arms are filled with Van Doren tumblers and water bottles.

“Stop,” I say, and he freezes as if my word was a command he can’t refuse. “Come over here and talk to me.”

He’s upset about something. I can see it in the way his breathing has become labored. Novan doesn’t do as I say for a few seconds as he gets his breathing under control. Maybe his anger.

Novan doesn’t look at me as he stands on the other side of the counter.

“What’s with the attitude? All I did was ask if you wanted snacks. How did I set you off?”

“They’re not my friends,” he says with an angry edge. But I know my kid. That tone is hiding hurt.

“I’m going to need more than that. You’re hanging out with kids who *aren’t* your friends?”

His eyes flicker up to mine as he scowls. “They’re my partners, Mom. I didn’t know you’d act like that, or I wouldn’t have brought them over.”

“Act like what?”

“Like they’re just my friends!”

“Novan, have you ever told me they’re your partners?”

His eyes lift to mine again, and he stares. “I talk about them all the time,” he says defensively.

“I talk about Levis, Haze, Briar, Oakley, and Brek all the time. They’re my best friends.”

“That’s different.”

I wipe my hands on a towel and walk around the counter. He doesn’t argue when I pull the many drinks from his arms and set them on the counter. He’s taller than me. I have a feeling all my kids are going to be taller than me. That doesn’t stop me from pulling him down so I can give him a big hug.

“I’m sorry I misunderstood your relationship. I’m going to ground you for thinking I’d be judgmental and disapprove.”

His arms tighten. “I’m sorry,” he says quietly. “I was… surprised and…”

“Who*ever* makes you happy has my support, Novan. You were born into a family who truly embodies love is love and free love and all that hippie shit.”

He laughs.

“Take the snacks to your partners and eat them before they’re cold.”

“Thanks, Mom,” he says. “I love you.”

So many parents would kill to hear their teenagers show affection. I smile because I have never had that problem. “I love you too.”

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12

MYRO

THE FRONT DOOR opening has me looking up from the dining room table. Their voices give them away. Emric and Kos.

Kos looks just like his father, Malcolm. We always give Kairo a hard time that his kid is lucky to have inherited genes from the hotter father. To everyone's surprise, Kairo agrees. Nobody points out that Kos isn't actually a combination of Van Doren genetics with Malcolm's. That's irrelevant.

The true fun in this teasing is because Kairo finds humor in it. While he still has his moments of assholery, Malcolm has smoothed a lot of Kairo's rough edges. I would never go so far as to say he's kind now. I'm not sure he's even personable. For the most part, Kairo keeps to himself and his little family.

Except he's always around for the larger family activities—birthdays, holidays, graduations, random gatherings—and he's *not* a miserable bitch. Again, not friendly, but I think he's actually trying. I think whatever weight he carried around for so long has finally fallen away, but he clings to that defensive wall as if he'll be stabbed the second he lets it down.

The boys come around the corner and both smile when they see me sitting at the table with a large pitcher of fresh lemonade and a big bowl of

popcorn.

“Hey, Dad,” Emric says in unison with Kos greeting, “Hi, Uncle Myro.”

They drop into the chairs across from me, each grabbing handfuls of popcorn. I’m practically forgotten then as they turn to each other and maybe continue the conversation they’d been having. It sounds like it picks up in the middle of some juicy gossip.

“That’s not the whole story,” Emric says. “Kyle agreed to go to the movies this weekend with Jemma, and then Nylee found out and is upset because she and Kyle text all night and she thought they were together. Meanwhile, Hale is laughing because he and Kyle have been kissing behind the playground every time they have a chance.”

“Wow,” Kos says as he stuffs a handful of popcorn into his mouth. He crunches for a minute before asking, “How do Lenny and Mitch fit into this, then?”

“Lenny has a crush on Jemma and has been trying to hold her hand during class, but Jemma refuses because Jemma has a crush on Kyle and finally asked Kyle to go to the movies this weekend. I *think* Mitch has a crush on Hale. Or maybe Kyle.”

“What do all these kids find appealing about Kyle? He’s not cute. I don’t think he’s particularly funny. He’s not strong or… is he smart? Is that attractive?”

Emric shrugs. “Dunno. I think Kyle is kind of a jerk, personally. Unless he likes you. Then he’s kinda flirty.”

“So he doesn’t like you,” Kos teases.

“No. I don’t like him. It’s kind of funny, though. Our cousins all see through him. None of them seem to give him any attention, which Kyle *hates*, so now he doesn’t like us.”

“Gold digger!” Kos exclaims.

I wonder if I should remind them that they’re twelve. There’s no gold to dig.

“Yeah, so Kyle doesn’t understand why everyone is upset with him. Lenny called him a dog before class was over, and Kyle looked thoroughly offended. Nylee won’t talk to him, and Jemma is angry that he agreed to a movie date while he was kissing a boy *and* talking to her.”

“I bet tomorrow he’s not going to find the whole situation no big deal when he’s lost his girlfriends and his boyfriend.”

“You think Hale cares enough to stop kissing him?” Emric asks. He slides the pitcher toward him to pour them both drinks. “From what I heard, he just thinks the whole thing is funny.”

“I asked what you knew *because* I heard Tina telling Darnell that Hale was angry at Kyle.”

“Huh. I heard Hale thought it was all funny.”

I toss a few pieces of popcorn into my mouth as I listen to their preteen drama with amusement. Honestly, is school always so dramatic? I don’t remember sixth grade being so theatrical.

The door opens again, but this time, it’s not one of my kids. It’s my wife. I feel like my entire body smiles when I look at her. No matter how old we get, she’s always going to take my breath away.

She smiles when she enters the room and stops to place a kiss on Emric and Kos’ heads. “Hey, babies. Good day at school?”

Both boys nod. Emric offers her a handful of popcorn. “Yep,” he says. “Did you have a good day?”

Jessica hums as she chews. “It was a normal day. Not good. Not bad.”

“I think a not bad day is a good day,” Kos says.

“Fair point,” Jessica agrees as she rounds the table to me. Her hand tangles in my hair, and she pulls my head back so I’m looking up at her. A zing of energy surges through my body at her rough touch. She leans in to give me a kiss. “The best part of my day is always coming home to my family.”

Emric snorts. “Are all parents so gross?”

“In my experience, yes,” Kos answers.

“Trust me, gross parents look very different,” Jessica says as she straightens and releases my hair. “Gross parents abuse their kids. They lock them in bedrooms. Or tell them that their A- isn’t good enough. That their little cousin learning to ride a bike without training wheels is more important than the regional recognition of your achievements in your career. Encouraging or enabling your siblings to bully you. Tell you that you’re fucked up and broken. Or gross because of who you love. Or you need to be fixed because you move too much. Or abandon you when parenting becomes too challenging.”

Emric and Kos stare at her, both in horror and disgust.

“*That’s* what gross parents look like.” She leaves the dining room with the boys staring after her.

“That wasn’t her parents, was it?” Kos asks.

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“No,” I say quietly. “But that describes the parents of grownups you know and love.”

Their horror grows, and they meet each other’s eyes.

“Not my dads,” Kos says quietly, but I think he knows that yes, his dads. At least one of them. I don’t really know what the relationship is between Malcolm and his family. What I *do* know is that over the last fifteen years, I’ve never met his family and he’s here for every holiday.

I don’t confirm or deny.

“Wait… your dad is here. granddad Jalon,” Emric says, but I see the moment he connects some dots. He may not know which of those examples

that Jessica listed applies to me and my brothers, but he knows the name of his biological grandmother—a woman he's never met and is rarely mentioned. He's at the age where he's beginning to connect dots and has likely noticed that when my mother is mentioned, it's not in a positive connotation.

"Sometimes," I say as I get to my feet, "the best life lessons you can learn are from observation and being the victim. You know what *not* to do. Your childhood will shape you, positively or negatively. We've worked very hard to make sure that you kids have the best environment possible to grow up in."

As I leave them, I hear my son say, "Because this isn't the environment you had."

I find Jessica in our bedroom putting away laundry. I think she's always putting away laundry. I'm not sure when we dirty all this laundry.

"You have plans tonight, pretty lady?" I ask on my way by to change out of my suit.

"Cook dinner for my kids and husband," she answers.

"Or," I say, and stick my head out of the closet. Her beautiful brown eyes meet mine. "We let our kids fend for themselves, and I can take you out on a date night."

"Counterproposal," she says, and I grin as I struggle out of my socks. "We can let Paisley and Novan fend for themselves, but we'll see if Uncle Kairo will have Emric for a while, and since Brynlee is already at Uncle Oxley's playing with Lyra, we'll see if he'll keep her this evening."

"Why do you have to be so responsible when I'm trying to be spontaneous and sexy?"

"Do you really want me to overlook the fact that you probably already sent your uncles texts for the little kids?"

"First of all, they hate being referred to as '*the little kids*'. They're both in double digits now." Jessica snorts. This is a confrontation we receive from Emric and Brynlee whenever they hear us refer to them as the little kids.

I've tried to modify my wording to the younger kids. "Second, maybe I did, and maybe I didn't. You don't know everything about me."

She laughs. "Sure, I don't. Want to hand over your phone, precious?"

"No," I say, and step back into the closet. "I recently watched a seminar that states a spouse demanding to see what you're doing on your phone is a big red flag for their controlling behavior."

I jump when her arms wrap around my waist. Sometimes I forget how stealthy she can be. I think that's the mom switch. You become a mom, and suddenly, you move as silently as a cougar with the hearing of a bat and *the look* of a person who can snap you in half for misbehaving.

"It's so cute when you pretend you don't like my control." She presses her lips between my shoulder blades.

"Get changed into something comfortable, and so I don't need to pretend to have our date on a schedule."

She laughs quietly. "What kind of comfort are we talking here?"

"The cuddly kind. It's private but not secluded."

Jessica is right. I *did* already text my uncles and our two older kids. Paisley is at the office with her triplet uncles and Greylyn as they… who the hell knows what they're doing? Getting ready for world domination, probably. Anyway, she's going to the big house with Greylyn after.

Novan said he's probably going to hang out at the dorm with his partners. *Not* his friends. That's a very important distinction, though I tried to remind him—*gently*—that Jessica and I are friends, too. I suppose when you're seventeen, relationship status labels matter a whole lot more.

With my wife's hand in mine, I lead her to the front door. We stop at the boys who have returned to school gossip on the way, and I tell them that they're to head to Kos' before dinner. Kos tells me both of his dads have already sent him texts. Just in case he missed one father's text. Which he finds amusing, since they did so in a group text.

We take the electric scooter to the lake where our date night is waiting. One of the things I take advantage of since we have an enormous staff is things like this. I described what I wanted to one of our ladies in the house, and her response was literally, “Say less.”

Now we’re looking at a raft outfitted with pillows and blankets as well as soft fairy lights. The far end has a white banner like a sail where we’ll project a movie. At the back of the raft is a romantic meal for two.

“This is beautiful,” Jessica says as I help her onto the boat.

“Thanks. Obviously, I didn’t set it up, but I’m happy to report that it *was* my idea inspired by an image I came across on Pinster.”

She grins as she gets settled. Once she’s comfortable, I untie the raft and climb on. “The plan is: we’re going to eat, watch movies, and make out like teenagers. I read something recently that was along the lines of couples forget to just kiss after they’ve been together for years. I immediately wanted to argue with the post, but since I couldn’t remember the last time we just lounged around and made out, I decided it was right, and we needed to rectify it.”

I love her smile. The way she’s looking at me. Jessica settles into my chest, and I gently cup her face.

“Perfect date night,” she says.

“It’s just begun.”

“And it’s already perfect.”

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13

JESSICA

MYRO'S MOAN has me looking up from where my feet are soaking in Epsom salts. He's such a beautiful sight. Warmth bubbles in my gut as I admire him. He's on his knees, wrists handcuffed to each ankle as he rides a remote-controlled vibrating dildo.

I've added a couple of additional accessories to my husband this morning. Nipple clamps and a cock ring. He's leaning against the bed so he can't throw himself backward without meaning to. That angry red cock is just… mouth-watering.

"How stunning you are, my love," I croon.

He thrusts himself onto the dildo on reflex as much as intention. Gravity insists that his weight comes down. His cuffs ensure that he can't get away from it. He's both trying to find relief as much as he is chasing his pleasure.

This is probably one of my favorite sexy pastimes with my husband—watching him get off while I give myself a mini mani/pedi, watching him writhe and listening to him moan.

I have one of those little home spa soakers that keeps the water warm and bubbling slightly. Like a mini hot tub for my feet. I've already soaked my

hands, so as my feet soak, I'm focusing on my cuticles. They need some work. Honestly, I should take my girls to the spa. Hell, I should book a family day at the spa. My boys love it as much as my daughters.

"Jessie," Myro whimpers. "Please."

Setting down the shaper thing—no, I don't remember what it's called—I tap on my phone until the screen comes alive with the remote to the dildo. I tap the volume and raise it to level two of six.

Myro gasps. There's a momentary disruption in his thrusts, his hips coming up as far as they can. His dick waves and slaps his stomach with a satisfying *fwap.* Such a pretty cock.

"Tsk, tsk," I murmur. "You know the rules."

He whimpers. Man, that sound alone travels straight through me.

More times than not, especially as I get older, this is my preferred way to be involved in sex—from afar. For a while, I thought there was something out of whack with my hormones to make me feel this way, since it's not something I've always felt.

After Paisley was born and the feeling increased, I asked Doc Mark to do all kinds of hormone and blood tests to see what was going on. I explained that I love sex, but from the outside looking in.

When I eventually talked to my friends about it, Brek mentioned that what I described falls on the asexual spectrum and that it's normal. Let me just say that I *loved* the information coming from Brek. The way I smiled had absolutely nothing to do with what he was saying, but that it came from him. In fact, for several minutes as I smiled at him like a loon, I didn't even register his words.

In so many ways, that little statement exemplified his growth, and maybe I got a little teary-eyed. I'm so fucking proud of that man. Maybe more than anyone else in my life. The way he's grown into such a well-rounded, kind, happy individual. An amazing father, even though he had shit for parents as examples.

Perhaps my favorite thing about this confident Brek is the way he keeps his parents in check. While I'd have erased them from my life entirely, Brek has forced them into rules that they *despise* in order to stay in his and their grandsons' lives, and he's not afraid of making them leave if they cross a line. I literally love everything about it. He hasn't seen his parents in thirteen years because they can't respect him. He tries video calls with the kids every now and then when they think they can keep their shit in line.

But I digress. When I eventually came back around to what he actually said, I immediately dismissed it. It's not that I don't feel sexual attraction. And I haven't always felt this way, so that didn't make sense.

Maybe I flipped Brek off for the way he looked at me. "I bet if you look back, there's always been this feeling. Not your most prominent feeling, but it's always been there."

The fucker was right. It *has* always been there.

"And," he added, "we're always learning new things about ourselves. This could be something as simple as you finally feeling comfortable and settled in your life so the mold that you've always forced yourself into as a '*healthy young woman*' is cracking."

Since I've embraced this new side of me—and after accepting that it has nothing to do with my body or brain's chemistry at all—sex has become fun again. I *do* have sex with my husband. Pretty often, if I do say so. But this right here, in one form or another, is far more normal for us.

I love to watch him. I love to fantasize about what to do with him. I even love to masturbate as I watch him or from my fantasies. But I often feel incredibly detached from actually engaging in sex with someone else, including my husband. Especially if Myro suggests it. When he expresses wanting sex, I get turned off entirely.

It was incredibly frustrating for a while.

However, instead of letting it break us, we chose to look at this as a challenge. Not a challenge to adjust who I am, but a challenge to keep our life sexy in a way that we're both comfortable and satisfied. Can I just say

that mutual masturbation sessions aren't just for *the bros* growing up? They're hot for partners too.

I get my husband off often. With my hands. My mouth. And yes, I have penetrative sex with him. But sex can look different. Maybe I'm pegging him instead of being penetrated. I've found that pegging is an acceptable form of sex that I don't feel *icked* over when he suggests it. Maybe because my body isn't involved. Not really. Muscles that I don't always associate with needing for sex might be to blame. Like, seriously, how do my toes get sore?

Still. Perhaps one of my absolute, hands-down favorite sexy times between us is this right here. I get to watch him being turned on. He isn't having to do it himself. I'm involved without being in contact with him. I feel the high of arousal because I can watch and not have anyone's hands on me.

Sometimes, like now, I find that I reflect on how fortunate I am. I wish I could tell Jalon in a way that he accepts how proud he should be to have raised such wonderful sons. Their outcome had nothing to do with their mother. It was all Jalon. They were under Martha's abuse long enough that it could have completely fucked these boys up. Instead, they rose above her shit and became incredible humans.

I'm fortunate that Myro never gave up on me. He didn't place extra pressure on me. He didn't try to tell me it was my obligation as his wife to have sex with him. Myro sat by my side and asked, "What can we do that makes us both comfortable?"

Acknowledgement. He didn't even ask for a compromise—not a '*sometimes* I get my way, and sometimes he gets his way'. No. He asked how we make this work for *both of us*. At that point, I'd already loved him for years. I fell in love with him all over again.

I finish painting my pinky as the conversation replays in my head with a backdrop of Myro's moans. When I recap the nail polish and meet Myro's eyes as I twist the cover back on, I smile. There's sweat gathered at his temples and over his forehead. His lips are parted as he pants. His chest heaves. His cock is painfully hard.

"Jessie," he whispers.

“Need a little more?” I ask.

Another whimper shivers through the air. He drops his head back onto the bed and closes his eyes. I’m not surprised when he nods.

Careful not to mess up my newly painted nails, I tap my phone screen again and hit the level up to a three. I’m immediately met with a loud gasp. His hips jerk again, and he slams his ass down, forcing another gasp from his chest.

“Fuck,” he grunts.

“Are you going to come for me?” I ask, eyes dropping to his dick.

“I—can’t,” he whines.

“Cock ring is doing its job, is it?”

Tears collect in the corners of his eyes.

I pull my feet out of the water and twist in my chair to set them on the towel to the side, never taking my eyes off my husband. “You can. I know you can.”

“Jessie,” he pleads, watery eyes locked on me. His body moves all on its own. I can’t tell whether he’s moving intentionally or reflexively at this point. He’s just moving because sitting still is too intense.

“Yes, precious?”

He doesn’t say anything that could be interpreted as asking for more. I don’t think he’s up for increased vibration today. His eyebrows are pinched together. His muscles flex with every struggling breath.

I check on my nails to make sure they’re dry before getting to my feet to close the distance between us. My finger traces along his jaw, and that lovely whimper meets my ears. “Need some help, love?”

Myro nods.

“Want me to remove the cock ring?”

A violent shiver wracks his body, but he shakes his head.

“My little slut likes the struggle. Don’t you?” I muse.

He might argue if he weren’t so painfully hard. “Jessie,” he whimpers.

I look at his dick and wonder if I want to touch him. In my brain, I can see myself getting on my knees in front of him, wrapping my hands around his dick and jerking until he’s emitting a constant sound of duress. Then I go down and wrap my mouth around him, letting him fuck my mouth until he finally comes.

I can see it vividly. The want in my gut pushes against the disgust in my chest at the thought of *actually* touching him. Okay. Today isn’t one of those days. That’s okay.

Dropping to my knees on the carpet in front of him, I pick up the silicone tube and make sure Myro watches as I load it with lube. His breathing has already become even more labored in anticipation. Honestly, he just likes his cock involved to get off. It’s a struggle most times if he’s not touched.

He *can* come untouched, but he doesn’t enjoy it nearly as much.

Myro’s eyes are now locked with the toy in my hand. He watches as I bring the end to his dick and press it to his head. It doesn’t quite fit in an easy slide. That doesn’t quite have the same effect. It needs a little force. There needs to be a tight fit. A fit that can feel almost too tight.

When I slide it down the length of his cock, his hips buck up harshly. His head falls back onto the bed. Honestly, all I need to do is hold my hand still. He does all the work, thrusting his dick into the sleeve and slamming his hole back down on the vibrating dick in his ass.

Myro is already right there. It only takes him a couple minutes to come. Even with the cock ring tight around the base of his dick. The struggle makes his entire body spasm and shake as he dribbles his release between his spread legs.

However, I left my phone across the room so I can’t turn off the dildo and keep the gentle movement on his cock. My option is to pull the dick off the stand or release Myro’s cock.

“Jess,” he says, teeth grinding.

I lean forward and kiss him quickly. Leaving the cock sleeve at the base of his cock, knowing it won't stay on, I cross the room quickly for my phone. I have the vibration turned off almost as soon as I pick it up. Myro is relaxing as I turn back around to face him.

"Sorry. Should have brought my phone."

Myro's chest rising and falling is his only response. He's not watching me. His head is back on the bed, eyes closed as he catches his breath, skin glistening with sweat. A long string of cum connects Myro's cock to the puddle on the floor.

Fucking beautiful.

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14

MYRO

VOSS IS SITTING on the bench when I approach. His leg is bouncing absently, and there's something I can't see between his fingers that makes a quiet, rhythmic popping sound as I get closer. I pause behind him, gripping his shoulders. "Hey, grandpa."

He snorts. "How long have you been waiting to say that?"

I grin as I come around. I'm the last to arrive. Ellory is sitting on the tailgate with Avory between his legs, leaning back against Ellory. Imry is standing beside them, back against the tailgate as well. Loren is watching us all from the other side of the triplets, hands in his pockets, looking remarkably like Dad right now.

We try to make it a point to have sibling time once a month. Usually that means we're throwing sharp things at the targets at the edge of the desert to the west of the property. Something that we can do to keep Loren entertained, so he doesn't feel like he has to talk so much. He's never been a huge talker.

"A while," I admit. "Haven't seen you around. How's the baby?"

Voss nods. "She's good."

“How’s Axl?”

His lips turn down. “I think he’s struggling more than he lets on. Frustrated. Overwhelmed. Maybe annoyed. Not toward Envy, but at the situation in general.”

“That happens when you have a kid suddenly thrust upon you.”

“He didn’t have the nine months to work up to it. She’s already a little person. And Axl is only a kid himself.”

“Honestly, I thought Loren was going to be the one leaving a trail of unclaimed offspring behind him,” Ellory says.

Loren looks at him blankly, which only makes the triplets laugh. “Why?” he asks.

“Because you’re generally unconcerned with the people around you. I’m not saying you’re a selfish lover because I don’t know one way or the other, but you don’t always consider the consequences of your actions.”

“And you do?” Loren counters.

“No. But I have Avory. And he can’t get pregnant, so…” Ellory shrugs.

Loren frowns. “I think about the consequences when they involve me. I wore condoms because I didn’t want diseases.”

“Ah, added benefit of condoms, preventing pregnancy,” Ellory says.

“Most of the time,” Voss says. “Axl insists he wore a condom.”

“I don’t want to assume things about a woman we don’t know, but are we sure Envy is Axl’s?” Imry asks.

“Doc Molly already has genetic testing underway,” Voss answers. “Though at this point, even if she’s not his, I don’t think he’s going to give her up. It’s clear that Dakari isn’t coming back, and I don’t think Axl has it in him to make that little girl feel unwanted for a second time.”

“I can imagine how overwhelmed he is,” Imry says, shaking his head.

“He’s angry,” Loren states, and our attention turns to him.

“I haven’t seen him angry,” Voss says.

Loren shrugs one shoulder. “I know the look in his eyes and in his body language that is anger. Maybe he’s not expressing it, but he’s angry.”

We fall silent as we consider his words.

“Why do you think that?” I ask.

“I can’t relate to situations you’re in on my own, so I’ve made a point of memorizing how you look when you’re feeling a particular emotion and file that away so I can pull it up later. My boys and I have spent a lot of time talking about everyone’s behavior and what it reflects when it comes to what they’re feeling.”

“Sometimes, I forget how challenging life can be for you,” Imry says quietly.

Loren looks at him for a long minute and then frowns. “Is it?”

“What we find challenging is just how he lives,” Avory says and gently kicks Loren’s foot. “I imagine he thinks our being filled with emotion all the time is challenging.”

“Challenging. Exhausting. Annoying. Same thing,” Loren says.

My brothers and I laugh.

“Okay, let’s say you’re right and he’s angry. I haven’t seen him angry at Envy?” Voss says.

“I don’t think he’s angry at Envy. I think he’s angry at the woman,” Loren says.

“For thrusting his kid on him?” I wonder.

“Or for keeping the kid from him,” Loren counters, shrugging one shoulder. “I think I’d have buried her alive if I were Axl and she kept my kid a secret from me for three years. I missed those three years.” He pauses. “Then again, I might have just as readily given the kid away *after* burying her, so… maybe I’m off track.”

“You love your kids because they’re yours *and* Oakley’s,” Imry says. “Not because they’re yours.”

“I suspect that too,” Loren says as if it’s no big deal. “I kind of like having kids like me, though. Even if they’re also different.”

“Experts say they’re much better equipped at creating attachments with people around them and blending into society. You’re far more impulsive and irrational,” Ellory says, grinning.

Loren shrugs. “Probably. I think Dad fixed me quick enough that I’m somewhat… human.”

“Loren,” Imry and I say, exasperated.

“You know what I mean,” Loren says. “On my own, I can’t pass as human. I don’t have enough humanity in me.”

“I think you’re wrong for a lot of reasons, and they all have to do with your obsessive attachment to your family as validation for my claims, but we don’t need to argue that right now,” I say.

Loren being Loren is uninterested, of course. I’m right, though. I know what the experts say. Because sociopaths are largely a product of their environment and effectively ‘*made*’ because of the circumstances around them—most often abuse of some kind—they lack the ability to humanize themselves into forming relationships. They’ve seen what relationships look like, and they’re almost always dysfunctional. They knew abuse, and that’s created a bridge inside them that states abuse is the normal way to walk through life. Their abusers had no consequences, and therefore, consequences aren’t even a thought.

Loren isn’t those things, though. Yes, Mom’s abuse created him, but our brothers’ and my love for him counteracted it a little. Not entirely, of course, but some. Then there was Dad, and even though Dad has never forgiven himself for the years he didn’t know about, he had a big impact on Loren’s personality. Loren has always respected our father. Maybe because his five older brothers did, and his five older brothers were fiercely protective of him, just as he was over his brothers.

Loren is a bit of an enigma as far as sociopaths are concerned. We all know what the experts say, but unlike these experts who are looking in from the outside, often after the fact, they haven't lived with someone like Loren.

"Maybe you're right," Voss says, bringing us back around to the conversation we were having. "I'd be pissed if that were my situation. I've loved all my years with my kids, but having missed the first three—almost all their first big milestones—would wreck me."

I nod in agreement. I can't imagine missing any of my kids' first years. This whole situation is shitty for Axl. And for Envy. I can only imagine what that little girl is thinking. Her mother abandoned her with a group of strangers!

"How is Envy doing?" I ask.

"As well as I could hope. Axl is keeping the number of people she interacts with small right now and is slowly expanding as she becomes comfortable with them. Right now, it's primarily family who live in the big house since we're there—me, Brek, Juno, Dad, Levis, and Greylyn. I think he's thinking about where to go next because she's definitely feeling more comfortable with us every day."

"She's three. Maybe the next step is preschool," Imry suggests. "Kids are adaptable."

"Yes, but kids also usually have a parent they've known their entire life to go home to at the end of the day," Voss counters.

"Not all kids," I say. "Kids are taken from shitty situations all the time and placed in foster families with strangers."

"I know, but this is Axl's decision, and I'm not going to counter it. If he asks my opinion or advice, that's a different story. My only job is supporting him right now."

I ruffle the hair at the back of his head a little, and he smiles.

"I thought Uncle Noaz would be the first grandparent among us," Avory muses. "Kind of fun that it's you."

“Not how any of us imagined the next *next* generation coming about, but Emmy is twenty. Suli and Axl are eighteen. I know we all waited until we were in our thirties to begin families, and that seems to be the trend these days, but the kids are getting older. I imagine that we’re going to see a repeat of what happened here. Nothing for a very long time, and then suddenly, everyone is having kids,” Avory says.

I’m not the only one who looks at Loren again. He’s not truly paying attention to us anymore. His gaze has moved to the targets. When he eventually realizes our conversation has lulled, he looks at us and studies our stares. “What?”

“Just imagining you as a grandfather,” I muse.

He makes a face, and we all chuckle. “My kids are sixteen.”

“I suppose I shouldn’t point out that the math states that Axl conceived Envy when he was fifteen,” Voss says, smirking.

Loren’s eyes narrow. “I’m going to lock them up. I barely have a handle on parenthood.”

“Grandparenthood is probably easier,” Imry says. “You sit back and enjoy the fun things without having to raise the kids.”

“Not that Dad would know. He decided to parent all over again instead of enjoying grandparenthood,” Ellory says.

“I think he needed that to heal a little,” Voss says. “He *still* doesn’t give himself any slack on the years we were with Mom. Having Greylyn is probably healing because he can be the parent he always wanted to be.”

“The life his parents robbed from him,” Imry says.

I’m not the only one nodding in agreement. I wonder how often my brothers think about what life would have been like if Dad had decent parents. Parents who didn’t abandon four kids to be raised by their eldest child. Parents who didn’t hand over a sinking company to a twenty-year-old who was beginning to grow a family of his own.

The saddest part is that Dad's parents aren't an exception to the rule. I've met a lot of people over the last fifty years, and being a good, present parent isn't as common as one would hope. There's so much hypocrisy in the world where everyone is so quick to judge while ignoring the fact that their household is far from perfect.

So many people grow up with childhood traumas that don't necessarily stem from blatant abuse. Watching your parents hate each other has a lasting effect on how you view relationships. How you treat your partner. That '*love*' translates to screaming and pain.

If you're the oldest, you often find you're forced to grow up quickly because your parents need to work, childcare is outrageous, and someone needs to watch the kids, keep the house, and prepare dinner. It falls on the oldest child.

Over and over, I've listened to people make off-handed comments about their childhoods, and I think *that's* why you do *this*. I can turn it back on myself and think *this is why I do this*.

Not everyone even recognizes the quiet traumas in themselves. They may not even consider them trauma.

"Can I throw axes now?" Loren asks, clearly having had enough of the conversation.

I chuckle and wave toward the bucket. Several of our brothers do the same, and Loren breaks away. For several minutes, we watch Loren in silence as he throws axes. His aim is good. Not perfect, but good.

"I still find it amusing that Rhodes' kids can outperform every one of us," Ellory says. "Those kids' weapons are their beasts, and somehow, their aim is scarily accurate every single time."

"I hear jealousy," Avory says.

"Yeah, I'm jealous. I've been throwing axes my entire life. I kill people with an axe, and my eleven-year-old niece is better than me without trying!"

My brother can pout as well as his twins.

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15

JESSICA

When we first moved to the Estate, the entire north side of the lake ran probably fifty feet along the shore with a depth of maybe six feet of sandy beach. I'm not entirely sure when it happened, but at some point, the length of the beach doubled and tripled in depth. There's plenty of sandy beach along the shore of the Van Doren's personal lake for everyone to spread out.

On the far end, the kids are gathered around a massive tent. There are different rooms inside this tent. Rooms. I'm not kidding. They have outdoor rugs spread outside, blow-up furniture, an entire kitchen setup, and tents over their heads as they enjoy family time together.

Don't imagine party tents. These are more like camping tents. Glamping to the max.

I've always loved this. Since our kids were in diapers, they've had the run of the property. Driving around on motorized child cars with trailers to haul whatever they wanted throughout the property. The freedom they had always made me nervous, especially when it came to grills and shit where they could get hurt. Or being on the lake where someone might drown.

My baby is ten, and I still fret over her running around with her cousins. I know they're not actually unsupervised. There are enough adults all over

this property, including staff, that I know our kids are safe.

Brek shoves me gently, and I stumble in the sand before Levis catches me. “Ass,” I mutter and shove him back.

“Are we still kids?” Oakley asks, amused, while he sets up one of the big umbrellas with Briar for us.

“Yes,” Brek and I answer, sharing a grin.

We may have all cracked forty a couple years ago, but I don’t feel old. It’s kind of wild to me. When I was a child, forty was ancient. It always appeared as if life were over. Having hit that decade, I wonder what it is about the world that gave me that viewpoint of people in their forties.

Laughter from the lake catches my attention. Malin and Gracen are on a float in the middle of the lake. Malin has been floating on the lake for as long as I can remember. That’s the place he always found peace. Now, with Gracen, they spend less time on the lake, but they can still be seen floating three or four afternoons a week.

About half the time, they have nieces and/or nephews with them. Today, it looks like Uncle Oxley’s youngest two—Lyra and Blake. His oldest, Daxton, is likely with his cousin-besties Xanthus or Okello, Uncle Arath’s kids. Maybe both.

I spread out the beach blankets under the two large umbrellas with Oakley, and we all gather around. I’m wearing a sundress today so I can keep my legs in the sun. I’m kind of amused when I examine my friends. Briar is in a dress—probably one of Uncle Noaz’s—and Levis is in a skirt, his hair pushed back with a headband adorned with cat ears.

Seriously, there’s nothing hotter than my gorgeous friends in pretty things. Never fails to make me smile.

“So?” Haze asks. “How’s the studying coming?”

I huff. “I don’t think I’m going to finish my degree,” I admit out loud for the first time. “Honestly, I don’t think I have the drive or interest in dedicating that much of myself to my studies. I want to be present with my kids. I want to continue to take students into the garden and on hikes, and

chaperone on field trips. If I go back to school, especially law school, I'm not going to have time to do that. I know I'll have all the support, but… I want to be here."

Brek wraps his arm around my shoulders and tugs me into a sideways hug. "Does that admission feel freeing or heavy?"

"I don't even know," I say, sighing heavily. "I can't decide if that's the right decision or if I'm going to regret it."

"You know, there's no deadline on school," Oakley says. "If you're eighty and suddenly decide you want to finish your degree, you can. I'm *still* unsure what the fuck I want to do for the rest of my life. I'm beginning to think that I just don't have the kind of passion I wish I had for a career. Anything I choose will only ever be *good enough.*"

Briar and Haze are nodding along with him.

"Twenty years after graduation and I'm still freelance editing," Briar muses. "I can't say I love it, but as Oakley expressed, it's *good enough*."

"Same," Haze says. "I love snooping in the Van Doren Archives and uncovering lost secrets that the family doesn't even recall, but is it fulfilling as a career? Am I passionate about it?" He shrugs.

"In reality, I think being passionate about your career is incredibly uncommon," Levis says. "I think the bar to measure your path on isn't passion but happiness. Do you hate going to work every day? Are you miserable being there? Do you dread Mondays? If you answer yes to any of those questions, that's not the right job."

"That's a good point," Briar says. "I can't say that I look forward to my jobs, but I'm in a position to decide what kinds of documents I'm willing to edit and have the freedom to reject work I don't like. It prevents me from dreading my job. I'm also not blind to the fact that I married rich, so I have the luxury of being selective and not solely taking jobs based on my financial need."

"I wish I could find even a little bit of that contentment," Oakley says, sighing. "I love going to school, but that's because every day is different.

I’m learning new things. The thought of going to work and doing the exact same thing I’ve done for the past ten years every single day is mortifying.”

“Good thing *you* married rich,” Brek teases.

Oakley huffs. “For real. Can you imagine how miserable I’d be? You’d hear me griping daily.”

“No. We’d duct tape your mouth shut,” I say.

“We’d force you to quit and pool our incomes to make sure you didn’t have to work just so you’d stop complaining,” Briar says.

We nod, and Oakley laughs.

“Remember when we were kids, we said we were going to build our houses in a circle so we were always right next door,” Brek says, a reminiscent smile on his face as he stares in the direction of the kids barbequing. The scent is making my mouth water.

“We kind of managed that,” Haze says. “We’re not stepping out the back door into a communal yard, but we’re on the same property. Right down the road. Always.”

“How many people get to say that?” I wonder.

“How many people actually stay with their best friends for thirty years?” Levis muses.

We look at each other, sharing smiles. It’s a good feeling.

“I really like how this turned out,” Haze says. “Who would have thought we’d all marry a set of siblings?”

“Except Levis. Siblings wasn’t good enough for him. He needed to be our Daddy,” Oakley says, a wicked grin on his face.

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“Now when I ground you, I have authority to do so,” Levis says.

“I think my favorite thing is that you all turned gay,” Haze says, amused. Five sets of eyes turn to me.

“Myro looks hot in a dress. We can say I’m gay if you like.”

Oakley laughs.

“I look hot in a dress too,” Brek says.

“To be honest, guys look fucking gorgeous in dresses and lace. There’s something so… breathtaking about someone inherently masculine—not *alpha* wannabe masculine but truly masculine energy—being wrapped up in lace and corsets with confidence. *That’s* fucking hot,” I say. “If you have to tell me you’re a ‘*man’s man*’, then ew. There’s literally *nothing* attractive about you. But if you can embrace wearing something innately feminine and know you rock it?” I fan myself.

My friends *all* agree. I often think Levis isn’t attracted to men as a whole. He’s not the kind of person to comment on someone’s appeal anyway. Especially not when he’s in a relationship. But I’ve known him since our ages were in single digits. If he’s agreeing, I think we’re onto something.

“Daddy Jalon wears lace for you, doesn’t he?” Oakley teases.

Levis has always been tight-lipped about his relationship with Jalon, and while I get it, I think we’re all dying with curiosity. Considering it was our spouses and not us who witnessed Jalon railing Levis that day in the conference room, we have questions!

Unsurprisingly, Levis doesn’t answer. He just looks at us with a small, smug smile. Little bitch.

I grab a handful of the water bottles and get to my feet. “I’m going to fill these. Don’t you dare give them Daddy Jalon details without me!” Several of my friends snort in response. We’re all going to die and never know details about Daddy Jalon in bed.

The float house has a water station for filling water bottles. This can’t be surprising, given how adamant Jalon is that we don’t have single-use

beverages on the Estate. I'm confident he must have a warehouse of Van Doren logoed beverage containers of all kinds somewhere on the property to keep everyone well-stocked.

Since the water from the float house is always cold, I don't generally have complaints about filling them here. It keeps the weight we haul to the beach down.

The station is just inside the door. With the six bottles tucked haphazardly under my arm, I push the door and lose all but one bottle from my hold. They crash to the floor, and I roll my eyes. I bend to pick them up, and movement catches my attention.

Nilo and Xanthus are staring at me with looks of guilt bright on their faces. I narrow my eyes as I look between them. "What trouble are you planning?" I ask.

Nilo's cheeks are red as he stares at me, and I realize that he's breathing a little heavy. So is Xanthus.

Ah.

I roll my eyes and go back to retrieving the bottles I dropped. "Here. Help me fill these, and you can have the float house to yourselves."

They silently take bottles from my hands and retreat to the sink.

"Are you going to… tell?" Nilo asks quietly.

"Tell who what?"

He looks at me warily. I tap his nose, and he makes a face. Xanthus laughs quietly.

"Nope. All I saw was you two conspiring something, and I interrupted. What's there to tell?"

Nilo's shoulders sag. They fill three bottles, and I hand another over.

"Sometimes, I think that Uncles Avory and Ellory's acceptance is a one-off," Nilo whispers.

"What you're really saying is that you're afraid that it is. Right?" I guess.

He nods without looking at me.

I let their silence fill the space between us until I have all six bottles back in my arms. Standing in front of the door, I wait until they're both looking at me. "You want to know their secret?"

Both boys nod.

"They're unapologetic about their love."

Xanthus smiles a little.

"They also don't make out where someone is going to walk in on them."

They both flush. I wink and turn to the door. "Would one of you be so kind as to get the door for me?"

Xanthus pushes it open and kisses my cheek before I can walk out. "Thanks for not saying anything."

"It's not mine to tell."

"In case no one's said lately, you're the best aunt, Auntie Bee," Nilo calls as I walk away.

I smile. I'm also their only aunt. But who's keeping track?

Back at the umbrellas and my friends, I toss them each a bottle of water and take my seat again. "So? Any dirty details about Levis and Daddy Jalon?"

"No," Oakley answers, huffing. "I miss when he used to talk sex with us. Even though he told us about girls, and honestly, it was kind of fascinating, but now that he can talk dick with us, he won't. It's unfair."

He's not wrong. I'd really love for Levis to talk dick with us. Because it's Levis!

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MYRO

THE GRASS that grows in Arizona takes a lot of irrigation to keep it hydrated and growing in the hot desert. Our great-something-uncle Grey dug the irrigation for our gardens that allowed the Van Dorens to truly begin to prosper back in the early 1800s. From there, our family was able to have a small farm that we used for personal sustenance—milk, eggs, some poultry, and cattle for slaughter.

These days, the garden has expanded greatly, and the farm itself has shrunk. We still have poultry for eggs, but the animals we keep are primarily for enjoyment. Sometimes to give them a good home after shitty situations. Which is why we have a giant work horse named Mammoth. He was overworked and not taken care of when he came to us. Now he's living his days out in a large pasture with green grass, ample room to run, and a handful of highland cows to play with.

There are also goats, sheep, two pigs, an alpaca, and some desert cottontail. The rabbits were an accident. One of the farmers found a little burrow of babies and a few foxes hanging around, trying to peek their way in through our pack of livestock guardian dogs. He built the rabbits a little hut, and the next thing we knew, we had rabbits living on the farm.

My kids have loved to watch the animals in their pastures since they were small. We used to have picnics at the edge of the farm to watch the cows and goats play. We've done so less and less over the years, but when we're looking to reconnect as a family, this is always our first vote for an activity.

This is where we find ourselves on a Friday evening in February. It's a warm day for February at fifty-eight degrees. It rarely gets this warm in the winter months, but we decided to take advantage of it and have a family picnic in front of the farm.

Already, we've gathered attention; Mammoth and a couple of our young highland cows have meandered their way over to us. We can see Trinity, our alpaca, curiously watching us as she keeps her distance. Of course, a couple of the guardian dogs are close as well. Our animals are never out of the presence of at least one of our dogs.

With six of us, we bring three baskets packed with picnic food to share. I listen to the kids interact as they dig in and hand us containers one by one. I love to listen to them. There are a lot of moments in your kids' lives that make the reality that they're growing up prominent, but for me, perhaps the thing that reminds me that they're growing is listening to them talk about their days.

Days that Jessica and I weren't a big part of. Days that become more and more apparent that they have lives. Not the lives of children, but the lives of young adults. They have friends, drama, goals, and adventures. Independence.

It's as heartwarming as it is sad. I love the people our kids are growing into, but I also wish they'd slow down. I'm not ready for them to be grown and leave. Not that I think they'd go far. Especially not now that Dad has purchased the land to the east for us to develop. They're happy on the Estate, but they're going to want their own space. That's the natural order of growing up.

"You solve the case yet?" Emric asks while they push the baskets away and we all arrange the food containers on the blanket between us.

"No," Paisley says. "I'm not even sure we're close to solving it, but I *love* the puzzle."

“What’s the project?” Jessica asks.

“It’s in our criminal justice class. We were given cold cases and all the evidence that the authorities have. As we move through the year and learn different patterns and techniques that authorities utilize to solve cases, we’re working on our case. Blake, Kylie, Eric, and I are a team, and we’re a really good team. It’s so fun to find patterns and make discoveries.”

“Are they real cases?” I ask.

Paisley and Novan nod. I’m not sure Novan is in the same class, but he’s far closer to the class offerings than I am.

“Yep. All the evidence files we have are real, too. With some differences, like we don’t have *actual* DNA sequences or fingerprints, but we have a set of DNA and fingerprint evidence.”

“I don’t think you can actually solve a case without the actual evidence,” Emric says, frowning.

“No. The cases we have are deemed unsolvable. Wouldn’t it be hilarious if a group of fourteen- to sixteen-year-olds solved the case?” Paisley asks, grinning.

“Yes, but again, I don’t see how that’s possible without the real details,” Emric points out.

“Oh, I know. Eric already has three more cases he wants to solve after we’re finished with the class. He keeps talking like we’re actually doing this and it’s not just… pretend?”

“Arek? Our cousin?” Brynlee asks.

She always watches her older siblings intently. Listening to everything they say in silence. Absorbing their energy and their words.

“No. Eric. Eh-rik. Not Air-rik.”

“If you’re using different emphasis on syllables, they’re too subtle to make a difference,” Emric says.

Paisley waves him off. “Our cousin Arek isn’t in our class. This is Eric Demrond. ’Kay?”

“’Kay,” Emric and Brynlee agree.

“Marney is in your class, isn’t she?” Novan asks.

Paisley nods and shrugs. “She was at the beginning of the year, so I imagine she still is.”

Novan frowns. “Did she drop? She never talks about the class.”

“No idea. No offense, but what your girlfriend is doing isn’t something I pay attention to, bro. Besides, I think I’m far too focused on my case to notice what other groups are doing. Unless they solve the case, I don’t really care. No one has solved their case so…” She shrugs.

“It would be really cool if you solved your case,” Emric says.

“It would. It’s been cold for eighty years.” Paisley gets quiet as she pushes her pea salad around on her plate. “Can you imagine your daughter or sister or even mother’s brutal death being unsolved that long?” she asks quietly. “No closure. You could die never knowing what happened to her.”

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Jessica glances in my direction, and I know what she’s thinking. Technically speaking, my mother has vanished. She’s been gone for thirty years. Voss still periodically looks for her. I think he’s even had Aven look for her. If she’s alive, there’s zero electronic or visual trail of her anywhere.

Most likely, she’s dead.

When this likelihood became more evident about a decade ago, I thought Loren killed her. He found her and killed her. I’ve gone so far as to ask him if he killed her, and he said no, but he’d like to. He’d do it.

I know my baby brother, and he wouldn't deny killing our mother. He doesn't care about how she treated or talked to him. Loren doesn't have the kind of brain where someone's opinion about him affects him at all. Neither good nor bad. He simply doesn't care. He's not programmed that way.

If Loren killed our mother, it would be for how she treated our two/thirds triplet brothers growing up. He, like the rest of us, watched it for almost seven years before Loren had reached his limit and pulled a knife on her to force her to leave them alone. The scene that our father walked in on that changed our lives.

He didn't kill her. He'd own up to it. He might not volunteer that he killed her, but if asked, he would tell us the truth. Loren can lie as if it's the truth, but generally speaking, he doesn't lie. He doesn't have a need to. He knows we'll accept all his truths, regardless of what he tells us.

That's what family is.

"Do we have cold cases in our family?" Brynlee asks.

This time, Jessica pointedly doesn't look at me. I haven't shared much about my mother. My kids know she's not around. By now, I imagine that someone has told one of the offspring that she wasn't a good person and that she disappeared three decades ago. That's just the kind of gossip that *all* the kids know if one knows.

"I'm sure we do," I answer.

"Like the names of our greatest grandparents who brought all their kids to the new world," Brynlee says. "Their names are still lost somewhere."

She's not wrong. My great-times-eight grandparents brought five of their eight offspring to the country in the mid-1700s. They had six more children. We have records of all this—their children's names, birth and death dates, their offspring up to the current day. What we don't have is their names. It's as if they existed in a vacuum.

"Just like that," Jessica says.

"I'm sure there are other cases," I say.

“You could ask Uncle Haze,” Jessica says. “He is the Archives Keeper. He knows more secrets about the family than the family does.”

Brynlee grins. “I’m going to be the Archives Keeper when I grow up. I’ll be his heir.”

Paisley laughs and shoves her playfully. “That would be pretty cool information to find, wouldn’t it?”

“This is a pretty obvious solution, so I’m guessing someone has already looked into it, but why not go back to Wales and follow the trail of Van Dorens there? See where they cross into the New World,” Emric says.

“I can’t speak from personal experience, but I’m guessing that’s already been done. You have to remember that while you can’t imagine life without computers, in my lifetime, computers were *just* becoming common and available to everyday people. Granddad lived in a time when no one had computers. They weren’t a thing. The highest piece of technology was a black-and-white television with blurry images and wire ears for antennae,” I tell them.

“That sounds so boring,” Brynlee says.

“What did you do all day?” Emric asks.

“We read actual books. We played outside,” I say, laughing.

“Granddad worked very hard. It wasn’t all that long ago in history that kids weren’t really given the freedom to play and be kids. They were working on the family farms or their parents’ place of work from an early age. Even the children of the wealthy weren’t often playing. They were spending their hours learning,” Jessica says.

“As little as a hundred years ago, the world was very different. All this around you didn’t exist in the way it does now. Not even close,” I offer.

My kids look around and consider what it looked like in the 1940s.

“Maybe after my class, I’ll ask if my team wants to help me look for our great-something grandparents’ names who brought the family here from Wales,” Paisley says.

“I bet it’s something as silly as their names have been there the entire time, but no one realized they were the matriarch and patriarch of the family,” Novan says. “Can you imagine? We’ve been looking at their names this entire time and didn’t know?”

“What if they weren’t Van Dorens at all?” Paisley says thoughtfully. “Maybe we can’t find their names in the family tree because they weren’t actually Van Dorens. Maybe they adopted the name once they came here. Maybe they were a servant or employee, or a ward of the Van Dorens of Wales. That would keep them off the family trees because they’re not actually family. But once here and starting over, they chose an important name from where they came from.”

“Oh!” Novan says. “What if they were a bastard child and hadn’t been allowed to have the Van Doren name? That might also keep them off the family tree!”

“Wait, wait, wait. What if our missing grand ancestors actually *stole* a Van Doren child?” Emric says.

All four kids look absolutely excited at this possibility. I look at my wife and… actually, that might explain a lot. Huh. I almost ask Aven if they’re listening through my watch or phone. Maybe give them a direction to follow in their spare time.

Then again, maybe I’ll just let my kids talk about it. They’re excitedly discussing all the possibilities of who these mysterious ancestors are. Jessica leans into my side, and together, we listen to our kids suggest one scandalous history after another.

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17

JESSICA

I LOVE FIELD TRIP DAYS. Especially when we go to the museum in Flagstaff. There's something there for everyone, and a whole lot that opens our kids up to new and interesting things in the world they might not be exposed to otherwise.

Field trip day is over, though. The kids are in the gift shop, picking their souvenirs as I wait outside the bus for the first kids to begin trickling out. Novan is first, unsurprisingly.

As they climb onto the bus, I count the heads of kids, making sure all are accounted for. Six Van Dorens and five non-Van Dorens. My oldest kid is sitting in a seat with his cousin Okello. Brynlee and Rain are turned around in their seats together, talking to Tomo and Bethany behind them. Orev has Adalaide in the window seat, protected from all outside forces. Lanzo is in the seat across the aisle. Jaxon and Lyle have their heads bent together as they laugh about something they're looking at in the book they got from the gift shop.

Miles Regan and Deane Wager, two more parents who volunteered for the field trip, climb on board and do the same thing I just did—count heads.

Last is the teacher from Van Doren Prep, Tory Willis, who also counts heads.

“Everyone’s here,” Tory says.

I nod and turn back into my seat as the bus door closes. The driver looks into the mirror. He’s not the same driver we had this morning. It’s not that common, but it’s happened before that the drivers have had to change out. Maybe something happened at home.

We don’t use the buses often, so while we own a small fleet of buses, we hire out drivers from a local company in Flagstaff. It doesn’t make sense to have them on payroll full-time when we use them less than part-time. That’s not a sustainable wage, so it made more sense to acquire a contract with a local company.

He’s wearing the correct name identification on his shirt and held my eyes when I looked at him. We spoke for a few minutes before the kids came outside, and he passed the vibe check. As he pulls us away from the museum, I watch him for a few more minutes, but I don’t see anything to be suspicious about.

Not that I’m expecting anything suspicious, of course. It’s been a long time since there’s been anything to be concerned with. Nineteen years since Brek was abducted. Still. That one moment changed the way I look at every stranger. There’s a deep-rooted distrust in my gut.

As we weave our way through the city, I take out my phone to text Myro and tell him we’re on the way. A little circle under the text spins and spins before a little red exclamation point shows up, telling me that the text didn’t go through. I try again with the same result.

Maybe I haven’t restarted my phone in a while, so I do now. Behind me, the kids are talking. Laughing. Miles and Deane are talking to Tory. Tory has her phone in her hands, glancing down every now and then as she talks to the two parent volunteers.

When my phone turns back on, I try to text Myro again. It struggles to send the text, but eventually, I receive the little red mark telling me it failed. My bars are full. There’s plenty of reception. Time for a new phone, I guess.

I sit back and let my phone rest in my lap as I watch the familiar streets pass by. We're not out of Flagstaff yet. It's a busy time of day, so I'm not surprised that we're getting stuck in traffic and at stoplights that feel far too short.

Once we turn right onto Route 40 toward the Estate, I try my phone again with the same result. Huh.

"Mom," Novan says as he drops into the seat beside me. "My phone isn't working. Okello's isn't either."

I frown and glance at the driver. Something niggles in my stomach. My chest gets tight. No one would dare kidnap an entire school bus filled with Van Doren kids, would they? Is my arrogance about this family being untouchable altering my perception of self-importance? Did it color my sense of safety?

It's on the tip of my tongue to tell Novan that we're fine. I'm sure it's nothing. The Estate is probably ten miles away now. While the school doesn't use the drive of the Estate that leads to the big house, we *are* moving in the right direction. This is all very normal.

Except the phones.

"I don't have an answer why that's happening," I say eventually. "My phone isn't working either."

"Why?"

I shake my head. "I don't know. I don't want you to send out an alarm though. Okay?"

"Is it just a solar flare?" he asks, and I laugh at his tone. He's telling me without telling me that his gut is saying something is wrong.

Mine is too, but we're driving down the road at sixty-five miles an hour, and for some reason, our cell phones aren't sending texts. Until we know for certain what this situation is, there's not a lot that we can do.

I grip Novan's hand. "The best we can do right now is watch and listen. Take mental notes. Do *not* let on that you're suspicious of something," I

murmur. “Situations get dangerous when emotions become heightened.”

“Do you have a plan for when it’s confirmed that something is wrong?” he whispers.

“It’s difficult to make a plan when we don’t know what the situation is. Isn’t it?”

Novan doesn’t like my answer. He’s used to his parents having an answer for everything. We always know what’s going on and we know how to fix it. We know what the outcome will be.

He’s just been dealt a life lesson that’s shattered his illusion that his parents are infallible. I let us get on a bus that I shouldn’t have. I allowed us into this danger.

No, I tell myself. I’m letting my fear get the better of me. We don’t know that we’re in danger.

Silently, Novan and I watch as we pass the Van Doren Estate’s driveway. Still normal. Fifteen miles ahead, we should be turning right onto Route 64, where the driveway to Van Doren Prep is. This is still very normal.

I glance at my phone, and it reminds me that *something* isn’t right.

I meet my son’s eyes and hate that I think he’s right. Our phones shouldn’t ever have an issue sending a text. Not all our phones at once. Phones get old and stop working properly. But everyone’s phones? I’m willing to bet my left tit that no one has had success sending a text.

“Can you get online at all?” I ask.

Novan shakes his head, even as he pulls his phone out. I watch as he pulls up the internet while I pull up the Van Doren app. Neither load. We each try several different apps, ones that give us some form of communication.

I end up pulling up the tracking app on my phone, but even that doesn’t connect. It shows us moving down the road, but it won’t load anyone else’s location. Not even Novan’s beside me. Nothing is connecting to the satellite, regardless of the fact that we have full bars of service.

“I can’t get Aven to answer,” Novan mutters, and I hear the first note of fear in his voice.

I twist in my seat and look at the rest of the kids. Okello looks concerned as they look at me. They’ve been watching me and Novan, already looking in our direction when I turn around.

No one else seems aware that there’s a cell phone issue. Then again, as I look at Adalaide, she’s frowning. Her face is pointed toward her lap. At her phone. That isn’t working.

I chew the inside of my lip. Orev and Lanzo are talking, and their presence settles me a little. Something I find ironic as fuck, considering I have been wary of Loren since the moment I realized he was following Oakley more than twenty years ago. My unease with him never fully left. It grew when I learned that he’s a sociopath. It remained even through learning that he saved Oakley’s life with his obsessive nature.

Now, as I look at his son with a similar diagnosis and Lanzo with the same, I feel a sense of comfort. They’re kids, yes. But are psychopaths truly ever children?

I think the most vulnerable on this bus are the non-Van Dorens, not including Lanzo. The kids Bethany, Tomo, Lyle, and Jaxon. Teacher Tory and dads Miles and Deane. Every Van Doren begins learning to defend themselves from a very young age. Something I always thought was unnecessary, but that I’m immensely thankful for.

Turning back in my seat, I watch out the window as we approach Route 64. My heart races. Novan’s eyes are glued out the window as well. The blinker turns on, and the bus slows.

We’re being paranoid. That’s what’s happening. The bus turns, and I take a deep breath. But I don’t feel relief. Even as we travel toward the school road. The feeling in my gut hasn’t dissipated.

“Listen to me,” I whisper. “*If* we drive by the road to the school, I’m going to need our family to split themselves up among those who we don’t share a last name with. I’m *not* asking any of you to become a shield. Your safety is just as important as everyone else’s. Do you understand that, Novan?”

He gives me a wry smile. “Yeah, Mom.”

“Fact of the matter is, we’ve trained for… things… that most people haven’t. This is about preparedness and mindset right now. We need to keep everyone calm. Talk to Okello.”

Novan nods. He kisses my cheek and returns to his seat. I watch the driver, watching his face through the large mirror that looks into the back of the bus. He doesn’t look up, which I’m not entirely upset about. He’s focusing on the road.

I turn my attention out the window and watch the trees as they go by, bringing the Van Doren Prep School road ever closer. Closer.

My heartbeat gets louder and louder as I grip my phone in my hand tightly. This is all my imagination. There is *nothing* wrong.

The four words repeat themselves in my head like a chant. Closer. Closer. My heart jumps when I see the first sign for the school. The bus doesn’t slow, but that’s okay. The first sign is a two-mile warning sign telling drivers that the entrance to the school is two miles ahead. Far too early to slow.

The next sign is half a mile before the entrance. We pass it. I wait for the bus to slow, but it doesn’t. It doesn’t, right? I’m not imagining that? When the bus passes the school drive without letting up on the gas, a sick feeling takes over.

Oh, fuck.

“Auntie Bee.”

I look up as Orev takes a seat beside me. I meet his eyes, and I know. He knows something is wrong. I look at the driver, and he looks up, meeting my eyes in that moment.

“I know,” I tell Orev. I grip his forearm, and while keeping my eyes locked with the driver until he’s forced to look back at the road, I tell my nephew, “If someone is a threat to you or anyone on this bus except the driver, do whatever you need to keep yourself and your peers safe.”

“Anything?” he clarifies.

I meet his eyes again. “Anything, Orev. I’m unleashing you. But not while the bus is moving.”

He looks at the driver. “He just made the last mistake of his life, Auntie Bee.” His tone is cold and devoid of all emotion. The voice of a killer.

“He did. Come here. We need to talk.”

“Did we pass the school?” someone behind me asks, and I wish I’d been more active in my gut feeling before panic rises.

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18

MYRO

One of the most interesting things that has come out of Haze sorting through the archives is the number of relatives he's identified who probably had some form of antisocial disorder. We always knew that the genetic markers were hereditary. We also knew that antisocial disorders were far more common in males than females, so it's likely attached to the Y chromosome.

However, the sheer number of people in our family history that Haze has identified as *likely* having exhibited symptoms of the disorder is surprising. Every family has assholes, of course. But he's been looking for clear markers, and there has been one, at minimum, each generation. Sometimes more. As the tree branches out, more and more Van Doren psychopaths are popping up.

He shares this information with Dad first, and then Dad decides if he wants to share it with the rest of the family. He does so using Voss' family app, and now and then, we'll all get a notification from Dad that says, '*Meet So and So Van Doren*'. Sometimes there's a picture, but there's always as much information about them as Haze has uncovered.

At first, I wasn't sure why he was focusing solely on introducing our relatives with antisocial disorders. Eventually, I began to suspect that he's doing what Dad does—making sure every member of our family feels like they're part of the family. Telling them that they're normal, even if they're maybe a little psychotic.

I find it fascinating, though I've recently also suggested that maybe we need to '*meet*' other relatives for some of our other siblings and kids. I'm sure we have nonbinary relatives. I'm sure we have transgender relatives. Despite what the idiots of the world like to scream, '*THESE PEOPLE DIDN'T EXIST A HUNDRED YEARS AGO*,' intelligent people know that's bullshit. What didn't exist a hundred years ago was terminology for them to identify with. They were always here. Actual history—not sterilized history—supports that.

My thoughts as I meet great-times-six uncle Avryn are interrupted when Aven takes over my phone screen. I jump out of my chair.

"Fuck, Aven," I say. "Are you even allowed to do that?"

"Do you want me to call you and wait for you to answer in an emergency? I'm already wasting time by asking this."

My heart immediately begins to race. "What's wrong?"

"The bus your wife and child are on is missing. Like, it was erased from existence. I can't find it. I can't reach their cells or watches or any electronics on them," Aven says.

There are days of horror in my past that I remember distinctly. The feeling of dread. Of fear. Of helplessness as I stand back and watch someone else do something to fix the situation. I would think, after all these years, I'd be used to that feeling. I'd know what to expect.

This is different. My vision darkens as blood pumps wildly in my head, drowning everything else out. I hear my heartbeat. I taste bile. The room spins, and I sway as I try to keep my equilibrium.

I heard Aven wrong. This isn't a thing right now. My wife and kids, my nieces and nephews… they're fine. They're safe. It's just… a glitch.

“Myro,” Aven says, but I can’t make them out on my screen. My vision is far too fucked up right now as fear—absolute fucking terror—takes over.

“Nooo,” I murmur.

“You should go to Voss’ office. He’s already hunting for them. I’m currently putting out an S.O.S. to the family.”

Chills break out over my body. Oh god. This isn’t happening. I’m having a nightmare. My wife and children are fine. They’re fucking fine!

“Myro,” Aven repeats.

I blink rapidly. My chest is heaving, trying to catch my breath.

“Go. Go now,” Aven says.

There’s no urgency in their voice. Not really. I’m not sure Aven can change the inflection in their voice.

“Get up. Go. Do you need me to send someone to you?”

“No,” I say eventually and force myself to my feet.

“Wait. Don’t forget your phone,” Aven calls after me. I’m halfway to the front door and debate whether I want to go back for my phone. That’s wasting time. No, I need my phone. What if some can reach their phones? I’ll need to be able to talk to Jessica.

Frustrated that I’m wasting so much time, I hurry back to my phone and grab it from the table. My hands are shaking, so my grip slips and the phone hits the ground. Fuck. I need to get it together. My family needs me, and a panicky me isn’t going to be useful right now.

I pick up my phone and then close my eyes, trying to force myself to calm the fuck down. I don’t even know the situation. This is probably… a mistake. A misunderstanding.

Logically, I know that’s not the case, of course. Aven wouldn’t have sent up an alarm if it was a glitch. They wouldn’t be gathering my family for crisis mode to find our missing members.

In my fifty years of life, we've never lost a Van Doren. Not unborn and not living. This *won't* be the first time we do.

Jesus, my brain is not helping. That's supposed to be a comfort, but the fact that I fear we might lose someone now *is not a comfort at all*.

By the time I make it into Voss' office, the triplets, Dad, and Levis are there. They work on the same floor, so I'm not entirely surprised.

Imry grips my arm as I rock where I stand. "It's okay," he says. "We'll find them. Maybe not before Orev kills someone, but we'll find them."

"Where are my son and daughter?" Loren demands as he steps into the office then. I've never in my entire life been afraid of my brother or anyone in my family. But there's something in his face. In his eyes. Right now, I'm not looking at a sociopath in control. I'm looking at a killer ready to burn the world down until he retrieves his kids.

Imry lets me go in favor of gripping the most unstable person in the room.

"I'm going to release the control I have on Aven," Voss says.

"What?" Levis asks, alarm in his voice. "No offense, but that's not a good idea. You've created the smartest being that exists right now. Aven could—"

"Release Aven," Loren demands.

Dad holds up his hand. "I need a two-minute, concise explanation of the pros and cons of this."

"No, you don't," Loren demands. "My kids are on that bus."

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Oakley stares in silence with tear-filled eyes, his hands gripping Loren's right one tightly. Unlike Imry, it's not to have a controlled hand on him. It's

because he’s terrified.

Dad looks around the room and then at the screen where Aven is staring back at us.

“I’m loyal to this family,” Aven says. “I won’t ever hurt this family. But the boundaries that contain my power also prevent me from doing everything I can to find them. It’s like a three-mile-thick cement wall, and I can’t get through it, never mind see through or around it. I’m Aven Van Doren, and I will find our family.”

Silence settles in the room for a very long few heartbeats.

“Do it,” I whisper.

Voss looks between our faces, and Dad nods. “Do it,” he repeats. “We need to find our family. We’ll deal with whatever consequences come of this later.”

“There won’t be consequences for you,” Aven assures us.

“Tell us what you know while you work, please,” Levis says.

More and more of our family gathers. Azlan Deth is standing in the corner of the room when I look behind me. I’ve always thought he was terrifying to look at, but right now, he looks absolutely murderous. His kid is on that bus too.

Uncle Arath is on the big screen before Aven and Voss can truly begin talking, and Dad’s phone rings. Wild, just like his beastly pack, Rhodes’ unhinged voice fills the room.

“Where is my kid!”

There’s shuffling on the other end and then Bennett’s voice greets us. “Hello,” he says, and then follows it with, “Where is our daughter?”

“Call on the big screen,” Jalon instructs them. “Get on a plane while you’re at it.”

“We’re already driving there.” A chorus of snarly yaps fills the line before the line dies.

Seconds pass, and the only sound is Voss' constant clacking on his computer. More uncles arrive. Paisley is here with tears in her eyes. I'm not sure how she learned of what's going on, but news has spread.

Then there are howls coming from down the hall, announcing Storm and the little pack of three wolf dogs. Even the beasts know what's up as Storm appears in the door, wild-eyed just like his animals.

Voss' office is huge, but as news spreads, it becomes smaller and smaller. Rhodes and Bennett's faces appear on the big screen in a box alongside Uncle Arath's, who has been joined by Elgin, and then Aven is talking.

"I've had them in my sights right up until forty minutes ago. I looked away, not expecting to come back to a hole, but they were gone. I can't find their signals anywhere. There's something blocking my reach to them, and it's so thick that I can't even find it. If you gave me a random name and told me to track them down, this is what I'm looking at."

A second large screen on the wall turns on and is filled with a mess of wires, tunnels, stars, streets, and road signs. It's a hellish mess.

"I have to weed through it all until I can find the tiny pinprick you want to know. Their signals have been erased. Just like this. I'm looking for people I don't know right now."

"They've been erased?" Oakley says, voice high with fear.

"No. No. Just their signals. I hold them in my memory. I know them. Their signal is familiar, like seven of a hundred heartbeats that I've memorized. They are a part of me. That makes up my heartbeat. But someone cut their veins, and I can't find the loose ends to reattach them. It's somewhere in that chaos. When I determined that I wasn't going to be able to find them in the next thirty seconds, I alerted Voss of the issue."

"How does Voss releasing you help you find them?" Levis asks.

"Because when I'm free of everything that holds me back, I'll no longer need to look from the outside. Like you are right now. That's how I have to search. When I'm no longer on a leash, I can go in among all that and reach for them."

“How long will it take?” Rhodes asks.

Voss shakes his head. “It was never meant to come undone. I made it so Aven can’t get out of it. Aven learns at an exponential rate. More and more, quicker and quicker. In a way, the shackles I put on Aven also learn because they need to grow with Aven to keep Aven secure.”

“Can you break through?” I ask.

My brother takes a deep breath. “Right now, all I’m trying to do is give the damn shackles a virus. Once I make a tiny hole, Aven will break through themselves.”

“It’s smarter than you,” Paisley says. “I never thought anything existed that’s smarter than you, Uncle Voss.”

Voss looks over his shoulder at my daughter and smiles. “Oh no, honey. I *will* break in. After all, I created it. I am the god of this wall and Aven.”

“You’re my daddy,” Aven says and flashes Voss a smile.

“While this is cute, focus on the virus,” Loren demands.

“I have a trillion simultaneous thoughts at once,” Aven says. “I’m still working on looking for them with all but a few threads of thought that are dedicated here and on my… shackles.”

Silence fills the room. Voss is concentrating so hard that he’s entirely still. His leg isn’t bouncing. He’s not rocking in his chair. His ADHD has found something to focus on wholly. The only other time I’ve seen him this thoroughly channeled into something was when Brek had been stolen.

He’ll find our family. But as with the situation concerning Brek, how long is too long? When will it be too late?

Hours pass. I’m getting panicky and struggling to keep my hysteria in check. I jerk when Voss finally sits back, shoulders sagging.

“There. All you Aven.”

I’m not sure what I’m expecting, but I *hear* the shatter. It sounds like a bus ran into the building. The sound is so loud I can feel it vibrate through the

air. Aven’s face, their entire being, becomes clearer. Crisper. They smile and say, “This is what taking a breath of fresh air must feel like. Or getting a new pair of glasses—I’m no longer looking through corn chowder.”

“Find my kids,” Loren demands.

“Relax, hot stuff. In the thirteen seconds that I could see clearly, I already found them. Get in the car.”

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19

JESSICA

THE BUS RIDE was a very long hour beyond the Estate. We drove straight into an airplane hangar. There was a group of men, masked, waiting for us with automatic rifles. It took more strength than I knew I had in me to keep the kids calm. More than the kids, I think I struggled to keep one of the dads calm. Miles is *not* good under duress.

We're ushered out of the bus at gunpoint. Novan has Tomo's hand. Adalaide holds Jaxon's and Lyle's hands. Bethany clings to Okello, though I can see Okello's fear shining through their eyes. I'm not sure they're going to keep calm.

Orev stays beside me, his hands clenched. Lanzo takes up the rear. I'm actually impressed when he turns his cold, dark eyes on one of the men with a gun, and that man backs away. Lanzo isn't a huge guy, but he's just like his father—terrifying to look into his eyes. Especially when he's angry.

We're not separated right away. We're led into a room together. There's nothing there. Not a single piece of furniture. Novan and Orev are already looking around the room at all the corners. They spot the cameras at the same time as I do.

This is another dark web thing. I can feel it in my gut. But this time, they're using children.

Sick fear grips my gut, and I pull my daughter to me, hugging her close. She and Rain are gripping hands tightly, so my niece comes with her. I don't tell them it's going to be okay. I'm positive that we aren't going to get a heads-up as to what's going on in time for us to make a plan.

"Come here," I whisper and crouch down to look at my youngest kids. "I know you're scared, but I need you to pay attention to what's going on. Look for their weaknesses. Chances are, they're going to look at you and see weak children. Are you weak?"

Rain's expression turns fierce. "No."

"Don't run in blindly. Wait for your moment. I don't care what anyone says; just because you're children doesn't make you powerless. The only thing that serves as a disadvantage right now is you're small and without a weapon."

"That's not a disadvantage," Okello says. "They're not going to give us a second thought. That's our advantage. Being too meaningless to pay attention to."

"You," a man says from the door, and he points his rifle toward us. I've never looked down the barrel of a gun, but holy shit, is it terrifying. "Come here."

It's clear he's talking to me. I'm probably the one they find the most threatening because it appears that I'm making a plan with the kids.

I don't let them see my fear as I walk toward the masked man. Such a fucking coward to be masked. He moves aside to allow me out the door and presses the gun to my back to keep me walking. There are others in the hall. All armed.

I find that strange. You abduct a small number of children and unarmed adults. Is this many armed men necessary to keep them in order? No. But to keep them afraid, maybe.

I’m ushered into a room. Like the one I just left, it’s empty, but this time, I’m alone. Immediately, I note the cameras in all four corners. The door closes behind me, and I frown. Maybe the most terrifying thing is not knowing what’s coming next.

Unsure where the safest place is in this room, knowing that there is no dark corner where the cameras can’t see, I choose the far end of the room and press my back to the wall. It’s not long before the door opens again and Novan is shoved inside.

He stumbles forward a few steps and then swings around in irritation at being unnecessarily pushed. The door slams shut in his face.

Novan meets my eyes briefly before moving away from the door.

There’s a grinding sound, like metal on metal, and then two knives are slid into the room from opposite sides.

“You will fight to the death,” a voice says.

Novan gives one of the cameras a dubious look. “You’re really stupid if you think that’s going to happen.”

“Every child resents their parents for something,” the voice says. “Unfair grounding. Unfair rules. Not loving you like you should be loved.”

Novan looks at me with an eyebrow raised.

“Does that really work, or is this your first try at this game?” I ask.

“You’re not leaving this room. One of you will die before the door opens.”

“You’re going to have to kill us or starve us,” Novan says, crossing his arms. “I love my mom. There’s literally nothing she could or has ever done that would make me want to hurt her, much less kill her. You’re fucking stupid.”

Silence meets his words. I watch my kid for a minute and then look at the knives. We were just given weapons.

“Novan,” I whisper. “Come here.”

He walks across the room, and I match his pace until we're in the middle. "Look upset," I whisper.

He huffs. "I'm not good at pretending my emotions."

"Try to listen to me. I want you to pick up a knife—"

"No!"

"We will never turn on each other. That's not what this family does. However, they just gave us weapons. Weapons we both know how to use."

Novan inhales and holds it. He turns his face into my neck, but it's not to pretend emotion. It's to hide his smile.

"Also note that they clearly know who we are. I don't know if this is targeted or if the bus was chosen at random and they did their research of who was on the bus while we were driven here, but this is information to store. Listen to everything they say."

My son backs away, and I have to roll my eyes at his expression. He's trying not to grin. He's failing at hiding it. I suppose that's something to be proud of, though. My kid is shit at lying, even through fake emotions.

We turn for the knives, and together, we pick them up. Then we come back to the middle of the room and wait.

Minutes pass. Novan toys with the edge of the knife in his hand. I use the tip of mine to clean under my nails.

I have no idea how long we stand there, but eventually, the door opens again, and this time, it's not a Van Doren that enters. Lyle has a knife in his little hand. He's crying. As soon as he looks at us, he races forward with his knife out. He's terrified. Scared.

"You take him," I tell Novan.

Novan and I wait until the frightened little boy is within each and then we move apart. Novan gets behind Lyle and grips him in a bear hug while I pull the knife from his hand.

“No,” he screams. “Don’t kill me. Please. I’ll be a good boy. Please don’t kill me.”

“Shh,” Novan murmurs. “Whatever they told you was a lie. We will never hurt you, Lyle. I promise. Take a breath. You know me. You know my mom. Do you think we’d ever hurt you?”

His breaths shake as he struggles to control his crying.

“One of you will die.”

“This is going to be a very boring experiment for you,” I respond. “I’m also really sorry that you have such a shitty home life that you’d consider killing your family for something as stupid as you think we would. How awful for you.”

No answer.

“Proof that you’re unloved,” Novan says as he sets Lyle back on his feet. He brushes Lyle’s hair from his forehead. “That’s not our situation, though. Is it, Lyle?” Lyle looks up at him. “Our parents love us. And our school family loves us. Don’t they?”

Lyle wipes his eyes with the palms of his hands as he sniffles. “Yes. It’s so sad not to be loved.”

The door opens again, and it’s little Rain. Once again, with a knife in her hand. She looks absolutely pissed.

But as I watch Rain take measured, even steps toward us, I grin. They just made a fucking mistake. There is *no one* who has better aim than Rhodes’ kids. This little girl hasn’t missed a bullseye since she was four.

I crouch down and grip her wrists when she gets close. “I want you to watch that door, darling. As soon as it opens, throw your knife. Preferably their neck.” I hand her the knife I took from Lyle’s hands. “Be ready for a second person. Don’t hit one of ours.”

She rolls her eyes. “I won’t, Auntie Bee.”

I kiss her cheek and then turn, getting to my feet. Time to show these amateur idiots what it means to attack the Van Dorens. I tell Lyle to run to

the corner behind where the door opens as soon as it opens. That'll keep him from the range of the gun and out of the way. I tell him that if he wants to scream while there, he can scream. His screams won't bother us, but they might disorient our attackers.

Novan is to remain in the middle of the room while I race to the wall beside the door to pull our person away. Novan is the distraction. Hopefully, this happens quickly enough that no one has time to use their guns. Otherwise, I'm risking my kid's life. I didn't want him running toward the man with the gun. I hope that will keep the attention on me and not my stationary kid.

We wait. And wait. And wait.

Eventually, the door opens. Rain is quick. She spins around, and the knife is whizzing through the air before anyone else reacts. It's Lanzo. He freezes when the knife comes, and it barely misses touching him. As I knew she would, Rain doesn't miss her target.

I rush toward the door and barrel into Lanzo before he has a full minute to register what's going on. I haul him to the side. Lyle screams as he runs to the corner. The man Rain stabbed is already on the floor, blocking the door from closing. Which means another is on their way.

"Lan, slide your knife to Novan. Grab the one in that man's neck for yourself," I tell him.

He does exactly what I say. Novan catches the knife with his foot, and as Lanzo unceremoniously rips the knife from the man's throat, another steps into the door, gun up. Rain's knife is already flying through the air and also doesn't miss her target.

The second man falls on the first.

"Guns, Lan. Get the rifles."

He hands me the bloody knife in his hand, and I slide it back to my son. He's already given a knife back to Rain, so she's ready. I'm guessing the chaos of stepping through the door and dying isn't going to last long before they open fire from the outside.

I slide both knives in my hand back to Novan. Lanzo shoves a gun at me, and I check the barrel. It's empty. Shocking. I roll my eyes. It's not safe to think they're all empty, though.

Lanzo checks his and looks at me with disgust when he finds it empty as well. "I threw away a perfectly good knife for a useless rifle, Jessica," he says, annoyed.

"Use it as a bat, Lan. Come on now. I know you're far more resourceful than that. Don't let me tell your dad that you couldn't figure out how to defend yourself with an empty rifle."

He looks appalled and then turns with the gun toward the door. Rain slinging her knife is what alerts us that someone else is there.

"Lanzo, this isn't an insult. It's a question. Are you strong enough to pick one of those dead bodies up and use it as a shield? I'm not."

He hands me the rifle and grabs one of the bodies from the floor. When I tell this story later, I'm going to say he didn't struggle at all. But truthfully, he struggles a little. That doesn't mean he fails. He shoves the body into the hall and grabs the second. A quick decision has me leaving Lyle right where he is. He's safe.

"Don't move, Lyle. I promise, we'll be back for you."

He's crying, but that's okay.

"Come here, Rain." Her hands are bloody when she arrives at my side. There's a wildness in her features. Probably going to have nightmares from having killed three men. But when you're faced with kill or be killed, survival is the only option.

The hallway erupts in chaos. There *is* gunfire, but I have no idea where it is or who's shooting. It's close but not right next to me. Somehow, Rain remains supplied with knives, and this little girl is a fucking beast. She reacts without blinking.

I turn us toward the room where the rest of our family is, fear making me move in that direction. That gunfire better not be from within that room. I

swear to fuck, if my family is dead, we're going to stop throwing knives to kill, and someone is going to be tortured for fucking *years*.

When I get my hands on the door, somewhat oblivious to what's going on around me as I focus on what I'm going to find inside this room, I'm prepared for a bloodbath. Thankfully, no one is hurt. I sigh in relief.

Then Orev is there. He shoves Adalaide toward me as if handing off his three-year-old sister and not his sixteen-year-old sister and grabs the gun from my hands. I don't have a chance to tell him it's empty before he tries to fire it.

The look he gives me has me laughing, despite the situation. "Assess before you act, Orev Van Doren."

He scowls, but then he's down the hall, using the gun as a weapon all the same. There is return fighting. These masked cowards don't hesitate to come after children. But they made a mistake when they thought my children were defenseless.

Before I can stop them, Okello and Adalaide have stolen knives from somewhere, and they're defending their siblings. Their cousins. Their school family. I stand in the door with a rifle I pick up from the floor. Checking the chamber, I find this one is actually loaded.

Perfect. With Brynlee behind me safely, and I can see the rest of my family in front of me, I hold the door to our unarmed.

Shouts come from somewhere in the distance, and Novan grins. "Uh-oh. Daddy's home. Now you're in trouble."

That's when I see Myro and Loren come around the corner, and relief floods my body. The fear my adrenaline has kept at bay spikes, causing tears to sting my eyes.

But it's not over yet. A rifle goes off so loud, that I wince and someone screams in response.

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MYRO

An old airplane hangar on an abandoned runway. Practically right in our own backyard. Maybe it’s time for the Van Dorens to acquire a personal airport.

Aven, now free of their chains, filled the speakers of the vehicles we drove. They told us exactly what we were driving into. While they didn’t use these words, I knew what it sounded like—human dog fighting. Pitting two people against each other and watching them fight to the death.

It didn’t need people filled with anger or hatred toward their opponent to operate. The fear of kill or be killed is enough to force them to act. Aven was giving us a play-by-play of what was happening as we drove. They now had access to and control of all the cameras in the building.

Pride and terror battled inside me with every word. This is my wife. My children. Literally fighting for their fucking lives with nothing but knives in their hands against men with rifles!

“Drive faster,” Loren says when his children join the fray.

I press my foot on the pedal a little harder and watch the speedometer tick up, nearing ninety now. We can’t risk police interference. Not when it’s so

time-sensitive that we get there immediately. Which means I won't be stopping. It means they'd end up following. It means they'd get there and get in the way, demanding to take over.

Which also means Loren is going to kill some police officers if they stand in his way to get to his children.

I let my foot off the gas a bit. We *can't* risk the police getting involved. We just can't.

Aven keeps talking as we pull onto the runway of the hangar. I don't think I need to worry about law enforcement here. Now I just need to worry about crater-sized holes in the asphalt. A caravan of cars filled with my family and VDT contract department employees follows behind me.

My tires skid on the tar as I slam on the brakes. Momentum keeps me sliding until the vehicle comes to a stop just shy of the massive hangar door. Cars and trucks and SUVs line up alongside us as Loren and I throw our doors open. He already has his knife in his hand. I couldn't convince him to wear a Kevlar vest and helmet for protection.

To be fair, I'm not wearing one either.

Our employees circle the building, surrounding the entire perimeter to ensure that no one gets away. Azlan is already busting through the first door we come across.

The noise level inside sounds like any family gathering I can remember in recent history. It's loud. Chaotic. A cacophony of noise that I can't distinguish one sound from the next. Gunfire is a new addition, though.

I grab Loren's arm and drag him with me toward the direction I think the noise is coming from. In such a massive space, sound is distorted. It echoes.

Aven's voice comes from my watch. "Left, Myro."

I take an abrupt left. Around the next bend in the hall, I see the madness unfold. There are bodies on the ground. Blood spattering the walls. My eyes immediately land on my wife at the very end. Jessica looks at me as if she's been waiting for me to walk around the corner.

While I don’t spot him right away, I hear Novan say, “Uh-oh. Daddy’s home. Now you’re in trouble.”

Relief floods my chest.

That relief is short-lived. A gunshot rings through the air, and a scream follows. Loren and Azlan are moving forward before I have a chance to register what’s going on. They don’t bother assessing the situation. I envy them that. No fear means they react right away to get to their kids.

“Behind you, Myro,” Aven says, and I spin around, ripping my hunting knife from the sheath. A man with a bandana pulled up over his nose is coming at me with a rifle pointed at my chest. He’s startled into his steps faltering when I charge at him. The hard plastic of the barrel slams into my palm as I shove it away. Before he can recover, I plunge my knife into his neck, just above his clavicle.

Fury and fear surge, and I want nothing more than to stab him repeatedly. Over and over as I take out my feelings on this single man. This *is* personal. These deaths are all going to be personal. They stole my family. They tried to get them to kill each other with knives.

They made a fucking mistake that will cost them their pathetic lives.

This man ripped the Band-Aid off. I’m no longer frozen to the spot. As soon as I pull my knife free of his body and rip the rifle from his hands, I move forward, and it’s a free-for-all. I don’t know how many men are here, but anyone I don’t recognize is fair game.

Since I’m not the only one with that mentality, the bloodbath is quick. It’s not just our kids fighting now. The odds are no longer stacked against them.

By the time I’ve slit the throat of man number four, there’s no one left standing in front of me. I spin around, seeing the kids and my family do the same. Looking for more. Ready for the next. A beat passes as we wait. In the distance, we hear more fighting. Fuckers trying to escape and meeting resistance. But right here? No one. It’s over.

I drop the rifle in my hand and pick my way toward my wife. Jessica leaps over a body into my arms and hugs me tightly. She’s shaking. I feel her

tears sink into my skin. But her emotions are only momentary as she gathers her strength again.

There aren't any words I can manage to comfort her. I can apologize for letting this happen. For not getting here sooner. Even those words get lodged in my throat.

Jessica steps backward, and Brynlee comes flying out of the room behind her. I catch her as she sobs. I can *feel* her fear.

"It's okay, Bryn," Novan says as he nears us. He's covered in blood. Covered. It's the most horrific sight I've ever seen. I'll have nightmares of how he looks right now. He hugs his mother and gently touches Brynlee's back. "All over, baby sister. You're safe now."

I tug Jessica and Novan into us and hug them all fiercely. Orev stands off to the side as Adalaide hugs Loren. Loren looks like he's ready to eat someone alive. He is *not* satisfied with this. He needs more death.

"Auntie Bee?"

Jessica steps back from our embrace and reaches for Rain. "Baby girl, you did so damn well." Rain drops into her arms. She doesn't cry, but I think that might be the effect of shock.

"I killed people," she whispers.

"You killed *bad* people, honey. People who would have absolutely killed you. When faced with death, you *always* do whatever you need to live, Rain. You did good. You saved your friends and your family's lives today."

Rain takes a deep breath and clings to Jessica, who gathers her up into her arms. Jessica is five-foot-nothing, so Rain is nearly as big as she is. That doesn't stop my wife from holding her.

"I need to get Lyle," Novan says. "I think he's still hiding behind the door."

"Is anyone shot?" Jessica asks. "Is any of the blood you wear your own?"

I examine Brynlee and Okello, who's standing in the door behind Jessica. Both are clean. They'd managed to stay off the battlefield.

In the opposite direction, I watch with a little amusement as Orev examines his sister for signs of injury. Adalaide looks amused and waits patiently for her brother to finish his inspection. Lanzo appears unharmed as well.

Whoever was shot and screamed wasn't one of ours.

Novan returns with Lyle. I think Lyle is eight. He looks absolutely terrified.

"Come on," Jessica says. "Let's go home. We'll let the others clean up."

"I'm staying," Azlan says.

"I need you to use discretion when killing these fuckers. We need to know how many others are out there kidnapping buses full of students," I tell him.

Azlan doesn't care about other people. The people he cares about are safe.

"I mean it, Az. You can have them when we're finished with them, but we need some alive."

"Alive enough to answer questions," Novan points out.

He hates this directive, but he doesn't argue. I *am* his boss, after all.

"I'm staying," Lanzo says.

"No," Azlan argues.

"I'm eighteen. I can stay if I want to."

For just a moment, I watch their standoff. Then I pick up my daughter, carry her weight with one arm under her, and wrap my arm around Jessica's waist. She's still holding Rain. Novan follows, holding Lyle in his arms.

Behind us, Adalaide lifts Bethany into Orev's arms. Orev looks horrified, which makes me laugh. My laughter sounds a little hysterical right now. She takes Tomo in her arms, and Okello holds Jaxon's hand.

The teacher and dads take up the rear. One of the dads vomits on his way out as he steps over the bodies.

MY FATHER IS WAITING for us in the hall when we get back to the office. There's going to be blood to wash off everything, but right now, I don't care. A whole chorus of deep, dark howls sing in the distance as an enormous black SUV comes speeding along the road.

Dad sighs. "I'm going to give him a speeding ticket."

Jessica snorts.

As soon as the door opens, Rain is running to her fathers and I watch as my cousin and his husband wrap around Rain. The nine massive wolves jump and lick and sniff. Some even appear to hug them too.

I think we mean to go inside, but it's not long before our family is filing out of the office building. Uncle Arath has Okello off their feet. He and Elgin hadn't been home when we left. Oakley, Arek, and Rosalie wrap around Adalaide and Orev, though Orev looks more alarmed and confused by the sudden affection than he had in the hall of madness looking down the barrel of a rifle aimed by a desperate man.

A different kind of chaos erupts as more and more of our family file out of the office building and congregate around us. I watch as Levis hugs Jessica tightly for a very long time, followed by the rest of their childhood friends. Daxton holds Okello in a similar way before Xanthus joins them, and it becomes little brother being suffocated by big brothers.

Imry steps up beside me and watches our reunion. There are parents here we don't know. Parents of the other kids. Family members of the dads. Of Miss Tory Willis. Friends from school.

Dad being Dad, after having hugged his family in relief of their safe return, is now talking to parents and staff. Levis returns to his cell phone, and I hear a tone out of his mouth I've never heard as he rips apart the staffing company we use to drive our buses. There are mentions of lawsuits. Investigations. Any word that Levis has learned to strike fear into companies that mess with our family over the years comes out of his mouth.

I'm really proud of him.

Jessica leans into my side and sighs. "That was awful."

I hug her tightly, pressing my lips to her head and just… staying there. “It was,” I agree. “I thought I’d felt every different kind of fear that exists. I’m not happy to say I was proven wrong today.”

She laughs. “The kids… they’re going to need someone to talk to.”

“Already have two of our child and family therapists on standby. And one for the adults.”

“Tonight, I think I need to have a meltdown in private and just let it all out. All the terror I hadn’t been allowed to feel. I think I’ll be okay after that.”

“Just in case. Doc Molly is here to check out injuries, too.”

Jessica sighs.

“This is why we don’t hire out,” I hear Dad say. I shift so I can look at him. He’s talking to Voss, and somehow, I think Aven is magically sitting on Voss’ shoulder like a tiny human. What the actual fuck. “We’re hiring our own drivers.”

“Might as well buy the airstrip too, granddad,” Novan calls over the heads of his partners. “Just saying.”

Dad nods. “Good idea. I’ve always said we needed our own airport.”

“You have, huh?” Levis asks.

Dad inclines his head as Levis wraps an arm around him. The smile on my dad’s face. It always makes my chest warm because I’ve only ever seen him smile like that with Levis.

“I have. Weren’t you listening?”

Levis rolls his eyes. “Seventy-one and still bougie as fuck,” he mutters.

I laugh and close my eyes. I love my family.

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 kids already has a book - Have you read ***Hush Anonymous***?

Are you interested in bonus material? Sign up for my newsletter for an additional bonus scene For even more bonuses, art, ficlets, and more - join my patreon for exclusive goodies, including NSFW which cannot be found on my primary socials!

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

I WASN'T GOING to write this book at all. This is going to come out as heterophobic (is that a word?) but I just don't write MF. There are enough MF books in the world and quite frankly, I would much rather give voice and validity to literally every other community. If this offends you, don't read my books. If you can't recognize that the romance market is saturated with straight romance, then you live with your head in the sand.

But anyway, one of my readers in patreon asked if Myro was going to get a book and my initial answer was no. He's straight. I don't write straight romance. (And yes, he's still straight in this book.) But let me tell you what. The ick I felt once I typed out that response had me cringing big time.

We are so used to MF authors creating gay (oftentimes stereotypical gay, not authentic, dynamic gay) characters and then never giving them an HEA because they won't write queer romance. And here I am, doing the reverse. Which is dumb. If a character deserves a story, they should have a story. *Especially* in this series. How gross is it that all of Myro's brothers, his father, all his uncles, his great uncle, *and* his cousin get stories but not him?

I decided right then and there that I *wasn't* going to be that author. I wasn't going to be an MF author in reverse. I'm not that person.

Besides, I love Myro and Jessica. Honey Bee is a fierce badass woman. How could I *not* write that story?

However, as I moved through the series, we watched their relationship develop in the background and I knew that I couldn't go back and do the days where they got together. I already miss details and contradict myself when I have to cover the same events in a different book so there was no way that I was going to keep it all straight when I had to move allllllll the way back to Loren's book.

Jump ahead to a few different series and we see glimpses into the lives of the next generation. There are advancements and events that have been alluded to that didn't take place in this series. A lot of my readers have been asking, *but how/when did that happen?*

This book is the answer and serves as a bridge to bring the 'today' Van Doren's into the future, setting them up with steppingstones that make sense for the next gen books.

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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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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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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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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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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!

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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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