
HANGMEN TRILOGY - BOOK THREE
WHAT WE BECOME
EVE RICHE

# WHAT WE BECOME

A DARK WHY-CHOOSE ROMANCE

THE HANGMEN TRILOGY

BOOK 3

EVE RICHE

OceanofPDF.com

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About the Author

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# BEFORE YOU READ...



***STOP!!!!*** This is book **THREE** in a **TRILOGY** that **MUST** be read in order.

If you haven't read **WHAT WE BURY** and **WHAT WE BURN**, get your ass back where it belongs before we collar you and make you crawl through the club.

Don't think we won't do it.

>>> **READ WHAT WE BURY** <<<
>>> **READ WHAT WE BURN** <<<

Done the required reading like a good little sinner? You may continue.

But if your brain glitched over that cliffhanger and you need a refresher (or you're still stuck on what Holden did with Milo in the kitchen while Sage watched) then here's a refresher.

Try to pay attention to the bits where everyone has their clothes on (there aren't a lot)

https://authoreveriche.com/previously-what-we-burn



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# READER BEWARE...



*What We Become* is the final book in the Hangmen Trilogy, and we haven't gone soft for the ending. This is **dark why-choose romance**. It goes to places that won't sit comfortably with every reader.

We've kept specific content warnings off this page for readers who prefer to go in blind.

**If you'd rather know what's ahead**, you'll find the full list here: **https://www.authorevericheе.com/warnings.html**

Read the warnings. Skip them. Take a break when you need one. You know your limits better than we do.

Welcome back to Hunter Harbor…



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HANGMEN TRILOGY - BOOK THREE

# WHAT WE BECOME

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*For everyone who said, “I can fix him.”*

*Sweetheart, we’re three books in. You’re helping him hide the evidence.*



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# ONE
# SAGE



*Scrape. Tap. Scrape. Tap.*

The sound finds me before anything else does. Wet slide, dull strike. Over and over. Like a metronome set by someone who has nowhere else to be.

*Scrape. Tap. Scrape. Tap.*

My head is full of sand. Heavy, gritty sand that shifts when I try to think, filling the spaces where thoughts should be. My mouth tastes like rust and chemicals—metallic, bitter, wrong. I try to swallow and my throat clenches around the taste, gagging. The motion sends a spike of pain through the back of my skull that's so sharp my eyes fly open.

My vision takes a second to catch up, resolving shapes that don't belong to any room I remember. There's a wall of silvered plastic sheeting in front of me, nailed crooked over rough plywood. A dangling light bulb barfs a greasy, yellow glow into the space—tiny, barely wider than my shoulders, with a ceiling so low that my breath stirs the dust from the joists. The air smells of fresh lumber, bleach, and wet cement.

*Scrape. Tap.*

Someone—no. *Him.* Jamie. His silhouette moves in and out of the lamp's corona through the one gap in the plastic. Each time he leans in, the image distorts behind the wrinkles in the sheeting, making him look like a string of accidents spliced together.

He moves, and then I can see him through the gap, his eyes are open too wide, glassy and black beneath the light. His jaw locked so tight the muscle

flutters under the skin. He’s stacking something in the gap, hands moving with the same measured repetition every time—load, place, press, smooth. The object thumps down with a puff of powder, and he trowels mortar in a thick, gray tongue.

Brick. He’s laying bricks.

I don’t speak. Not yet.

*Assess your environment. Identify the threats. Seek your exits.*

Holden’s voice in my head. I’ve heard it enough times in briefings that it fires before the panic can.

My wrists are zip-tied behind the metal bracket of a chair. The ties are commercial grade, not the flimsy ones you buy at the hardware store. My feet are lashed to the chair legs at the ankles with more of the same. The chair itself is metal-framed, and when I try to shift, it doesn’t move. It has to be bolted down, or weighted. The floor under my sandals is bare plywood, gritty with mortar dust. The plastic sheeting extends up and over, sealed at the seams with duct tape. It’s construction grade and marked with a small label that says, “vapor-resistant barrier.”

*This isn’t improvised.*

The thought arrives cold and certain. This room was built by someone who understands containment. Jamie planned every inch of it.

I catalog what I can see through the gap. A hallway beyond. Hardwood polished floor. Crown molding along the ceiling.

I’m in a house. The light from the hallway is warm, residential.

*Brock’s beach house.*

Memory punches through in jagged fragments. The water bottle in Jamie’s car. The cool slide of liquid down my throat, the chemical aftertaste I mistook for plastic. The growing weight in my limbs, the softening of the world’s edges. His indicator clicking on.

The text.

The driveway.

*Jamie is Stephen.*

My stomach drops. Bile burns up my throat, and I force it down.

“Hey,” it comes out as a croak, as if startled from a dry pipe. The echo is weirdly muffled, like the sound is afraid to leave this plastic cocoon. My tongue feels fat. Useless.

Jamie doesn’t stop or even glance at me. He slides the next brick into its slot and lines it up so precisely you’d think he was building a bomb, not a

wall. The mortar smears up around the edges, splattering his wrists in ashy moons. When he finally glances over, his smile is soft, friendly.

“Hey, yourself.”

Another brick. Another layer in my tomb.

*This can’t be real.*

White noise crowds in, a static hum so thick I can’t tell if I’m about to pass out again or ascend to some fucked-up new plane of consciousness. I blink again, harder, and the world sharpens enough to hurt.

“Jamie,” I try again, and my voice comes out better, the consonants slippery and slow but clearer. “Why are you doing this?”

He ignores me, continuing his rhythmic building.

*Fuck.*

“Stephen,” I try. His name is a curse on my tongue, and even before the last syllable sticks, Jamie’s jaw flexes, registering it. His hand hesitates with the next brick, losing his hypnotic rhythm.

He meets my eyes for longer this time. Studies me as if through a microscope, not a window.

“Finally,” he says. “I was worried you’d forget and I’d have to explain it to you all over again and we’d waste all this great bonding time.”

A tremor starts up in my arms, but the rest of my body is so lead-thick I can’t tell if it’s rage or hypothermia. “You drugged me.”

The bottle was sealed. I cracked it myself.

He snorts, an ugly little exhale. “A needle through the plastic. The cap never moved. Mild sedative. Benzo, mostly. Not as fun as it sounds. I needed you lucid when you woke up. Present for the occasion.”

I look again at the wall, the bricks knitting together with every pass of his hand. “Are you going to kill me?”

A whole mood passes over his face, one cloud dissolving into another, and he sets the trowel down with the gentleness of someone lowering a baby into a crib.

“Obviously.” He presses the newest brick into its paste with a rolling of his wrist and looks at me with this slow, melting fondness. It makes the back of my eyes burn. “I mean, that’s the first thing people ask. And I get it. It’s clarifying. But I think you should ask something better.” His shoulders twitch with a quick, private laugh. “Like, *why?*”

“Fine. Why?” It comes out ragged. With the plastic trapping heat, I can hear the word bounce off every slick surface.

“See? Now we’re getting somewhere.” He picks at a drop of mortar on his sweatshirt. “Why gives the villain a chance to deliver his final monologue. Although, unlike the movies, no one’s coming to interrupt mine.”

He smiles.

“The knowledge dies with you, bestie.”

*Bestie*.

My heart beats against my ribs like it might find a way out if it tries hard enough. The air inside the plastic grows thicker with every brick he lays. Mortar, chemicals, and the sour metallic smell of my own fear.

“Why are you doing this to me?”

He folds his arms and angles his face so he can see me clearly through the gap. “Why you? Why now? Why the encore after my first little event didn’t stick?”

The terrier. The bushes. The rope.

“That was you as well.”

“Well, it wasn’t Brock.”

At the mention of his name, Brock’s final Kennel post flashes through my mind. He’d shared a picture of me at the party and tagged me as a “possible new pet.” A bunch of those evil bastards replied. But the one comment we focused on was from . . .

“SMAN69,” I say.

His smile widens.

“See how I’m not flinching? I knew you’d know about this.”

“Brock sent you my picture.”

“Brock sent me pictures of all his potential pets.”

The mortar makes another wet scrape across the brick.

“You knew he’d chosen me.”

“I knew before you reached the party. Brock told me Amy wouldn’t shut up about you and Tyler was taking forever to train her. He wanted to show Tyler how it was done.”

“And you were, what? Waiting at home to fuck him in celebration after he’d abused me?” I think back to the lighthearted text Milo told me arrived on Brock’s phone that night—something like “waiting for you” with an eggplant emoji.

He smiles like he’s revisiting a fond memory. “Abusing women is quite the aphrodisiac.”

“You’re sick.”

“No.” His eyes go wide. “*You’re* sick. You were all too ready to leave that party with him. Don’t you dare cry victim just because he was willing to give you what you wanted and you changed your stupid mind.”

“I agreed to walk home! I didn’t ask him to put his dick in my mouth!”

His hand shoots through the gap in the plastic and hits me square in the jaw.

The impact snaps my head sideways, pain blooming hot across my face. My teeth click together so hard it blurs my vision, and I taste copper—blood, from where I bit my cheek.

“Don’t,” he says, his voice still soft, still Jamie, “misrepresent the situation—especially when I know how much you like dick, you little whore. You should be honored he even considered you.”

My ears are ringing. I work my jaw experimentally, checking if it still opens. It does, barely, with a grinding protest.

“Honored?” I laugh at that. “Jesus. You must have really been in love with the guy. How pathetic. He runs around town, abusing women and bragging about it to his buddies. And meanwhile, you’re hidden away from public view, ass up in the air hoping he’ll come back home and still have enough in the tank to fuck you when he’s gotten his fill. Path-et-ic.”

This time he ignores my jab. His nostrils flare.

“No wonder he ghosted you.”

“No!” His hands slam against the half-built wall. The plastic shudders around me. “He didn’t leave. You know that. I know that.”

“He’s been posting this entire time.”

“Those posts aren’t his.”

“You don’t know that.”

“I knew Brock better than anyone.” The words come out hard and immediate. “He couldn’t take a selfie that wasn’t sixty percent nostril unless I held the phone. Then he supposedly abandons everyone and suddenly every photograph is perfect? Perfect lighting. Perfect angles. Punctuation he never used?”

He picks up the trowel again.

“Your tech boyfriend scrubbed the files until nothing pointed back to Brock’s phone. That was his mistake. Brock never did anything that clean.”

Milo always says no one looks at metadata.

Stephen did.

“Maybe someone in his new life takes the pictures.”

His eyes narrow. “Stop lying. You know too much to backtrack now. You’re a fucking liar.”

“I’m not.”

“I saw you the next morning.”

The trowel starts moving again.

“At the diner,” he says. “You poured coffee over my hand because you were too busy staring out the window. You were shaking. You flinched every time someone moved too fast. You apologized four times for a spill that didn’t matter.”

His eyes don’t leave mine through the plastic.

“I knew something had happened on that beach. I knew you were part of it. I just needed you to tell me what.”

*Scrape. Tap.*

The wall is at my knees now.

“So Jamie was never real. You positioned yourself in my life because of Brock—pretended to be my friend.”

“Obviously. As if I’d genuinely want to be friends with a sniveling slut like you.”

I flinch.

He studies my face, taking in every fracture.

“You made it very easy to get close to you . . . *pet.*”

My chest feels hollow.

All those shifts at the diner. Coffee and pie. Horror movies. Escape plans. Every ridiculous conversation because Jamie was supposed to be my best friend.

Clean.

Safe.

Normal.

“You were waiting for me to confide in you—confess. You think I killed Brock?”

He laughs. “You. Your men. It’s all the same to me now.”

“Why can’t you accept that he left you?”

“Because those men of yours wouldn’t have protected you so hard if that’s all that happened, bestie. Every time I came back to the diner, one of them was there. Sitting at your counter. Parked across the street. Following

you home.” His mouth curves. “They weren’t subtle, and the timing seemed a little too perfect. So I started following them.”

The trowel scrapes across the brick.

“And you know what I saw?”

He pauses for me to respond, so I just shake my head.

“One night, I followed them to the country club. Watched them pull on skull masks and enter through the service door after the gym closed.” He presses another brick into place. “The next morning, Bill Hudson was found hanging in the shower. Apparent suicide.”

“That’s why you put that noose in my apartment? And why you tried to hang me.”

“I wanted them to know I understood their language. I wanted them to find you wearing their work. Understand that *they* were the reason you were dead.”

My stomach twists.

“That didn’t work, so I’m making you disappear instead.” His eyes flick toward the steadily closing wall. “This time, they won’t find you at all.”

No body. No proof. Nothing to bury.

Exactly what they gave him.

“You never wanted me to confess,” I say. “You just want them to suffer.”

“Duh.” He lifts another brick.

I force my body into motion, bracing the chair’s back legs and trying to rock it. Nothing. The ties would hold a fucking coyote, and the chair doesn’t shift an inch.

“They’ll come for me,” I say. “My guys will find me. Then they’ll find you.”

He laughs.

“Oh, please. I walked up to that house and took you from under their noses. They watched you leave with me.” A slow smile spreads across his face. “They trusted me with their girl.”

I want to put my teeth in his throat.

“Face it, Sage. I’m better at this than all of your boyfriends put together. You’re fucked. And this time it’s by the only dick in your life that doesn’t want you.”

I spit at him.

He flinches, although most of it hits the plastic and begins a slow journey toward the floor.

“That was unladylike.”

“Fuck you, not-Jamie.”

A scrabbling sound pulls my attention. Claws on hardwood, the skittering chaos of a small animal moving too fast for its own legs. Then a bark—high, sharp, excited—and a brown blur

The terrier lands in his lap like a furry grenade. Tail going, tongue going, paws scrambling for purchase on his thighs. Stephen laughs and scoops her up, holding her against his chest like a baby. The dog licks his jaw. Stephen lets her.

“Oh my goodness. Look who came to say hello. Sage, do you remember her?” He angles the dog toward me so I can see the bright brown eyes and wiry coat.

I do.

The injured paw in the bushes.

The dog that led me to the rope.

The pieces slot together now.

A scrappy terrier on Brock’s phone, sitting on a kitchen floor in a cone of shame and looking delighted.

Tyler screaming that Brock would never have left his dog.

“Mars,” I whisper.

Stephen smiles. “His parents needed someone to take her after Brock disappeared. I volunteered. She already knew me.”

He scratches Mars behind the ears. She leans into his hand, happy and trusting, because she has no idea what he’s done.

“Go on, Mars. Show her your tricks.”

He sets her on the ground and snaps his fingers. Mars lifts one paw, trembling and whimpering as if she’s hurt.

On command.

Stephen grins.

“Impressive, right? Only took me three days. Treats and repetition—the same way you teach a bitch to sit.” He scoops Mars up again, his voice shifting into the light, chatty register that will haunt me for the rest of my life. “Do you know what my favorite part of that night was? Besides stringing you up and watching you almost die. It was when this little girl drew you in with her whimpers. You saw a hurt puppy and melted.”

He pitches his voice higher in a cruel imitation.

"'Come here, baby. I'm not going to hurt you.'"

My throat closes. I can feel it—the rope cinching, my feet leaving the ground, the world tilting, the pressure in my skull—

"The best part was watching you kick." He says it the way other people describe a good meal. "Most people pass out in under a minute. You held on for almost three. Clawing and kicking and making this sound—" He tilts his head, remembering. "Like a screen door in a storm. This thin, reedy squeal."

Stop. Stop. *Stop*.

"If your boyfriend hadn't been sitting outside in his car like the pathetic stalker he is, you would've been done that night. I wouldn't have needed any of this." He gestures at the room. "But he came simpering along. So I had to recalibrate. Use the old noggin. I have to say, I'm pretty proud of myself for this one." He looks around and sighs. "The house where it all started. Thematic, don't you think?"

Mars squirms in his arms. Stephen sets her down and she trots back into the hallway, nails clicking against the hardwood, completely unbothered by anything happening in this room.

Stephen turns back to me. "Here's how this goes." He reaches behind him and drags a yellow canister forward, tipping it so I can read the label.

*Industrial expandable polyurethane foam.*

"Once I close this wall, I run the nozzles through the gaps at the base and sides, and I fill the space. Thirty times its own volume. It gets warm first—nobody ever expects that part. Then it goes rigid. Eighteen hours and it's stone." He taps the canister with his knuckle. "By tomorrow morning, you won't be visible. You'll be inside the wall. Part of the structure. I come back, skim the surface, paint it to match the rest of the room. This space stops existing. Not on any blueprint, not in anyone's memory."

He sets the canister back and picks up the trowel. The wall is at my shoulders now. The gap above it is maybe eighteen inches—a bright rectangle of light that's the only thing keeping this room from being a coffin.

"Your boyfriends are going to look for you—of course they will. It's a given. But the only clue they'll find is my car. It lost control and went off the bluff, Sage. Turns out Jamie wasn't so good at being a designated driver. The sucky thing is, the current took the bodies out to sea. Two best friends,

taken too soon. No bodies, no leads. They'll look forever. But they won't find you." He starts on the next row. "Because you won't be anywhere they think to look."

*Scrape. Tap.*

The last row.

He doesn't rush it. Each brick is placed with the same measured care as the first, mortar spread smooth, edges squared. He hums while he works—something tuneless and absent.

I watch the light narrow. Eighteen inches becomes twelve. Twelve becomes eight. The rectangle of warm hallway light shrinks to a slot, and through it I can see his knuckles, gray with mortar, pressing the final bricks into place.

"Stephen, please."

He pauses. One brick left. I can see his eye through the gap, lit from behind.

"For what it's worth," he says, "you're the first best friend I ever had. I mean, I hated every moment of your company. But you were my first bestie—I can't take that away from you."

The last brick slides into place.

*They'll come. They'll save me.*

The light dies.

*What if they don't come?*

The darkness is total. Not the dark of a bedroom with the curtains drawn, where the clock face still glows and the smoke detector blinks its little green eye. This is constructed dark. The absence of light so complete that my eyes ache from straining against it.

My breathing sounds loud. Too loud. Each exhale bounces off the plastic and comes back to me, warm and used. I'm already recycling my own air.

For a long moment there's nothing. No sound from the hallway. No footsteps. No Stephen.

He's gone. The door is locked. The house is sealed. I'm inside a wall in a dead man's beach house and the only person who knows is the man who put me here.

I pull at the zip ties. The plastic bites. Nothing gives.

Then I hear it.

A hiss. Low and insistent, coming from somewhere beneath me. The nozzles at the base of the wall, right where Stephen threaded them through the gaps in the brickwork.

Warmth pools around my ankles, over the straps of my sandals. Soft, thick, wrong—like stepping into something alive. It spreads across the floor of the sealed space, slow and patient. An acrid smell rises with it sickly sweet beneath the sharpness. The smell of something that was never meant to touch skin.

*Foam.*

It’s warm against my ankles. Rising.

I open my mouth and scream.

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# TWO
# KNOX



“Milo.”

He doesn’t look up. He’s cross-legged on the living room floor, laptop open, additional screens running, a green grape clamped between his teeth. “Knox, if this is about the dishwasher, I already told Holden—the bowls go on the top rack, and I will die on that hill.”

“It’s Fury’s tracker.”

He looks up.

I hold out my phone. The pink dot on the map isn’t moving. It isn’t at the restaurant with the frozen margaritas. It isn’t on any road in between.

It’s stopped.

Blinking silently on the coast road past the boardwalk near her old apartment, in the stretch where the houses thin out and the bluffs start.

“How long?” he asks.

“Too long.”

I grab Milo by the front of his shirt and haul him up. His laptop clatters closed in his hands, but his eyes never leave the dot.

“Car.”

He nods.

Holden and Micah are in the kitchen, something simmering on the stove. The house smells like garlic and red wine. On the console beside the front door, a plastic cauldron overflows with candy for the trick-or-treaters. Milo bought enough for half the neighborhood, then claimed a second bag

for “quality control.” Twenty minutes ago, I was watching Micah cook and wondering whether Fury would want pasta when she got home.

Now I’m just . . . *fuck.*

Holden doesn’t raise his head from the half a pound of garlic he’s chopping, but his hand pauses.

“Problem?”

“Sage checked in from the restaurant an hour ago. Nothing since. Her tracker’s stopped,” Milo says, shoving his arms into his jacket as we pass. “Pink dot’s out on the S-curve above the bluffs.”

Holden drops the knife. “Isn’t that where—”

“Yeah,” I say, not letting him finish.

It’s where we found Fury under the jetty—on her knees, Brock’s hand in her hair. Where she stole my knife and opened him from ribs to groin.

Where she became ours.

*Mine.*

Micah is already moving. The dish towel hits the counter, stove off. “Call her.”

Milo does. Puts it on speaker. We all listen to the dead, cheerful ringing.

Once. Twice. Three times.

Voicemail.

Holden crosses the room, grabbing his keys and gun from the console drawer.

“Eli,” he calls up the stairs, his voice flat, clean, stripped of warmth. “Get down here.”

Footsteps. Eli appears on the landing in sweats and bare feet, takes the rest of the stairs two at a time, hair sleep-rough.

“What happened?”

“Tracker’s frozen.” Holden is moving while he talks, shoving his wallet into his back pocket, checking the chamber by feel. “Coast road. You need to stay here.”

Eli stops dead. “The fuck I do.”

“You’re staying. Call Sage. Keep calling. Call Amy—find out when they split up and where. Call Jamie’s phone. I want a timeline before I hit the driveway.”

Eli stares at him like he’s spoken in another language. “No.”

“It’s not a fucking negotiation, Eli.” Holden’s voice drops into that bossy cop register he uses when he needs shit done and isn’t interested in

anyone else's point of view. "Milo—you stay too. Get into the city feed. Traffic cams, street cams, parking lots, boardwalk businesses. Find Jamie's car, find who she's with, find out if this is a breakdown or a fucking abduction."

Milo's mouth falls open. "Absolutely not. I'm faster on-site and you know it."

"You're fastest in that chair."

"I can do both."

"No, you can't." Holden jabs a finger toward the living room. "We need eyes *now*."

Micah is beside the door, shoving his feet into his boots without tying them. My knife is at my ankle where it lives. I wonder whether Fury took hers or left it upstairs. I told her to keep it on her, but she was wearing sandals . . .

I should've checked her purse instead of grabbing her ass when she left.

"We need to leave," I say, heading for the garage door.

Everyone moves to follow me.

"For fuck's sake," Holden yells, blocking Eli and Milo's movement. "Somebody has to be here. If there's a call, if she comes back, if this is a fuckup and not a kidnapping—" He jabs two fingers at the ground, then at Eli's chest, pinning him to the spot with a stare. "You stay. You keep the lines alive. You call everyone. Amy, Jamie, the fucking restaurant—start with the bartender and go down the list. We *need* eyes on her."

Eli's jaw ticks.

I put my hand flat on Eli's sternum and hold.

"She'll want you here when she calls," I say.

"Fine. Go."

Milo scowls, but he's already reopening his laptop. "I'll call the second I find something."

Holden nods. "Garage."

We move fast. Holden's unmarked is parked beside my truck, and he beeps it open. I fold myself into the passenger seat, my knees hitting the dash. Micah pauses at the weapons case against the garage wall and pulls out a collapsible baton, hooks it onto his waistband. His face is calm as he gets in the back seat. His knuckles are white.

"Just in case," he says.

Nobody answers. Nobody needs to.

Holden starts the engine, backs out of the garage, and hits the coast road doing twenty over the limit before we've cleared the neighborhood. He flips the sirens at the first intersection—blue and red strobing across the windshield, the whoop clearing traffic ahead of us.

"This isn't official," Micah says from the back seat.

"No," Holden says. "It isn't."

He keeps the sirens going and floors it through the second intersection.

My phone buzzes. Milo.

"Talk," I say, putting him on speaker.

"Okay, three things." His voice is rapid and precise. "One—the tracker is pinging from a property owned by Alan and Christine Davis. Brock's parents. Their beach house."

Holden's hands tighten on the wheel. Micah leans forward between the seats.

The beach house.

The fucking party that started all of this.

*Why the fuck is Fury there?*

"Two—I called Amy. She's already at Dean's. She says Jamie dropped her off about an hour ago. She was tipsy, Sage was tipsy, Jamie was sober. She said Sage and Jamie were on their way here."

"On their way *here*," Holden repeats. "So what happened between Amy's door and this house?"

"Three—I pulled traffic-camera footage from the coast road junction. Jamie's Civic passed the camera heading south at 4:39 p.m. No other vehicles followed for eighteen minutes."

Holden checks the clock on the dash. "That's fifty minutes ago."

"I know."

The siren wails. The road opens ahead of us, the setting sun flashing across the windshield as the houses thin along the bluffs.

"Holden." Milo's voice is quieter now. "Is Jamie Stephen? Has he been under our noses the whole time?"

Nobody answers for three seconds. Three seconds is a long time when the sirens are screaming and the speedometer is climbing past ninety and the woman you love is a pink dot that isn't moving.

"I don't know," Holden says, voice sharp. "But we'll fucking find out."

My head throbs. I checked Jamie.

Plates. Address. College. Work. Everything came back clean. House-sitter. Graduate student. No record. No red flags. *Harmless enough. Some kid doing his graduate studies.*

I signed off on him.

I missed it.

My hands curl into fists against my jeans. My fingernails cut little moons into my palms.

*If he's hurt her—*

I don't finish the thought. Finishing it makes it real. And if it's real, the thing that lives in the base of my chest—the thing I keep locked down with control and discipline—will get out. And when it gets out, it doesn't go back in until someone's bleeding.

Micah says nothing from the back seat. His head is tipped down, face gone tight, his hands pressed flat against his thighs like he's holding himself to the seat.

"Four minutes out," Holden mutters.

I stare at the pink dot.

Still unmoved.

The road curves along the bluff, the ocean hammered silver below us. Sweat trickles between my shoulders. My knee starts bouncing. I pin it beneath my palm.

*I kissed her at the door four hours ago. She tasted like that lip gloss Milo bought her, the cherry one. She laughed against my mouth and called me Knoxie. I told her to have fun because I trusted this. I trusted the tracker. I trusted the friends. I trusted the world to give her one fucking afternoon.*

The house appears around the bend, shadowed and silent behind manicured hedges.

Holden kills the siren before the driveway and pulls into the shadow of the hedge line.

No car out front. Garage closed.

He parks and draws his weapon.

I'm already out of the car.

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# THREE
# SAGE



I can’t see. I can’t move. I can only hear.

*Hissssssssssssssssss.*

Fuck.

“Help!”

I keep blinking, hoping if I do it hard enough or fast enough the dark will crack open and let some light in. But there’s nothing but blackness. No seam or faint glow—not even the soft gray of a room with the lights off. I’m bricked in.

*A coffin.*

“Someone! Help!”

*Hissssssssssssssssss.*

The foam is alive. I can feel it touching my calves, warm and thick, and it’s *growing*. Slowly. Inch by painstaking inch.

It’s the same tempo Stephen laid those bricks—methodical, unhurried.

When it started, I’d braced for a rush, a rapid smothering. But this . . . this is panic-inducing torture.

“Fuck! *Please*!”

I hack out a cough.

The chemical smell is so thick I can taste it—acrid and sweet, like burnt sugar dipped in turpentine. Every breath coats the inside of my mouth, my throat, my lungs. I cough and the cough turns into a gag and the gag turns into vomit. Margarita, salsa, and regret, splattering the wall, landing on my lap and in the foam, dripping down my chest. The taste sets off another

round and now I’m breathing through slippery acid, bile burning fresh tracks down my throat. It changes nothing. The foam keeps coming, releasing more toxic gas into a space that’s shrinking around me one cubic inch at a time.

“HELP!”

The word rips out of me raw and ugly and bounces off plastic and brick. It dies two feet from my face. The sheeting absorbs it. The foam absorbs it. The sealed room eats sound the way it’s going to eat me—slowly, completely, leaving no trace.

“HELP! SOMEBODY—PLEASE!”

Nothing. The house is empty. Stephen left. The door locked. The nearest neighbor is probably a hundred yards away behind a hedge and a gate, and even if they heard a woman screaming from inside a wall inside a house on a bluff, what would they do? Call the police? File a noise complaint? Would they even get here in time?

I let out a sob. “Fuck. FUCK!”

I pull in a measured breath, trying to conserve my air, but the chemicals catch in my chest, and I have to let it go.

I try going back to my old coping skills—the count. *In for four. Hold for four. Out for four.* But I can’t focus. I lose count before I reach three. My legs are locked down. The foam climbs, packing itself along my body, pressing into every gap around the chair.

I scream because it’s the only thing my body wants to do.

The air in here is finite. I learned that with a rope around my neck. Every scream wastes another breath I don’t get back.

I’m not there yet. But my fingers have started to tingle, and I know exactly what comes after that.

The foam reaches my waist. It’s warm, pressing in and filling the space between my thighs and the chair, molding itself to the shape of me, pushing into the gaps of the zip ties with a slow, insistent pressure that makes my skin crawl.

I cough again. Longer this time, harder. The fumes are getting worse as the foam expands, releasing a gas that’s making my head swim and my eyes water in the dark.

*In for four. Hold for four. Out for four.*

The breathing technique doesn’t work when the air you’re breathing is poison. I try anyway. Count the seconds. Force my lungs to slow. But each

inhale is shallower than the last because the foam is displacing the oxygen and my body knows it even if my brain is still trying to pretend otherwise.

"HELP ME! PLEASE! SOMEONE!"

My voice cracks on the last word. The sound is thinner now. Reedy. The scream of a person scraping already-damaged vocal cords raw. I know this feeling. I lived it once already—in a hospital bed, throat wrapped in gauze, unable to speak for days.

*Not again. Please. Not again.*

The foam creeps up to my ribs.

*Think. Stop screaming and think.*

Stephen said eighteen hours to fully set. Not eighteen hours to fill the space.

I don't know how long I have.

Panic will make it shorter. So will the fumes. My head swims. My eyes water. Each breath comes shallower than the last.

*Focus.*

What can I do? What do I have?

I'm wearing a dress. Strappy sandals. No boots, which means no knife. No jacket. My phone and bag are gone. Stephen must have taken them while I was unconscious. I don't have anything. I'm a woman in a party dress, zip-tied to a chair in a sealed room filling with expanding foam and I have *nothing*.

The foam touches my breasts. I flinch. The warmth is obscene—intimate, invasive, like being touched by something that has no right to be this close.

*I'm going to die in a wall.*

I don't want to die in a wall.

I don't want to fucking die at all.

I suck in a breath and bite my cheek, hard. The pain cuts through the panic for half a second—just long enough to remind me that I'm still in here, that my body is still mine, that none of the rest of this was ever supposed to happen.

If I can breathe, I can move. If I can move, I can fight.

I try again to work my wrists, twisting hard, as if hatred alone could cut through plastic. The ties pull, slicing the skin deeper. Blood, warm and slick, makes the next twist easier—almost. I flex my hands, squeeze tight, let my sweat and the blood make a lubricant. The foam crawls up my arms

and my whole body shrieks, but I keep rotating, keep yanking, keep tearing at my own skin, because if I don't get out of this chair I'm going to be a statue forever.

And I don't want that.

I don't want this to be the end.

Not when my life is finally beginning. Not when my guys and I have just made everything official, moved in together permanently, and decided that *this* is the thing we want—each other, shared meals, shared space, shared lives. And sex. So much sex. And babies. Fuck. I want to have their babies. One with each of them. More if it works.

The oxygen must be going, because I start chuckling, thinking of Milo as a dad, of Knox. Of the five of them chasing rug rats around the house.

*Five kids minimum.*

*In this economy.*

A laugh catches in my throat and turns into another cough.

I shake my head, forcing myself to refocus, fighting the dizziness trying to drag me under.

*I want to live.*

I want to keep all of it—every hard-won sensation, every stupid joke, every time Milo kisses me and calls me kitten, every time Micah pulls me into his lap in the middle of a conversation because he needs me there, every time Knox presses my head to his chest and holds me. I want Holden's hands on my face when I least expect it, his voice in my ear. I want Eli to spank me and hold me, I want—

The foam touches my neck.

Warm. Thick. Rising.

I let out a sob, and my chin lifts. The foam presses against the underside of my jaw, and that's when I feel it.

The cameo.

The velvet band around my throat, the antique pendant resting in the hollow between my collarbones. Holden's gift. The choker I've worn almost every day since he clasped it around my neck to cover my rope scars, hiding the damage, making beauty from brutality.

The choker with the tracker inside it.

I freeze. For a second the panic burns up in a white flash. The cameo. The tracker. The guys—my guys—could find me. If they're watching.

If they care enough to check.

*Of course they care.*

But will they know it isn't just a girls' night out? A random stopover? A . . . whatever?

Will they guess how close the dark is?

How final?

I throw my head back. "HOLDEN—" I croak, nothing left in my voice but static. "MILO, HELP, PLEASE—"

The foam bulges against my mouth, and I turn. "KNOX! MICAH! ELI! SOMEONE!"

*Hold on, Sage. Just hold on.*

I wrench my face sideways, finding a sliver of air. "Please be watching," I beg as the foam touches my lip. "*Please*."

I seal my mouth shut. Breathe through my nose—short, shallow, rationed. The fumes make my nostrils burn. My eyes stream tears that have nowhere to go in the dark.

I think about Knox at the door.

*"Have fun, Fury."*

He'd kissed me like a man who expected me to come back.

The foam rises over my lips.

I stretch my neck as high as I can, chin tilted to the ceiling.

*Breathe.*

The dark presses in from every direction.

*Please.*

*Please find me.*

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# FOUR
# KNOX



We leave the car at the bottom of the driveway and move up on foot. No talking. Hand signals only.

Holden takes point. Micah flanks left. I take right.

The house is shadowed except for a single ground-floor light visible through the front windows. No movement inside. No car in the drive. The garage door is down—could be a vehicle inside, could be empty.

Holden gestures. *Front door. Me first. You two hold.*

He tests the handle. Locked. He steps aside as Micah pulls a pick set from an inside pocket and goes at it. Four heartbeats later, the deadbolt gives with the tiniest click. Micah steps back and meets our eyes. Holden sweeps in, gun low, and I follow on his shadow. If there's a threat, it goes through me first.

Inside, it's quiet. No TVs, no music, not even the hum of a fridge cycling. Just the tick-tick of a thermostat, the closed-up stillness of a house nobody lives in. The air smells wrong—chlorine? Sweet under sharp. Sugar and solvent.

We don't call her name. We listen and we move.

The foyer is wide, real wood floors, every seam machined perfect. Holden signals left, so I peel off that way. He takes the center, Micah sweeps right. My knife is already in my hand. I listen for anything in this house that could be human.

Kitchen's empty. No sign of struggle. A single cup in the sink. Unopened cereal on the island. Plastic wrap and local receipts in the trash—

the only evidence anyone has been here at all.

I sweep the other rooms—living, den, the glassed-in trophy room that makes my hair stand on end from twenty feet away—rows of lit shelves, and not one thing on them is a cup. No people. No movement. No dogs, not even the sound of a mouse. I make it back to the foyer as Micah appears from the other hallway, raises a flat palm: clear.

Holden waits at the foot of the stairs, frozen, eyes and gun both trained up. A light is on at the top landing—thin sliver under the crack of a door. For a second everything inside me stills.

We fan out. I take the lead up the staircase—slow, steady, using my toes to take the weight off each creak. Holden's breath is low behind me. Micah's is silent. We move as one. No sound.

Up top, the hall is black except for that slit of light. The smell gets sharper up here—chemical, and now something sweetly rotten under it. It makes my nose itch, like I'm breathing through fiberglass.

I edge toward the door, pause, listen. Nothing from the other side. Only the buzz of a cheap ceiling bulb and a faint, steady hiss behind the door. Holden gestures: on three. I count, then burst it fast, and we're over the threshold as one.

The room is all unfinished drywall, bare subfloor, lamps taped to a plywood table. Construction plastic lines half the wall, and the ceiling is the kind that slopes down on one end because the room is right up against the roof. But it's the wall beneath the slope that gets my attention. More importantly, the mismatched brickwork and the large yellow canisters feeding hoses through it.

I don't need to touch the bricks to know what's behind them. My jaw is set so tight I'm seconds from cracking a crown, but all that matters is getting to Fury.

"Here," I say, already moving to the brickwork and dropping to my knees. I wedge my knife between the mortar to work one free with the tip, wrenching it and dropping it by my feet.

The smell hits me—expanding insulation. It oozes out of the gap, dropping to the floor, fizzing as it grows.

"Do you see her?" Micah asks, and I can hear the shake in his voice.

I don't respond. Can't. I grab another brick and pry it loose. Drop it. Then pull another. Another.

The moment my arm can fit through the gap, I reach through, hitting plastic instead of the expected foam.

*He sealed her in twice.*

I get the knife and cut it open, and the smell comes out at me—chemical, sweet, wrong.

I cough. “Fuck.”

Fighting for breath, I plunge my arm through the gap and into the foam, fighting against the stickiness until I find something solid.

*Fury.*

“She’s here.”

I push my arm in as deep as I can manage, tearing plastic and scooping out foam while Micah and Holden pull out the bricks. The foam is hot, sticky, sucking my forearm down to the hairs and binding to everything it touches.

“Is she breathing?” Holden asks. His voice is level, but when I glance over my shoulder at him, his face is ghost-white.

“Don’t know.” I dig. The foam is packed around her head, sealing her mouth and nose. I scoop it away with both hands until her face is clear.

She’s not breathing. Not a twitch, not a gasp, not even the little animal snore I’m used to when she passes out on the couch. Just blank, pale skin and a glued mouth. I pry her lips open, find nothing blocking her airway, then clutch her jaw in my palm and tilt her head back. Then I angle myself into the tiny gap and seal my mouth over hers.

I blow.

Nothing.

*Shit. Fuck!*

“Micah!” I jerk my head—he’s closest, smaller than me. “Keep breathing for her.”

He’s shaking, but he does it—slides in next to me, pinches her nose, seals his mouth over hers, and breathes. Once, twice. He listens. Breathes again.

“Come on, baby girl. Come back,” he whispers, maybe not even realizing he’s saying it out loud.

I dig through the sticky foam. She’s in a fucking chair—chest to knees entombed, wrists lashed behind the backrest, feet zip-tied to the legs. The chair is bolted through the subfloor into a joist. My first yank does nothing.

“Keep going,” I order.

I tear at the foam at her chest. It's hot, elastic, fighting me. Holden's at my shoulder, muttering a loop of *fuck, fuck, fuck* while he pries more bricks out with his bare hands, blood running from a ripped knuckle.

"Can you get her?"

"She's stuck." I rake the packed crust away from her collar and arms until I can reach the chair. "Hold her steady."

I brace my boot against the subfloor and wrench the side rail until it snaps. The metal tears my palm, but the break gives me enough room to reach behind her. I wedge my knife beneath the ties at her wrists and cut them. Her hands spill forward, skin raw and bloody.

I shove the knife between my teeth and dig both hands beneath her armpits. Holden grips the chair. Micah braces the legs. I wrench Fury up and forward. The foam tears loose with a sucking pop, and she's mostly free—head slumping, hair matted to her face.

Holden takes her weight while I go for her ankles—two ties, both ratcheted so tight I have to saw at the bands to get them off. My blade slips, catches my thumb. I don't feel it.

"Get her on the ground," I command, pocketing the knife and scrambling to where Micah and Holden are easing her down like she's a fucking bomb.

Her chest doesn't move. Micah presses two fingers to her neck.

"Nothing."

He plants the heel of his hand over her sternum and starts compressions—hard, fast, and precise, even as his breath breaks apart.

"Come on, baby girl. Breathe for us," he pants. "*Breathe*."

Kneeling next to her head, I tear my shirt over my head and use the back of it to wipe her mouth, her nose, her chin. Check her passages again. Tilt her head back.

She's still not breathing.

I pinch her nose and wait for Micah's signal. At thirty, his hands lift. I seal my mouth over hers and breathe twice, watching her chest rise. The taste of chemicals and bile and underneath it, underneath everything, *her*.

Then Micah starts again.

Thirty compressions. Two breaths.

Again.

Again. *Again*.

My world narrows to the count and the sound of Micah’s wrecked shouts. To the anger and the fear crushing my bones to powder.

Holden’s hands are clamped on her shoulders, holding her steady.

Micah’s hands tremble but never hesitate, keeping time on her ribcage like he can will it to rise. Something gives under his palms with a sound I feel in my own chest. He doesn’t stop. Good.

Nothing happens for so long I have time to imagine a future without her. To regret the time I’ve wasted, the words I’ve left unsaid.

On the third round, she convulses. Her body arches under us and bile and blood-streaked froth erupt all over Holden’s forearms. Her eyes snap open, already rolled white, and she gasps—not a sound, just the violent, choking vacuum of a person yanked back from the edge.

Micah loses it and starts sobbing.

I turn her head sideways as she retches some more, the sound awful and beautiful because it means she’s alive.

“That’s it, Fury,” I say. “Breathe. Keep breathing.”

Her eyes blink. Unfocused. Rolling. Then they find me.

She smiles. It’s small and wrecked and the most important thing I’ve ever seen.

“Knew you’d come,” she whispers.

My throat locks. Everything I’ve held—for hours, for months, for the entire time I’ve known this woman—presses against the back of my teeth. I don’t have the words. I’ve never had the words.

I roll her onto her side and brace her against my chest. My mouth moves, but nothing comes out. I’ve spent my whole life preparing to lose people. I’m not ready to lose her.

Holden’s hands are on my back, gripping tight. Micah is beside us, one hand fisted in the front of her dress, like if he lets go she’ll slide back under again. We sit in it for a whole minute, the three of us drenched in sweat and chemical stink and the salty spatter of Fury’s vomit, until her breathing settles into something shallow and ragged—mouth open, sides heaving, a bubbling rattle, but still there.

She looks at me. The whites of her eyes are threaded red, eyelids moving slow like it hurts to blink.

“I puked on myself,” she says. Half-laughing, half-crying, her voice a ragged scrape that barely qualifies as sound. “Oh shit. I puked on Holden too.”

“Wildcat, if it means you’re breathing, you can puke on me a dozen more times.”

A faint smile ghosts over her lips. “Don’t tempt me.”

Holden lets out a slight chuckle as he gets to his feet, pulling out his phone and pressing it to his ear.

“Fury,” I murmur, running my thumb along the sticky skin of her cheek. “I can’t keep nearly losing you. You don’t leave my sight again.”

She smiles again. “Fair,” she croaks out. And then her eyes close and her body goes slack against my chest.

“Fuck, is she—?” Micah presses his fingers to her neck, visibly relaxing when he feels the pulse. “Passed out. She’s passed out.”

“She needs oxygen,” I say, swinging my gaze to where Holden is talking to Odin on the phone. Calling an ambulance means questions, and questions will lead to a wall full of foam-coated threads we can’t afford to pull.

“We need a medical extraction at the Davis property,” Holden says. “Chemical inhalation. Respiratory distress. She’s breathing but compromised. Treat Jamie Mercer as Stephen. Put every available person on him.” A pause. “Yes. Full resources. Every asset you can spare.”

He hangs up. Looks at me. Looks at Fury, unconscious in my arms.

“Helicopter will be here in twelve minutes,” he says. “Odin’s sending medical and tactical. We hold position until they arrive.”

“I’m going with her,” I say before anyone can tell me otherwise.

Holden nods. “Micah, you should go too. I’ll stay here.” I can see what that costs him—the slight tightening around his mouth, the way his hand curls into a fist and then deliberately uncurls. “I need to manage the scene. That helicopter’s going to attract eyes.”

“Eli and Milo?” Micah asks.

“I’ll call them. They can meet me here and help run interference.” Holden stands. “I need Odin’s cleanup crew. None of this mess can exist by morning. It needs to look like we were never here.”

Eli’s going to hear that Micah and I brought her back. Last time it was him.

Micah moves to kneel beside me. His hands are steadier now, but his eyes are wrecked.

“Hey, baby girl,” he murmurs, lightly touching her jaw. “We’re getting you out of here.”

Fury doesn’t stir. Her breathing rattles—shallow, uneven, the sound of lungs that are working but not happy about it. The foam residue around her mouth has dried to a pinkish crust. I grab my shirt and wipe more of it away.

We wait. Holden sweeps the rest of the house—cataloging, photographing, doing the cop work that keeps his brain from collapsing.

I hear him on the phone again downstairs, his voice clipped and cold, relaying details to Odin’s people like he’s filing a report on someone else’s tragedy.

Micah and I stay with her. He’s got her hand now. I’ve got the rest of her, her body curled against my chest so I can feel every breath she takes.

“Chopper’s here,” Micah says, lifting his head.

I hear the rotors before I see anything. At first, I think it’s my pulse howling in my ears, but it builds, rises, the chop of rotors cutting the salt air. Light sweeps across the ceiling from outside, white and surgical, and for a second the room looks like an operating theater.

“That’s us,” Holden says from the doorway. He’s got his phone in one hand and his gun in the other, and his face looks like it was carved out of the bluff outside. “They’re landing on the south lawn.”

I stand with Fury in my arms, one hand beneath her knees and the other spread across her back.

Micah is already moving for the stairs, clearing the path, and I follow with her head tucked against my shoulder and her breath against my collarbone, warm and rattling and alive.

The helicopter is on the grass when we get outside. Black. No markings. Rotors still spinning, the wash flattening the hedges and throwing grit against my face.

Two people in medical gear jump out before the skids have fully settled—a woman with a trauma bag and a man wheeling a collapsible stretcher across the lawn.

“Put her down,” the woman orders, already snapping gloves on.

I don’t want to. Every cell that knelt on that floor holding this woman together refuses to put her on a stretcher and let strangers touch her.

But the woman’s eyes are sharp and certain and her hands are already reaching, and I know—the way I know threat vectors and exit routes and the weight of a blade—that Fury needs what this woman can give her more than she needs me right now.

I lay her on the stretcher. The medics move fast, fitting an oxygen mask over her face, starting an IV, and clipping a monitor to her finger. Numbers spit out, but I can't read them from this angle.

"Pulse ox eighty-one," the man calls out. "Tachycardic. Breath sounds diminished bilaterally."

"Get her on the bird," the woman says. "Now."

They wheel her toward the helicopter. Micah and I follow.

Holden stands on the lawn with the rotor wash tearing at his clothes, watching us board, and the look on his face is the second worst thing I've seen tonight.

"I'll be right behind you," he shouts. I barely hear it over the rotors.

I nod, climbing into the helicopter after Fury, and the door closes.

I grip Fury's hand as we lift into the deepening dusk.

*Breathe.*

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# FIVE
# MICAH



The helicopter is a sound that moves in and stays—a low, grinding roar that gets inside your chest and replaces your heartbeat with its own. The rotors chop the air into something thicker, harder to breathe.

Or maybe that's my panic.

Sage is on the stretcher between us, strapped down at the chest and thighs, and the medic—Clarke, her name is stitched on her jacket—is so fucking calm it's obscene. She's done this before. A lot.

I hate that for her, but I'm grateful for it, and I can't think about either because the monitor next to Sage's head is a blur of blips and fractions and percentages. It's the percentage that keeps dropping.

Eighty-one. Eighty. Seventy-nine. Eighty.

"What does that mean?" I have to shout it. My voice disappears into the rotor noise.

Clarke doesn't look up. She's adjusting the oxygen flow, her fingers moving on the dial. "Blood oxygen saturation. We want it above ninety-five. She's hypoxic."

"Is she going to be okay?"

Clarke meets my eyes for half a second. She's deciding how much truth I can take.

"We're managing it," she says, which isn't an answer, and we both know it.

Knox is across from me. He takes up most of his side of the cabin—knees braced wide, hands flat on his thighs, shoulders hunched forward

under the low ceiling. He hasn’t spoken since we lifted off. He hasn’t looked anywhere but her face.

I want to reach for her hand. My fingers twitch toward the stretcher rail, toward the gauze wrapped around her wrist, toward the IV line taped to the back of her hand. But Clarke is working on that side, and there’s a pulse oximeter clipped to her finger and wires running from her chest to the monitor. Every inch of Sage that I could touch is occupied by something medical and necessary.

So I sit. Three feet from the woman I love, close enough to see the foam residue in the creases of her ears, and I can’t touch her.

My hands are still covered in the stuff. The foam. It’s dried on my forearms in a thick, pinkish crust that pulls at the hairs when I move. I can still feel the tackiness between my fingers, the chemical heat of it. And underneath that, underneath the industrial stink and the dried bile, I can still feel her mouth.

Her mouth not breathing under mine.

Her chest not rising.

The compressions. My palm on her sternum once we got her to the floor, pressing down while Knox breathed for her. Thirty. Two breaths. Thirty. Two.

A rib gave beneath my hand—a small, sick crack I felt all the way into my teeth.

But I kept going. Stopping would have killed her.

I hate that I had to hurt her to save her.

The helicopter banks. My stomach drops, and the stretcher shifts on its rails. Knox’s hand shoots out, steadying it before the motion reaches Sage.

I’m supposed to be the one who holds people together. It’s what I do. I know what it is to be shaking, bloody, broken, so I stay. I give people whatever steadiness I have until they can find their own again.

But I can’t hold this. I can’t reach Sage. I can’t make the numbers climb. All I can do is sit and watch and feel absolutely, completely useless.

Eighty. Eighty-one. Eighty.

“Can you give her more?” I shout.

Clarke shakes her head. “She’s at maximum flow. The bronchodilator needs time. We’re fighting the inflammation from what she inhaled.”

That means it’s inside her lungs. The damage is inside her lungs.

I close my eyes. Open them. The numbers haven’t changed.

Knox catches my eye. Just a simple look, shifting from Sage to me and holding. *I know. I'm here.*

I nod. Then he reaches out one of those big hands and holds on to mine. A gentle squeeze. I almost break down right there.

*I'm supposed to be the one who holds people together.*

The helicopter tilts again, and the landscape below shifts from dark coastline to darker hills. We're heading inland. Away from the ocean, away from the beach house, away from all that's familiar.

I think about Holden down there, alone, managing a crime scene in a house where he found our girlfriend cemented into a wall. I think about Eli back at the house waiting for a call that's going to wreck him. I think about Milo at his screens, running traces, trying to piece together the events that led to Sage in a wall.

Everyone has a job.

Mine is sitting still.

The monitor beeps differently. My eyes snap to the screen.

Eighty-three.

"That's better," Clarke says. "The bronchodilator is working."

I let out a slow breath, my chest loosening. Knox gives my hand another squeeze and lets go.

Eighty-five.

She's going to make it.

I wipe my eyes with the back of my wrist. The foam crust scratches my cheekbone.

I'm going to wash this shit off my arms, find her a warm blanket, sit beside her bed, and hold her hand for as long as she'll let me. When she opens her eyes, I'll be there.

My hands keep shaking.

I clasp them between my knees and try to breathe through this, find my own strength. But I've never felt as weak—as powerless—as I do right now.

Part of becoming a Hangman was believing I'd never feel that powerless again. But here we are. It found her anyway. It keeps finding her.

I've sat on kitchen floors at two in the morning telling Eli he's allowed to have something good. That the dark doesn't get to charge us rent on the rest of it. Watching her breathe through a mask at maximum flow, I can't find one word of that I'd say out loud again.

*Maybe Eli was right all along.*

*Maybe we can't have this.*

Lights appear below us, resolving into a compound of stone and glass buildings set among the trees. White lights flare around the landing pad, figures already moving on the ground.

It looks like someone built a luxury retreat in the mountains for the rich and powerful. The kind of place you'd go to recover from burnout or heartbreak if you were a tech billionaire. Or where you'd go to disappear.

Twenty minutes ago, this was only a destination. Seeing it now, I add it to everything else I've learned about Odin—his reach, his resources, the pieces of his world he reveals only when we need them.

Clarke speaks into her headset. Medical jargon. Numbers I've been tracking and numbers I haven't. The helicopter begins its descent and Sage's hand twitches.

Her fingers curl slightly. It's a reflex, maybe. Or the drugs. Or the oxygen finally reaching the parts of her brain that remember how to move.

I reach out, because I can't stop myself, and touch her shin above the ankle. The foam on my fingers brushes rough against the foam on her skin, but it's real. I can feel her heat, the living pulse under the surface. She's in there. She's coming back.

*We can have this.*

"I'm here, baby girl. I'm right here."

Her fingers curl again.

The helicopter touches down. The doors open. People in scrubs rush the stretcher, and Clarke is talking fast. The night air hits my face, and it smells like pine and cold dirt and nothing like the ocean.

A doctor meets us on the pad. He's short and bespectacled, already snapping on gloves. One look at Sage and his face settles into controlled concern—calibrated urgency.

"Dr. Shahid," he tells me, then turns to Clarke. "Talk to me."

They move. The stretcher rolls. Knox and I follow. The fluorescent lights make everything look clinical and strange after the dark of the helicopter. Inside, it looks nothing like the luxury retreat I saw from the sky.

The medical team pushes through a set of double doors, and Knox and I move to follow.

A nurse steps into the gap. She's a head shorter than me and entirely unbothered by that. She places one firm hand on my chest, halting me.

“Family can wait here,” she says. “Dr. Shahid will update you as soon as she’s stabilized.”

“I need to be in there,” I say.

“You need to be out here. He’ll come find you.”

She turns on her heel and runs after Sage. The doors slam shut behind her.

The sound is nothing compared to the roar of the helicopter rotors.

Knox stands beside me. We’re in a corridor that smells like antiseptic and floor wax. There are plastic chairs against the wall. A water cooler in the corner. A poster about hand hygiene.

My knees give.

It’s a slow, downward slide, my back against the wall, until I’m sitting on the linoleum with my forearms on my knees and my head hanging between my shoulders. The foam crust cracks along my arms as I fold.

Knox doesn’t say anything. He lowers himself down beside me, back against the same wall, shoulder touching mine. We should be at home having dinner, listening to Sage drunkenly tell us about her afternoon while trick-or-treaters knock on the door and Milo chooses both trick and treat every time. That’s how tonight was supposed to go. Instead, we’re in a hospital ward hidden in the trees, covered in dried foam and sweat and the residue of the worst night of our lives.

I press the heels of my hands to my eyes and breathe, and breathe, and breathe.

Eighty-seven. Eighty-eight. Ninety.

She was at ninety when the doors closed.

*She’s going to make it.*

*We can still have this.*

Strangers have their hands on her now. Every one of them works for a man whose real name I don’t know.

*Please, let us keep this.*

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# SIX
# HOLDEN



The oxygen mask fogs and clears with each breath. Fog. Clear. Fog. Clear. I've been counting them since the last nurse checked her stats.

One hundred and six.

I let go of her hand once to stretch my fingers. I lasted eleven breaths before I picked it up again.

I got here three hours after she did.

Three hours of crime-scene cleanup and mountain roads while the woman I love was fighting for every breath in the back of a helicopter.

Three hours. I spent them photographing brickwork. Working with Milo and Eli to direct Odin's crew while they rebuilt a wall that was never supposed to exist. Cataloging zip ties and bagging foam samples from a crime scene that would never see the inside of a courtroom. Cleaning away the evidence that any of us were ever there.

I did my job. I did it well.

And she spent those three hours without me.

The room Odin's people put her in doesn't look like a hospital. It looks like a hotel suite that happens to have a ventilator in the corner. Mahogany panels. Soft lighting. Machines that hum instead of beep, as if even the alarms here are too well-bred to raise their voices. Money buys quiet. Money buys a nurse every fifteen minutes instead of every hour. Money buys Dr. Shahid standing at the foot of her bed within minutes of my arrival, telling me things I've already guessed through years of experience.

“Chemical pneumonitis. Significant airway inflammation. The cracked rib is stable—that’s common with effective compressions.” He pauses on *effective*, meaning to reassure me. “Her oxygen saturation is climbing. Ninety-two now. She’s young. She’s strong. The next twenty-four hours will tell us more.”

Young. Strong. As if either of those things stopped the foam.

I ask him one question. “When will she wake?”

“Her body will decide. She’s exhausted, and the medication will keep her drowsy. We’re monitoring the swelling closely. When she’s ready, she’ll wake on her own.” He waits for more questions. I don’t have any that he can answer. He nods once and leaves.

The door clicks shut behind him, and the room exhales back into silence.

*One hundred and seven. One hundred and eight.*

I look at what was done to her. Wrists bandaged where the ties sawed through skin. A split lip I don’t remember from the wall. Bruising along her arms. The chart says cracked rib, and my mind supplies the rest—Micah’s hands on her sternum, the give of bone, the cost of forcing her body to breathe again.

I catalog it automatically. Restraint injuries. Chemical exposure. Blunt-force trauma.

Then I catch myself—working her like a scene—and the space behind my ribs aches, tectonic and wrong.

She is not a scene.

Her things sit in a plastic basin on the side table. The dress, cut away and bagged. One sandal. And the cameo, velvet stiff with chemical residue, the antique face staring at the ceiling like a small, patient witness.

The tracker. My gift. Our leash.

It’s the reason we found that wall. The reason she’s breathing warmed air instead of setting into the structure of that house. Every argument she ever made about surveillance, about autonomy, about being managed—and the leash is what kept her alive.

I don’t feel vindicated. But I have decided that she never leaves our sight without a tracker again. She can hate me for it. She can hate me every day for the next fifty years. That’s the deal. Alive and angry.

My phone buzzes. Milo.

“Jamie’s car’s at the bottom of the bluff,” he says. No greeting. He’s learning. “Coast Guard says no bodies. Current took ’em, supposedly. Torch job on the VIN but I pulled the engine block number. It’s the Civic.” A pause. “He planned the whole ending, Holden. Down to the eulogy.”

“He’s not done,” I say. “As long as he wasn’t watching that house, he’ll think she died in that wall. When he finds out she didn’t, he’ll come finish it. We need to prepare for both outcomes—keep her hidden in case he *was* watching, and control what he finds out in case he wasn’t. As far as the world knows, that car went into the water with two people in it. Keep it that way. If Stephen watches the news tomorrow, I want him smiling.”

“Already handled,” Milo says. “Odin’s people own the recovery. Coast Guard will log it as vehicle recovered, occupants presumed deceased, bodies unrecovered. Standard bluff accident.” Keys clatter on his end. He’s driving or typing—probably both, and tonight I let it go, because I need him reckless. “Jamie Mercer’s coming apart, by the way. Fenrir’s been digging deeper. Whoever’s sponsoring him knows spycraft. The grad school enrollment is a shell. The house-sitting profile was built eight months ago on a fake identity. Guy’s a ghost with good credit. Whoever taught him has skills I’d admire if I didn’t want to stab them and cut them up into a million fucking pieces.”

“Find the man under the ghost. Real name, money, people. Burn his whole life down to the studs.”

“On it,” he says. Then, quieter, “How is she?”

I look at the mask. Fog. Clear. “Breathing.”

A beat. “Okay,” he says, and the word does more work than it should. “Okay. Eli and I are gonna grab some things from the house and then we’re coming to you. What do you need?”

My chest tightens. “You. Just you.”

Milo goes quiet. I register the slip about a half second after he does and clear my throat.

“I mean, I don’t need anything. Just get here. And be careful. I don’t want you followed.”

“Got it, Detective.”

The line dies. I set the phone facedown beside the cameo.

The door opens without a sound. Knox. Showered, wearing someone else’s clothes—a scrub top straining across his shoulders—foam still

ground into the half-moons of his nails. He takes up position on the far side of the bed and looks at her the way he looks at everything: completely.

"Micah's in the bathroom down the hall," he says. "On his third shower. Foam's a bitch to get rid of."

I nod and look at my own hands, still crusted up my forearms. "Milo called. Said they found the Civic off the bluff. Coast Guard's logging it—occupants presumed deceased. Might make Stephen think he succeeded. Give us some time to regroup."

Knox nods. "As long as he wasn't watching. That chopper wasn't hiding much."

"I know." I press my lips together.

"Others on their way?"

"Yeah. Milo and Eli are stopping at the house first. So, if you want clothes and shit, let them know."

He tugs at the too-tight scrubs. "Clothes would be nice." He pulls out his phone and shoots off a text. "Micah and I are about to grab something to eat. You want anything?"

I look at Sage in the bed. She's so damn small. It's the thing I keep coming back to. Sage has never looked small to me—not on the beach, not in the hospital after the hanging, not when she stood in a motel room covered in Dale Stine's blood and dared me to be angry about it. She fills rooms. She fills my house. She fills a space in my chest that I didn't know was hollow until she walked into it.

But right now, under the white sheet, with the oxygen mask and the IV line and the bandaged wrists, she so vulnerable. Breakable.

*He almost broke her for good.*

"Holden?"

I lift my head to Knox, and it takes me a moment to remember the question. Food. Do I want any?

"I'm good," I say, my eyes straying back to her. "I'm fine right here."

Knox studies me for a long moment. Whatever he's looking for, he must find enough of it, because he nods once and moves toward the door.

Micah appears in the frame before Knox clears it. Damp curls, borrowed scrubs, skin scoured pink. He's scrubbed himself raw trying to get the night off his body. I recognize the impulse. I've done it after scenes that followed me home.

"You should eat," he says gently.

“I’m good.”

“Holden—”

“Bring me back a coffee if they have one that isn’t terrible.” I give him the closest thing to a smile I can manufacture. “Black. Bring one even if it is terrible, I’ll drink it anyway and complain. It’ll give me something to do.”

He huffs out a laugh. It dies halfway, but it was there, and I count that as a win. He looks at Sage, then at me, and something passes behind his eyes that I don’t have the bandwidth to translate.

“Thirty minutes,” he says.

Then it’s just us. Her and me and the machines and the fog-and-clear rhythm I’ve built my evening around. I squeeze her hand, lean forward, and press my mouth to her knuckles above the tape line. Then I stay there.

*I can’t stop shaking.*

It starts in my hands. A fine tremor, barely visible, the kind I could mask with a fist or a pocket. But it spreads up my forearms, into my shoulders, through my chest. The muscle in my jaw is jumping, teeth grinding against each other with enough force to crack enamel.

I press her hand to my forehead. Close my eyes.

*You almost died in a wall, wildcat.*

She almost died. *Again*.

It keeps replaying in my mind. The wall. The foam. Her face, gray and still. Her mouth, sticky with pink insulation. The seconds—the infinite-*fucking*-seconds—where she wasn’t breathing and nobody could make her breathe and I *sat* there with blood on my hands from the bricks and a gun in my holster that couldn’t do shit to save the woman I love.

I’m good at things. I’m good at tactics and logistics and reading rooms and making hard calls and staying calm when everyone else falls apart. I have been shot at. I have sat across from men who killed their families and kept my voice level. I have orchestrated the deaths of predators and eaten pancakes afterward and slept like a baby the next night.

And I couldn’t stop a man with a trowel and a bag of mortar from sealing my girl inside a wall.

Couldn’t figure out that the guy who claimed to be her *best* friend—who said he’d *hide a body* for her *to my face*—was just getting close to her in order to *brick her into a fucking wall.*

What if Knox wasn’t watching the tracker?

What if the tracker stopped working?

What if we didn’t find her in time?

What if . . .

*What if!*

The sound that comes out of me isn’t a sob. It’s a breath—a long, shuddering exhale that I’ve been holding since the driveway. Since the coast road. Since Milo’s voice came through the phone and said *that’s the Davis property* and every cell in my body reorganized around a single, screaming certainty: *not again.*

My vision blurs. I press the heel of my hand to my brow and grind it in, but it does nothing. The shake is everywhere now. My arms, my back, my ribs—like my whole body is being run through with an electrical current just below the skin. My mouth tastes like salt. Like blood.

I can’t fucking breathe.

It comes in hard, like a punch. I try to keep it down, to swallow it, but my chest is hollowed out and every part of me that should hold something solid is just—gone. A sound escapes me, low, pathetic, not even a real noise, just the intake before the crash.

*I almost lost her.*

*Again.*

It breaks open. I can’t stop it.

My shoulders hunch forward, and I pull her hand up to my face, burying my nose in the palm, inhaling the chemical tang of hospital soap and the stubborn, underlying scent of Sage beneath it. My body shudders with the force of it, and the next breath is ragged, and the one after that is a sob. The kind I haven’t made since I was a child. The kind I learned, by the time I was twelve, to never let anybody see. I press her hand flat to my face and bend over in the chair, and I let the grief have me.

I cry for the hanging. For the wall. For every text from a dead man’s phone number that we couldn’t trace. For the fact that I moved her into my house and told her I wanted the mess, the whole beautiful mess, and then a man with a smile and endless patience nearly took it all while I was at home chopping garlic.

I cry because I’m the detective. I sat across from Jamie. Shook his hand. Listened to him joke about hiding a body and never once saw the threat sitting at my table. Then I let him drive away with her and expected him to bring her back.

I don’t know how long it goes. Long enough that the oxygen mask fogs and clears a hundred times. Long enough that my face is a disaster and my throat is raw and the collar of my shirt is soaked.

Her fingers move.

I lift my head. She’s looking at me over the oxygen mask, eyes half-open, glassy from the drugs but *present*. Seeing me. Seeing all of it—the wet face, the red eyes, the complete and total demolition of the man I’m supposed to be.

She reaches up. Touches her fingers to my hair. Traces down to my temple. Rests against my cheek, palm cupping the mess of me.

“Holden,” she whispers. The mask muffles it but I hear her fine.

“Hey, wildcat.”

“You’re crying.”

“No, I’m not.”

“Holden.” Her thumb traces the wet track under my eye. “You’re leaking, then.”

I press my hand over hers, holding it to my face. My throat is thick, and I can’t stop the leaking from my eyes, so I give up on trying to be the man who holds it together.

“What happened, Sage? How did he—” I soothe my thumb over her knuckles and breathe. “More importantly, how are you?”

She shakes her head slightly, eyes blinking slow. “My best friend bricked me into a wall, Holden. I’m fucking mad about it. How about you?”

“Furious. I thought you were dead,” I say. It comes out fractured. Each word a separate piece of rubble. “When you were on that floor and you weren’t breathing—I thought—”

“I know.”

“I wasn’t with you in the helicopter.” It tears out of me, the real wound beneath the grief. “I put Knox and Micah on it and stayed behind. I always fucking stay behind, Sage. I should have been with you. Fuck the scene.”

Her eyes soften.

“Knox and Micah kept me breathing,” she says. “You made sure none of us went to prison. I needed all three of you.”

“I should’ve been with you.”

“I always want you with me, Holden. I do.” Her fingers tighten against my face. Weak, trembling, but insistent. “But you were there. Just not in the way you wanted to be.”

I bring her hand to my mouth and press my lips against her knuckles. Hold them there. Breathe.

“You have snot on your face,” she says.

A sound comes out of me that might be a laugh if it wasn’t so broken. I wipe my face with the hem of my ruined shirt and she watches me do it with an expression that’s tender and amused and completely unimpressed by the wreckage, because Sage has never needed me to be unbreakable. She just needed me to be hers.

“Don’t tell the others,” I say.

“That you cried?”

“That I had snot on my face.”

“Holden. Milo is going to find out. Milo finds out everything. He probably has a camera in this room.”

“He doesn’t.”

“Are you sure? He’s very sneaky.”

I’m not sure. I check the ceiling anyway.

She laughs—a thin, rattling sound that turns into a cough. I reach for the water cup on the nightstand, angle the straw under the mask, and hold it while she sips. Her hand wraps around my wrist while she drinks, thumb resting on my pulse point, and I let her feel it. Fast. Ragged. Proof that I’m not as put together as I look.

She lets go of the straw. Settles back into the pillow. Her eyes are heavy again, the drugs pulling her back under.

“Stay,” she says.

“I’m not going anywhere.”

“Promise.”

“I promise, wildcat.”

Her eyes close. Her breathing steadies. The mask fogs and clears and fogs and clears.

I lean forward and press my lips to her forehead. She smells like antiseptic and hospital soap, and I keep breathing it in because it means that she’s here. She’s alive.

I don’t let go of her hand.

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# SEVEN
# SAGE



I wake up to the sound of arguing in the hallway.

"You can't bring that in here. It's a medical facility, not a—"

"It's a care package. It's therapeutic. There are studies."

"There are not studies about—oh wow, is that a *robe*?"

"Yes. A luxury robe. Egyptian cotton. Thread count so high it has its own zip code. She's been through a trauma, nurse. She deserves thread count."

The room is bright—morning light pouring through floor-to-ceiling windows that frame mountains and pine. Stone walls. Hotel sheets. Wildflowers beside the bed. Medical equipment trying and failing to make the place feel like a hospital.

I have no idea where the fuck they brought me.

The oxygen mask is still on, but someone turned the flow down overnight because my breathing is easier, less rattled.

My throat feels like I gargled battery acid and my wrists throb under the bandages and there's a deep, chemical ache in my chest that flares every time I inhale too deeply. But I'm breathing. I'm still breathing.

Micah is asleep in the chair beside me, chin tucked to his chest, one hand wrapped around mine on the bed, the other hanging off the armrest. He looks rugged in a way I've never seen. The stubble, the shadows under his eyes. He's wearing hospital scrubs and boots with dried foam insulation on them, and my God, just looking at him here makes my heart ache from everything we almost lost.

*They saved me.*

Again.

The door opens and Milo enters like a parade float.

He's carrying a basket the size of a small bathtub—wrapped in cellophane with a gold bow on top. Behind him, Knox fills the doorway. Then Holden, freshly showered and carrying a paper bag from what smells like a bakery. Then Eli, who stops at the threshold and just looks at me for a long moment before stepping inside and carefully closing the door.

"Kitten." Milo sets the basket on the foot of the bed and bows, like he's presenting me with the crown jewels. His usual grin in place, wide and manic, but his eyes are red-rimmed and raw and his hands are shaking in a way he's trying to cover with theatrical gestures. "I brought supplies."

"Milo, what—"

"Don't ask questions. Just receive." He tears the cellophane open and starts pulling things out. A silk pajama set in dusty rose. A cashmere throw blanket. Slippers with memory foam soles. A full, very fancy skincare set—cleanser, toner, serum, moisturizer, eye cream, lip mask. A scented candle that says SURVIVE THIS, BITCH on the label. An iPad loaded with every streaming service in existence. Noise-canceling headphones. A stuffed cat that looks handmade. And at the bottom, a card.

I pick up the card. It's also handmade, a pencil drawing of a character that looks suspiciously like Milo joyfully dancing under the moonlight while holding up a small black cat that's hissing and baring its claws. There are love hearts between them, and I can't help the smile that tugs at my lips.

When I open it, I find Milo's handwriting inside—chaotic, slanting, half the letters connected wrong.

Kitten.

You scared the shit out of me. Don't do it again or I'll be forced to personally drag you back from the afterlife and kick your ass. You're the only kitten I've ever had. I'd be lost without you. PS: there's a backup tracker in the bow of the stuffed cat. And one in the iPad case. And one

*in every single pair of shoes you own. Not taking any chances going forward.*

*Love, the sensible one,*

*Milo.*

I snort, which costs me a lightning strike of pain through my chest. The shoe trackers are absolutely becoming a conversation when I can breathe without setting my ribs on fire. The rest of it makes something warm and painful squeeze behind my sternum. I do my best not to cough, but my lungs take the bait and I hack a thin, wheezy bark that ends in a squeak. The guys flinch as one, a synchronized spectacle of *Oh shit, she broke again.* Micah jerks awake, panic in his eyes. Then he sees me, takes in the guys standing around, and visibly relaxes.

I wave the card at them, trying to point out the joke, but my hand shakes too bad to get it all the way up.

Milo sees me struggling and reaches over to steady my hand, his fingers cool and careful where our skin meets. "There's more on the back," he informs me, helping me turn the card over.

*P.P.S. I know I joke a lot. (Like, a lot lot.) But you're my person, Sage. You're OUR person. And I'm not letting anything—walls, bricks, weirdly persistent secret-boyfriends-of-that-guy-we-killed, nothing—take that away. If you ever need a place to hide, run to me. If you ever need someone to fight for you, send me. Yours since the first moment I saw you covered in blood, M.*

It's the "yours" that breaks me, just a little. My eyes threaten to flood, and for once I don't care who sees it. I fold the card closed and clutch it to my chest and take a long, slow breath that somehow doesn't ache as much

as it did a minute ago. Knox rests a giant hand carefully against my shin, avoiding the raw skin, and anchors me to the bed.

“Thank you, Milo,” I whisper, eyes burning.

“Oh, kitten. Don’t cry. We’re not doing crying. We’re doing luxury recovery and aggressive self-care.” He pulls the silk pajamas out and holds them up. “These are going to feel like being hugged by angels. I did research. The review said ‘life-changing’ and I trust strangers on the internet more than I trust most governments.”

Holden rubs his face and peers into the basket of goodies.

“What is all this? You were supposed to bring her things,” Holden says, handing the bakery bag to Micah. “*Her* things. From the house. So she’d feel comfortable.”

“I improved on the brief.” He gestures at the mountains outside. “We have access to a billionaire’s resources. I resourced.”

“Jesus, Milo.”

Eli reaches down and picks up a duffel, setting it on the bed beside Milo’s basket. I recognize it as *my* duffel bag, the one from the closet at home. “Unlike Milo, I brought you some stuff.” He flicks me a look. “Most of it is our clothes you’ve stolen,” he says, offering me a grin and a look that tells me he loves this about me. “So I packed something from each of us—my hoodie, Knox’s T-shirt, Micah’s boxer shorts, Milo’s robe, and Holden’s overshirt. Plus there’s some leggings. Underwear. Hairbrush. Toothbrush. Shampoo. Conditioner. Socks. Slippers.” He finishes his rummaging and meets my eyes. “Amy’s been told you’re okay. She’s still safe with Dean. Oh, and Frank’s fed. We’ve put him on a feeding rotation while you’re here.”

Of course they did. Even the fish has a protection detail.

“Anything else you need, name it.”

“It’s perfect. Thank you, Eli.”

He nods and leans in closer, pressing a lingering kiss to the top of my head. “Anything for you, little savage.”

I want to crawl over to him and bury my face into his neck, but my body says no and the doctor would probably scold me if I so much as adjusted the IV pole. So I shift a little in bed, pushing the comforter down to my waist, and draw Eli’s hand into both of mine. He doesn’t resist. He closes his hand around mine, thumb skimming gently over my knuckles.

Micah looks inside the bakery bag and sets it on the nightstand before standing up and stretching out his limbs. Then he moves closer to the bed and settles down beside me, balancing on the edge of the mattress and resting his hand on the top of my thigh. His other hand hovers near my ribs for a second before he pulls it back to his lap. “How are you feeling, baby girl?”

“Shit,” I breathe, a fresh bout of tears threatening to spill from the relief of seeing him.

He swallows hard, swipes at his own eyes. “I asked Holden to pick you up an almond croissant.” He gestures at the bakery bag. “But if you want the raspberry Danish next time, you have to do me a favor and call your doctor ‘Doc McStuffins’ at least twice in the next twenty-four hours.”

I want to laugh. It comes out as a hiccup. “Deal. But only if you feed it to me.”

“Deal.” Micah smiles and adjusts the bedding slightly, like he needs something to do with his hands.

“Dr. Shahid says your numbers are improving,” Holden says. “O2 is at ninety-four. If you stay stable through the afternoon, they’ll step down the oxygen tonight.”

“And then?”

“And then when the doc gives you the all clear, we get to take you home.” He squeezes my knee. “Where you belong.”

“I heard him say something about keeping me for a few days,” I say, and Holden nods.

“One of us will be here with you the whole time.”

“Good,” I say, meaning it. Because for the first time since this all started, my freedom feels more like a trap than a liberation. After being sealed into a wall and thinking I was going to die, right now, I think I’d be okay with one of them handcuffed to me at all times.

Knox hasn’t moved from the foot of my bed. He’s standing shoulders squared, eyes scanning the room like he’s expecting the bricks to follow me here. Everyone else has found a way to be next to me—Micah on the mattress, Eli holding my hand, Milo riffling through his own gift basket like he might’ve missed something. Knox has posted himself between me and the door, and the distance isn’t physical. I know this man. I’ve watched him love people through walls of silence. Something is eating him alive and he’s not going to say it out loud.

“Knoxie.”

His eyes come to me.

“Come closer.”

For a second I think he’s going to refuse. Then he moves around the bed, and stands there, jaw working like he’s trying to find the right word in a language he doesn’t speak.

Then he leans down and kisses me, as close to my mouth as he can get without removing the oxygen mask.

“Hey, Fury,” he says against the mask.

“Hi.” I’m smiling and crying at the same time, which is becoming my default setting. “You taste like oxygen and plastic.”

“You taste like hospital.” He straightens and steps back. But I’m not letting him get away that easy.

I pat the mattress. “Sit. You’re giving me a neck crick, and I already have a signature neck injury.”

Milo chokes on a laugh he tries to disguise as a cough. Holden mutters, “Too soon,” but he’s smiling.

Knox sits. Carefully. Like the bed is rigged with explosives. I take his hand—it swallows mine whole, warm and rough, foam still ground into the crescents of his nails. Evidence that he dug me out with his fingers.

“Don’t ever do that to me again, Fury.”

“Get bricked into a wall?”

“Befriend a psychopath with a mortar trowel.”

“In my defense, I didn’t know he owned a trowel.”

Knox manages a ghost of a smile.

Milo has been uncharacteristically quiet for approximately forty-five seconds, which means he’s about to detonate.

“Okay,” he says, clapping his hands together. “I need to say something and I need everyone to be present and not interrupt me because if I stop I’ll lose my nerve and then I’ll make a joke instead and we’ll all pretend this moment didn’t happen.”

The room goes still.

Milo looks at me. Without the grin, without the shield, without any of the ten thousand defense mechanisms he wears like body armor.

“We almost lost you,” he says. “Again. And I know everyone in this room is thinking it and nobody wants to say it because we’re all doing the stoic-badass thing and that’s fine, that’s our brand, but I need to say it out

loud because if I don’t it’s going to eat me alive.” His voice wavers. Steadies. Wavers again. “I love you. I love all of you. And I’m so fucking scared that one day I’m going to be the smartest person in the room and it still won’t be enough. That someone will find a gap I didn’t cover. That I’ll be staring at a screen when I should’ve been staring at the door.” He swallows. “I should have caught him. Jamie. Stephen. Whatever. He was sitting in our girlfriend’s diner eating pie and I ran a background check and it came back clean and I said *cool* and went back to my code. I should have—”

“Milo.” I reach for him. “Come here.”

Knox shifts back to give him space. Milo sits on the bed like I’m made of glass, which is the least Milo approach to sitting on anything. I take his face in both hands, bandages and all.

“You didn’t miss him,” I say. “None of us figured it out. He was just that good.”

“I missed him too,” Holden says. He doesn’t look at anyone when he says it.

“Me too,” Knox adds.

Milo shrugs. “No offense. But I’m supposed to be better than you two.”

“You built the tracker that found me,” I say. “You built the system that got them to the house. The only reason I’m breathing right now is because of something *you* made.”

His bottom lip trembles. He bites it. Doesn’t look away.

“I made fuck pit 2.0 too,” he says, voice cracking. “And you haven’t even slept in it yet. So you need to not die. Because I also got a custom mattress that has a warranty, and I can’t return it without the original packaging.”

I pull him in. He folds into me—carefully, mindful of the IV and the bandages and the oxygen line—and buries his face in my neck the way he did the night he killed fourteen men and fell apart in the bathtub. I hold him and feel him shake and I whisper, “I’m here, I’m here, I’m here,” until the shaking stops.

When he pulls back, his eyes are wet but the grin is trying to reassemble itself. “For the record,” he says, “the stuffed cat is named Milo Number Two. It’s a comfort animal and should not be separated from the patient at any time. I’ll fight the nurses.”

“Noted.”

A knock at the door cuts through the moment. Dr. Shahid steps in, takes one look around the crowded room and only lets his brow quirk slightly before returning to his normal white-coat composure.

“Good morning, Miss Adams. I need to check your vitals, change your dressings, and listen to your lungs.” He glances around the room again—Knox taking up roughly forty percent of the available floor space, Milo perched on my bed, Holden looking like he slept in a dumpster, Micah on the mattress edge, Eli right beside me. “I’m going to need the room. One of you can stay.” He checks his clipboard. “Her spouse? Next of kin?”

“We’re all her spouse,” Milo says, without hesitation.

Every head in the room swivels toward him.

“Family,” Micah says. Loudly. Looking directly at the doctor and trying to steer the conversation away from a cliff. “He means we’re her family.”

Dr. Shahid looks at Milo. Looks at Micah. Looks at Knox, who is not helping. Looks at Holden, who has closed his eyes like he’s praying for the floor to open. Looks at Eli, who is studying the ceiling tiles with sudden, intense fascination.

“Right,” Shahid says, in the tone that says he’s decided this is none of his business. “One of you only. The rest—there’s a waiting area down the hall. Coffee machine on the left.”

Holden looks at me with eyes that are still raw but functional—his brain rebooting after last night’s hard crash. I was out of it for the most part, but I’m pretty sure most of them either slept in the visitor chairs or the waiting room.

“We could all do with coffee,” he says. “That bakery didn’t have any, and I’m running on fumes.” He leans down and kisses my forehead. “I’ll be back in a couple of hours, wildcat. You need anything, you call.”

“I’ll stay,” Milo says, already reaching for the iPad in the basket. “We can stream Mormon Housewives and—”

“No.” Holden wraps a hand around Milo’s wrist. “You’re with me.”

Milo blinks, then slowly smiles. “In a boyfriend capacity?”

Holden sighs.

“Get outside before I change my mind about ever feeding you again.”

“That’s not a no,” Milo whispers to me as he slides off the bed, grabbing Milo Number Two and tucking the cat in beside me. “Love you, kitten. Wear the pajamas. I’ll know if you don’t.” He blows me a kiss from the door, and I attempt to blow one back.

“I’ll stay,” Eli says before Micah or Knox can volunteer. “You two go. You need rest too.”

Micah and Knox don’t argue. Micah squeezes my hand. “I’ll bring you that raspberry Danish later, baby girl.” He presses his mouth to my temple. “Be good for the doctor.”

“Doc McStuffins,” I say, making him smile.

“That’s one.”

Knox is next. He stands over me for a moment, taking my hand between both of his, his warm brown eyes steady on mine.

“I won’t go far,” he says, brushing his lips over my knuckles.

“I know.”

He sets my hand down gently, pats it lightly. Then walks to the door and stops. He doesn’t turn around, but his hand grips the frame hard.

“Eli,” Knox says.

“Yeah.”

“Take care of her.”

“I will.”

Knox nods once. The door closes behind him.

And then it’s just me and Eli and Dr. Shahid, who is already pulling on his gloves.

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# EIGHT
# ELI



Dr. Shahid works in silence. Vitals. Lungs. The dressings on her wrists. The chemical burns streaking her legs. I stand by the window and try not to catalog every mark on Sage's body as evidence of something I failed to prevent.

I catalog them anyway.

"Looking good overall," Shahid says, replacing the last dressing with clean gauze. "Her lungs are clearer than I expected. The steroids are doing their job, and her oxygen saturation is holding steady." He makes a note on his clipboard. "I want to keep her another few days for observation. The pulmonary edema risk doesn't fully clear for forty-eight to seventy-two hours, but I'm cautiously optimistic."

"Can I shower?" Sage asks. "I still smell like a chemical plant and my hair feels awful."

"Showering is fine. The rib's the one that'll argue with you. Support it when you cough, don't lift anything, and don't be brave about the pain—brave gets you a lung infection. Keep the wrist dressings on. I'll replace them afterward." He glances at me. "Take the oxygen off for the shower, but put it back on immediately after. No longer than fifteen minutes."

"I can breathe on my own for longer than fifteen minutes," Sage argues.

Shahid's brows lift to his hairline. "You can barely sit upright, Miss Adams."

She glares at him over the oxygen mask.

Shahid's mouth twitches. "I can get you a nurse to assist, or—"

“I’ve got her.”

He looks at me. Then Sage.

She nods.

“If she becomes dizzy, short of breath, or her color changes, press the call button immediately.” He disconnects the monitor leads and IV line, caps the port, then tapes it against the back of her hand. “The emergency button is beside the shower rail.”

“Understood.”

“Fifteen minutes,” he stresses again.

“Yes, sir.”

He clicks his pen, tucks the clipboard under his arm, and heads for the door.

“Thank you, Doc McStuffins,” Sage calls after him.

Shahid stops. Turns. Looks at her over the top of his glasses with the expression of a man who has spent twenty years in medicine and thought he’d heard everything.

“I might double-check her medication,” he mutters as he walks out.

When the door closes, Sage grins.

“That’s my raspberry Danish earned,” she says. “Tell Micah. You’re my witness.”

I almost laugh. The sound catches in my throat, unfamiliar after the last twenty-four hours. But it’s there.

And she put it there.

“Shower,” I say, because if I stand here looking at her for much longer, I’ll start thinking about how afraid I am of losing her.

I help her sit up. She tries to swing her legs off the bed and almost over-rotates, balance gone, body still not quite hers. My hands go to her waist before she can tip, and the shock of contact makes her go still.

She lifts her eyes to mine. “I’m okay,” she says, even though she’s not.

“Liar,” I murmur, and help her to her feet.

Her legs shake from the effort, and she immediately leans into me, breathing heavy like she just sprinted up the staircase at home.

“You want me to carry you, little savage?”

She nods. “Please.”

I slide one arm behind her back and the other beneath her thighs. Relief. Terror. Desire. Guilt.

They all hit at once when I lift her.

“I’m heavier than I look,” she mumbles, looping one arm around my neck.

She weighs less than she should. All bandages, bruises, and stubbornness. I keep my hands clear of the burns and carry her toward the bathroom.

“You look like an extra in a crime-scene reenactment,” I tell her.

Her laugh brushes my throat.

“You’re a dick. Just for that, you have to wash my hair.”

“You sure you don’t want me to shave it all off?” I ask, noting how it’s slick with the oil the nurses used to remove most of the foam last night. There’s still a decent amount of sticky residue in there.

“While I would rock a buzz cut,” she says, “I think I’ll pass.”

The bathroom is nicer than my old apartment. Stone tile. Heated floors. A rainfall shower head the size of a dinner plate. Towels thick enough to sleep on.

The plastic shower seat and emergency call button are the only things stopping it from passing as a luxury hotel.

I lower Sage onto the seat and crouch in front of her.

“I need help with the gown,” she says.

“I know. I’ve got you.”

I pull off her socks first, then carefully unfasten the gown at her neck. She lifts her arms as much as she can and lets me ease it away from the capped IV and bandages.

She doesn’t flinch when I touch her.

It’s the opposite. Her shoulders loosen. Her breathing slows.

*Trust.*

After everything I’ve done, she still gives it to me without making me ask.

The gown lands on the floor. She sits in front of me in nothing but bandages, burns, and bruises. There’s a dark mark along her jaw. Raw skin around her ankles. A line across her ribs where the foam hardened against her body.

The sight of it reaches inside my chest and twists. But I don’t retreat. I take the handheld shower head from the wall, turn the water on, and test the temperature against my wrist.

“My shampoo and conditioner are in the bag you brought,” she says.

“Of course.”

I hand her the shower head and step into the room.

My hands start shaking before I reach the duffel. For one second, I stand there with my fists clenched at my sides and listen to the water striking the tile.

She's alive.

She's ten feet away.

She's waiting for me.

Last night, I sat in a house that smelled like garlic and wine while Milo searched traffic cameras, and every old fear I've ever had came back wearing new clothes.

*This is what happens when you let yourself love something.*

*This is what happens when you bring someone into your darkness.*

*This is what happens when you believe you get to keep her.*

For several hours, those thoughts felt like facts.

They don't now.

Stephen put her in that wall. Stephen drugged her. Restrained her. Filled the space around her with foam and left her to die.

Our life is dangerous. Loving us is dangerous.

But pushing Sage away didn't protect her from the rope. It only made her face that danger believing one of the men she loved didn't want her.

I'm never doing that again.

The fear can come back. But it doesn't get to make the call.

I find the bottles and return to the bathroom. They knock together in my hands when I kneel beside her.

Her head tilts. "You nervous, Ward?"

"I don't want to hurt you."

Her mouth curves. "What if I promise that this time I *won't* like it?"

A laugh breaks out of me before I can stop it. "Tip your head back."

She closes her eyes, and I wet her hair slowly, keeping one hand across her forehead so the water doesn't run into her face. Then I work the shampoo into her scalp.

Roots first. Slow pressure behind the ears. Down the length to the ends.

The first time we showered together, she gave me a detailed tutorial that ended with a threat to murder me if I damaged her hair cuticle. Back then, washing her hair was an excuse to touch her. Now it feels like something I should have learned sooner—care without rules around it. Tenderness

without making her earn it first. Everything she's always deserved but I've never given.

I rinse the shampoo away. When I reach for the conditioner, her hand closes around my wrist.

"Eli."

I stop. "What?"

"What were you going to tell me?"

My fingers tighten around the bottle. "What do you mean?"

"Last night," she says. "Before I left. You said you wanted to talk."

"That can wait, little savage. This isn't what I had in mind."

"You said tomorrow."

"You almost died."

"And yet it's still tomorrow."

"Sage."

"You promised good stuff." Her eyes narrow. "I nearly died before I got to hear it, so I'm not accepting a rain check."

I stare at her. Wet hair slicked down her back. Bandages turning dark at the edges. Bruises coming into sharper focus beneath the warm light. She's still ordering me around. Still refusing to let me hide.

"I had a speech," I say.

She bites her lip, but the smile escapes anyway. "Was there an agenda?"

"No."

"Color coding?"

"Stop."

"That's not a no."

I squeeze conditioner into my palm and work it through the ends of her hair.

"The speech had bullet points," I say. "I'm going off-book."

Her eyes stay closed, but her mouth curves. She waits.

I work the conditioner through a tangle near her nape, slow, careful. "Before you, I had a system. Two lives. Two selves. A wall between them thick enough that neither side could see the other. The teacher stood in the light. The hangman worked in the dark. And I told myself the wall was load-bearing—that if it ever came down, both versions of me would collapse under the rubble."

I tilt her head forward and work the ends through my fingers, carefully using my nails to remove any remnants of the foam.

“Then you happened. And you didn’t just see both of me—you refused to choose between them. I kept waiting for you to figure out that one of us wasn’t worth keeping. Instead you loved the whole wreckage.” My voice thins. I let it. “And the wall came down, Sage. And I didn’t collapse. I started getting better. I’m a better man because you love me. A better partner. I didn’t know those were things I was allowed to become.”

“Eli.” Her eyes open. Wet lashes, and not from the shower.

“I’m not done. You wanted the good stuff. Sit still.”

She huffs a laugh that cracks in the middle. I guide her head back and start the rinse, shielding her eyes with my palm.

“I have Micah back,” I say. “Really back. Not the version where I stood three feet away and called it closeness. I know things about him now I never let myself know before. I fall asleep beside him most nights and it feels like mine. You did that. Loving you taught me how to let him love me—how to let any of them love me. I spent years pretending to exist in the light while I actually lived in the dark. Now I have a life that’s full. Messy. Both halves in the same room, and nobody has to leave.”

I turn the water off. The silence afterward rings.

“You knew before I did,” I say quietly. “You put it on my back. The monster breaking out of the cage. I thought it was about accepting what I am. It wasn’t. The cage was never keeping the monster in, Sage. It was keeping everything else out. You were just the first person I let reach through the bars.” I press the water out of the ends of her hair. “And you put six birds above it. I thought that was you being generous. It wasn’t. You’d already worked out that when the cage broke, it wasn’t only the monster that got loose.”

When I look at her, she’s crying. Silent, steady tears cutting through the damp on her cheeks.

“That’s the good stuff,” she whispers. “That’s the really good stuff.”

“There’s more. But you’re shaking, and Shahid said fifteen minutes, and I refuse to explain to Holden that I let you get hypothermia mid-speech.”

“Eli Ward, if you stop talking now, I will stab you with my own IV port.”

I laugh—actually laugh—and press my forehead to hers, wet hair between us, her bandaged hands finding my jaw.

“I wanted to tell you that you’re extraordinary. That I love your temper. I love that you put knives in every room and steal our clothes and refuse to

wait quietly while the rest of us debate over every little decision.” My throat tightens. “I love the way you challenge me. I love the way you trust me with the part of you that wants control and pain, even after I gave you every reason not to.”

“Eli.”

“I love you.”

She goes very still, and I pull back enough to wrap a towel around her to keep her warm.

“I’ve loved you for longer than I knew what to call it. I think part of me loved you on the beach when you stood there covered in Brock’s blood and refused to fall apart for any of us. Maybe before that. I don’t know.” I shake my head. “I spent so long trying to establish exactly when it happened that I missed the part where it no longer mattered.”

Water drips from the ends of her hair.

The shower ticks quietly behind us.

“I don’t want to be halfway in this anymore,” I continue. “I don’t want to be the man who leaves coffee on the counter and stands outside your door because that’s the closest he’ll let himself get. I don’t want scenes to be the only place I give you everything.”

“What do you want?”

The answer comes easily.

That’s new too.

“I want to be your partner. Fully. Not only your Dom. Not the man you let back into the house because you felt sorry for him. Yours.”

“I don’t feel sorry for you.”

“Good.”

“And you’re already my partner.”

“You made room for me,” I say. “I haven’t always stood in it.”

She studies my face, and I pick up another towel so I can dry her hair.

“I want mornings with you,” I tell her. “Dates. Arguments. I want you complaining about my coffee and leaving your shoes where I’ll trip over them. I want to wash your hair when you haven’t almost died first. I want the club. The leash. The parts of us that don’t make sense anywhere else. I want all of it.”

Her eyes shine, and I move on to drying the other side of her head.

“Even after last night?” she asks.

I know what she means.

“Yeah. Even after last night. It scared the shit out of me, Sage. Every old reason I had for keeping my distance came back. For a while, I believed loving you had put you in that wall.”

“*Stephen* put me in the wall.”

“I know.”

Not *but*. Not *if*. Not *because of me*.

Stephen did this.

“I didn’t know it last night,” I admit. “But I do now. Distance didn’t keep you safe before. It won’t keep you safe now. It only keeps us apart.”

“What happens when you get scared again?”

“I tell you.”

Her brows lift.

“I tell you I’m scared,” I say. “Then I let you decide what you want to do with that information. I don’t make the decision for both of us.”

“Look at you, learning boundaries.”

“Don’t sound so surprised.”

“I’m incredibly surprised.”

I finish towel drying her hair and kneel in front of her to pat dry her legs.

“I really thought I was dead last night.” She says it so quietly I almost miss it under the drip of the shower.

I keep drying her legs, slow passes of the towel over skin mapped with burns, and let her take the silence she needs.

“You know what I thought about?” she says. “In there. At the end.”

“What?”

“You. All of you.” Her voice is wreckage, but there’s something underneath it holding the shape. “I thought about the house. The pit. I thought about kids, Eli. I decided I want five. Minimum. One with each of you, and I was sitting in a wall full of foam doing family planning like a lunatic.”

The towel stops moving.

“Five,” I repeat.

“In this economy,” she says, and laughs, and the laugh turns into a cough that bends her forward. I’m up before it peaks, hand flat between her shoulder blades, feeling the rattle work through her. It passes. She sags back against the seat, breath sawing in and out.

“Oxygen,” I say.

“Don’t you dare.”

“Sage.”

“I’m fine, it’s just a cough, we were having a moment—”

“We’re still having the moment. The moment travels.” I wrap the towel tighter around her shoulders and lift her. She doesn’t argue, which tells me more than the cough did. Her arm loops my neck, and her face presses into the hollow of my throat, and I carry her back into the room with her wet hair soaking through my shirt.

I settle her on the bed and fit the oxygen mask over her nose and mouth. She wrinkles her face at it like it personally offended her, but she lets me.

“Happy?” she mutters.

“Ecstatic.” I pull the duffel onto the bed. “What do you want to wear?”

“The silk pajamas. Milo will know if I don’t.”

“He probably put a sensor in them.”

“He already put trackers in all my shoes.”

“Of course he did.”

I help her into her underwear first. Then the pajama bottoms, careful around the burns on her ankles and legs. She holds my shoulders while I pull them into place.

“Arms out.”

She holds them out slowly. I ease the sleeves over her bandaged wrists and capped IV port, then wrap the top around her and twist each button closed at the front. When I’m done, the silk settles against her skin, and she sighs.

“Milo was right,” I admit.

“Don’t tell him. He’ll become unbearable.”

“Become?”

“Good point.”

I help her to lie back, pull the cashmere blanket across her lap, and make sure the oxygen mask is still properly covering her face.

“So, five kids, huh?” I settle myself on the edge of the mattress.

“Is that crazy to want that?” she asks. “I mean, this isn’t the first time someone’s tried to kill me.”

“It isn’t crazy. Stephen doesn’t get to decide whether we have a family. Once he’s out of the equation, we can talk about five. Or six. Whatever family size you want.”

“What about you? Is that something you’d want?”

The question sits between us longer than most questions do.

Children.

I think of my students and the excitement for life they all have. The chrysalises hanging in their mesh habitat at the back of my classroom. Every card with a misspelled *Mr. Wrod* in crayon, every one of them folded into my desk drawer like evidence of something I never let myself name.

“Yes,” I say.

Her brows rise enough to shift the mask.

“I’m a teacher, Sage. I’ve spent years loving other people’s children and handing them back at three o’clock. I told myself that was enough. That it was the correct allotment for a man like me.” My throat works around the rest of it. “But I told myself I couldn’t have a lot of things, and you keep proving me wrong.”

“Yeah,” she whispers. “I do, don’t I?”

I lean in and press a kiss to her forehead.

“I love you, Eli,” she whispers.

“I love you too.”

A knock lands half a second before Dr. Shahid enters with fresh dressings and the IV line.

“Fifteen minutes,” he says, checking the clock. “I’m impressed.”

“I’m very obedient,” Sage says through the mask.

I cough.

Shahid looks between us and decides not to ask. He reconnects the monitor and IV, then replaces the damp dressings around her wrists. Sage winces but doesn’t pull away.

I stand beside the bed.

When Shahid tapes the final edge of gauze into place, he checks the oxygen reading. “Ninety-five,” he says. “Good. Keep the mask on. I’ll check again in four hours.”

Sage lifts it slightly.

“Thank you, Doc McStuffins.”

His eyes close briefly. “It’s Dr. Shahid.”

“Sorry.”

“No, you’re not.”

“No.”

He leaves before she can make it worse.

The door clicks shut.

Sage’s eyes crinkle above the mask.

“Five?” I ask.

“Minimum.”

I take her hand and start calculating bedrooms.

Five bedrooms. Six, if they want their own later. A fence with milkweed running along the base of it.

I get about forty seconds of that before the other number arrives—the one I’ve been holding down since the bricks came out. One. One man, alive, who thinks he finished this, sleeping tonight with nothing at all on his chest.

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# NINE
# MILO



When Holden said “you’re with me,” I assumed—not unreasonably—that he meant sexually.

Let the record show that the man wrapped his hand around my wrist in front of four other people, used a voice that could melt steel at forty paces, and then walked me out of a hospital and into a car to sit in a parked sedan eating drive-thru breakfast burritos across the street from the house where our girlfriend was almost murdered.

Romance isn’t dead. It’s just deeply weird.

Two hours of mountain switchbacks, highway, and coast road later, here we are. Holden drove in silence while I ran traces on my laptop and tried not to think about every mile taking us farther from Sage and closer to the house where she almost died. We stopped for burritos on the edge of town because even stakeouts require calories, and because neither of us had eaten properly since yesterday.

The first time I saw this beach house, Brock was still alive. I’d broken in under the cover of darkness to find handwriting samples for his suicide note—dug through drawers, looked in the trash, stared at him while he was fast asleep.

I remember thinking, as I watched yet another rapist peacefully dream, that there might be something irrevocably bent about the wiring in my head. Not because of what I was doing, but because of how little it disturbed me. I was preparing to murder Brock with four other men and force him to admit

to his crimes by making it look like a suicide. That, to me, was just good fun.

Now, sitting in broad daylight with egg and hot sauce dripping down my wrist while Holden stares at the Davis place like he can set it on fire with concentration alone, I'm thinking about the clean little digital life Jamie Mercer handed us—and the thread I've been pulling since four this morning.

Somewhere inside it, Jamie becomes Stephen.

I just need one knot to give.

Holden wipes his thumb over the steering wheel, slow and methodical. He hasn't really eaten. He took two bites of the burrito and then held it in one hand like he forgot food requires follow-through. His eyes are bloodshot. His jaw looks engineered by a company that hates happiness.

"You gonna finish that?" I ask, nodding to the burrito.

He glances at it, a mere flick of his eyes before they're right back on the house. "Not hungry."

"You need food."

"I'll eat when we have eyes on something."

"We have eyes on an empty driveway. Odin's team has cameras on the gates, motion sensors on the perimeter, a two-man rotation parked literally right there." I point to the SUV that screams federal tax fraud. "If Stephen so much as farts within fifty yards of this place, someone's getting an alert."

Holden says nothing.

I take another bite.

The silence in the car has weight. Not the comfortable kind. Not even the hostile kind, really. Just a dense, metallic pressure that makes every small sound louder—the crinkle of the breakfast wrapper, the tick of the cooling engine, the distant cry of gulls over the water.

I swallow. Wipe the hot sauce off my wrist with a napkin. "Okay, so. I'm going to say something annoying and reasonable."

"That narrows it down to every sentence you've ever spoken."

"Thank you. My point is, if you don't eat, you get meaner. And you're already at baseline glacial asshole, so—"

He turns his head and looks at me. Then he takes one mechanical bite. With eye contact. Then he resumes staring.

I'm a little bit hard.

Why did that turn me on?

I blame sleep deprivation, trauma, and the fact that Holden looks best when he's one bad decision away from felony assault.

He chews like he's doing paperwork about it.

I look back at the house because that's safer than looking at his mouth. The Davis place sits up on the bluff all rich and dead-eyed, all clean lines and expensive windows and curated coastal charm. The kind of house that says nothing bad has ever happened here, which is funny, because I could list a couple pretty easily.

My phone buzzes in my lap. I pick it up, thumb through the notifications, and feel my whole body go weird and still.

"Well," I say.

Holden doesn't move. "Well what."

"We got something from the credit pull I shoved through at"—I check the time—"Jesus Christ. It feels like I've lived three separate lifetimes since yesterday afternoon." I turn the screen toward him. "Holden."

That gets his full attention.

He takes the phone from my hand. The muscles in his forearm shift under his sleeve as he scrolls, reading fast.

The credit card Jamie used to pick up the tab at the margarita bar yesterday—like a thoughtful little golden retriever with a laptop bag—links to a virtual payment profile. The profile links to a house-sitting app account. The app account is under J. Mercer. The identity docs uploaded to verify it? Fake as we suspected. Good enough to pass the automated review, not good enough to survive me being petty at four in the morning.

Behind the fake driver's license is an old utility deposit. Behind that is a real name.

Stephen Mercer-Davis.

Holden goes very still when he gets to that part.

"He's a Davis?" he says.

"Hyphenated. Mercer-Davis." I take the phone back and pull up the chain Fenrir sent through. "Here's the trail. James Mercer—the real one—was Stephen's father. Died when little Stevie was three. Industrial accident at a bottling plant outside Tacoma. Press arm came down wrong and flattened half his chest before anyone could hit emergency stop."

Holden's jaw tightens.

"Stephen's mother remarried two years later. Married into the Davis family—Brock's uncle. Stephen got the hyphenated name. Mercer-Davis." I

scroll through the records, connecting the dots. “So Stephen and Brock aren’t friends. They’re step-cousins. Raised in different states—Stephen grew up outside Tacoma, Brock here.”

“And at some point they developed a relationship close enough that Stephen was willing to murder for him,” Holden adds.

“Exactly.”

Holden stares at the house. I can see him rewinding—every interaction, every background check, every vetting conversation—and finding the gap.

“We searched Brock’s friend group,” he says. Flat. The voice he uses when he’s furious at himself. “His frat. His teammates. The party circuit. His family. His parents’ immediate contacts.”

“But not extended family from out of state.”

“A step-cousin.” He says it like a curse. “He was *family*. He probably showed up at holidays. Birthdays. And nobody in Brock’s circle would’ve flagged him because he wasn’t *in* the circle. He was adjacent to it.”

“Exactly. He was hiding in the space we weren’t looking. The gap between friend group and family tree. Step-cousin from a different state, different last name on the school records, different everything. The only connection is a marriage certificate from when Stephen was five.”

I watch Holden process this. His mind running scenarios, retracing steps, auditing every decision. I know the look. I’ve seen it in the mirror.

“I searched his name,” Holden says quietly. “When Sage first mentioned Jamie. I ran him through every database I had access to. And it came back clean because I was searching a ghost—a dead man’s identity worn by his son.”

“We both missed it. I ran the same check. Same result.” I lean back in my seat. “Knox ran it too. Stephen used his dead dad’s name, his stepdad’s family connections, and the fact that nobody cross-references house-sitting apps with thirty-year-old death certificates. It’s not sophisticated, Holden. It’s just patient. He literally had this identity sitting tragically in his pocket.”

Then the dates line up in my head, and I stop enjoying myself.

“Holden. The Mercer identity is eight months old.”

He doesn’t look away from the house. “Brock died in May.”

“Yeah—*May*.” I put the phone facedown on my thigh because my hands want a job. “So Jamie wasn’t built for Sage. Jamie was already sitting in his pocket months before any of us touched Brock. Whatever he needed a second name for, he needed it while Brock was still alive.”

“You think it’s Kennel related?”

“I think a lot of this is Kennel related.”

The car is quiet. The beach house sits beautiful and empty, holding its secrets the way rich houses do.

“So he grew up knowing Brock,” Holden says. “Family events. Summers. Whatever. They were close enough that Brock trusted him. Close enough that Stephen—”

“Fell in love with him.” I finish the sentence because Holden won’t. “Step-cousins, raised apart, reunited at family shit. Brock’s the golden boy, Stephen’s the quiet one from out of state. And somewhere in there, it became something else. Something Brock kept secret because his family, his image, his whole world doesn’t allow for a boyfriend. Especially not when that boyfriend was his step-cousin.”

“And when Brock disappeared, Stephen didn’t believe the narrative because he was the only person who truly knew him.”

“And then that same person pieced it all together by sitting in a diner across from our girl, eating cherry pie and planning his revenge.”

Holden’s hand tightens on the steering wheel until the leather creaks.

“Message Fenrir,” he says. “Full profile. Stephen Mercer-Davis. I want every address, every associate, every account. School records, medical records, travel history. Where he’s been, who he’s talked to, what he drives, where he sleeps. Everything.”

“Already started.” I hold up my phone. “We also CC’d Odin’s team on the initial pull.”

“Of course you did,” Holden says.

“Thank you. I feel seen.”

While Odin’s people start tearing Stephen Mercer-Davis apart, I pull up the forwarding logs from Sage’s phone.

There’s a hole in them.

I stare at it long enough that Holden notices.

“What?”

“There’s a text that didn’t forward.”

His attention snaps fully to me. “One of the spoofs?”

I nod. “The catch ran through the secure relay Fenrir severed when he locked me out after the warehouse. When he restored my access, the trackers came back. The cameras came back. The phone mirror looked live.” I enlarge the connection record. “But the catch never reauthenticated.

The script was running, so it showed green on my end. It was just listening to a dead feed."

Holden's jaw tightens. "And Brock had stopped texting."

"For six weeks. There was nothing to trigger it, so an empty log looked exactly like a working one." I stare at the carrier record from yesterday. One message, sitting inside the gap I didn't know existed. "Stephen found the one dead wire in my entire system."

"Fenrir cut the wire."

"And I didn't test it when he gave me access again. We could have known she was in danger at least an hour sooner."

"Milo—"

"We can argue about whose fault it is after we find him." My fingers move across the screen. "Right now, I'm fixing it."

I rebuild the catch through two independent relays. If either connection drops, every device in the house will scream.

That won't undo yesterday.

But Stephen won't get silence from me twice.

"There's something else," I say, scanning a second file. "Fenrir also pulled a one-use handset from the tower records. It came online twelve minutes after Sage's tracker stopped, half a mile from the beach house, and made one call."

Holden's eyes sharpen. "To who?"

"That's the problem. The call bounced through three relays and terminated at a VoIP endpoint that no longer exists. Whoever was on the other end had infrastructure. Corporate security, intelligence, something adjacent."

"And you think it was Stephen."

"The timing, the tower, the single use—it looks like a check-in."

"Looks like," Holden says. "Don't turn inference into fact."

"I know. But Stephen may not be working alone on this. He was part of the Kennel. They could be helping him."

The possibility settles between us like a third passenger.

"Okay. Let's log that as a genuine possibility," Holden says. "But first, we need to know who he is."

My phone buzzes again before I can make a joke about catfishing. It's a new file dump. Fenrir moves fast when properly motivated by attempted wall-murder. I skim, thumb flying.

“Okay,” I murmur. “Okay, this is fun in a very upsetting way.”

“Read.”

“Tacoma address history until eighteen. Community college for one semester, dropped out. Two psych holds—brief, both after ‘family incidents,’ whatever that means. One disorderly conduct charge at nineteen, sealed. Then a whole lot of nothing on paper and way too much movement off paper.” I scroll. “Cash-heavy work. Contract gigs. Dog-walking app, house-sitting app, freelance copy editing, data annotation. Lots of jobs that let him disappear into other people’s lives without anyone asking why he’s there.”

Holden’s mouth goes flat. “Of course.”

“Oh, and here’s the really gross part. He’s in all of Brock’s accounts. Has been for—shit—a long time.”

Holden turns his head. Slow. “What?”

I scroll harder, my stomach doing ugly little gymnastics. “There are device overlaps going back almost a year—login assists, password resets, draft folders opened from secondary IPs. Brock’s phone, Stephen’s laptop, same sessions. Seems he was completely embedded.”

“Handling his digital life?”

“Curating it.” I flick through the packet. “Deleting DMs. Managing backups. There are export logs from Brock’s cloud storage routed through a machine registered to a library in Tacoma, then later one here. Stephen had admin-level intimacy with Brock’s whole ecosystem. Photos, notes, location history, calendar. He probably knew every girl Brock talked to, every party he went to, every place he took them.”

Every place he took them.

The beach house stares back at us from the bluff.

“Did Sage tell you much about what happened? What Stephen said while he . . .” I nod toward the house. I don’t need to finish that line.

Holden shakes his head. “She hasn’t felt well enough for a full statement.”

“Okay. Then this is new information.” I scroll back through the device overlaps. “He wasn’t just aware of what Brock was doing. He was inside it. Deleting messages. Managing backups. Cleaning the trail before anyone knew there was one.”

Holden’s face hardens. “That’s how Brock kept getting away with it.”

“He had help. From Stephen.”

The realization settles between us.

Stephen wasn't just Brock's boyfriend.

He was infrastructure. The concierge for a serial rapist.

Holden drags a hand over his mouth. "Can you access that cloud archive?"

"Already trying." I flick through another set of credentials, jaw tight. "He used mirrored authentication, which is either very romantic or extremely serial-killer admin assistant. Hard to tell where one ends and the other begins."

"Don't joke."

"I'm not. That's the upsetting part."

I open a packet of recovered metadata and freeze.

"Oh, no."

Holden's head turns. "What."

"There are folders." My voice goes thin in a way I don't like. "Private folders. Hidden behind mislabeled system files. He renamed them after firmware backups." I swallow. "That's cute. Evil, but cute."

"Open them."

My fingers hesitate for half a second. Just enough to register that I don't want to. Then I do it anyway, because wanting has never once been the metric by which we survive.

The first file is a photo.

It's not Brock.

It's a girl.

Young—college-age maybe, dark hair stuck to her wet cheeks, mascara smeared into gray half-moons under her eyes. She's on the floor in what looks like a bathroom, tile under her bare legs, one shoulder strap torn down her arm. Her face is turned toward the camera, and the expression on it is so nakedly terrified that my stomach drops straight through the floor of the car.

There's a timestamp in the corner from eight months ago.

And a sneaker in frame. Men's. White, expensive, Brock-coded as fuck.

I don't breathe.

"Jesus Christ," Holden says beside me, and I realize he's leaning in close enough that his shoulder is braced against mine.

I swipe.

Another girl. Blonde. Curled on a bed with both wrists pinned above her head by a hand coming in from out of frame.

Another.

Another.

I swipe again and the angle shifts—same room, different girl, same white sneaker in the corner—and my brain does this awful, efficient thing where it starts replacing faces.

Not theirs. Hers.

Sage on a bathroom floor. Sage on a mattress. Sage with mascara she'd never wear smeared under eyes gone huge and gray with fear. Sage looking at the camera because Brock liked to document his pets and Stephen liked to organize the archive. Sage after the jetty if we'd been five minutes later, ten, if Eli had said wait and Holden had listened and Knox hadn't already been moving and she hadn't stolen that knife and opened Brock up like a zipper before he could finish what he started.

The images don't even need to show her. My head does it for them.

I see her wrists held over her head. Her dress bunched at her hips. Brock's hand in her hair. Stephen somewhere nearby with a laptop, a camera, a trash bag, a plan. I see the folder he would have made for her. The name he would have given it. Something boring. Something that looked like a firmware backup.

My hands shake so hard I nearly drop the phone.

It's ugly and immediate and full-body—like somebody reached inside me and yanked every wire loose at once. The images blur. My vision goes bright at the edges.

"Milo."

I don't realize I've stopped breathing until Holden says my name again, sharper this time.

"I know," I say, except I don't. There are so many more girls than we thought. I don't know their names. I don't know how long Stephen sat there cataloging the aftermath of Brock's violence like a fucking archivist at a museum of ruined women. I just know I want to peel both of them out of the timeline and feed them to the ocean.

My jaw locks. My teeth grind. I can hear it.

"Milo." Holden takes the phone out of my hand before I crack the screen. "Look at me."

I don't want to. My whole body vibrates, fine and violent, rage finding all the little failure points. I press the heels of my hands to my eyes and see

those fucking photos and the white sneaker and Sage's face where Sage's face isn't.

Strong hands close around my jaw.

Not rough. Firm. Precise. Holden drags my face toward him until I have no choice but to look. His eyes are winter-bright and absolutely fucking merciless.

"Breathe."

I suck in air like it insulted me.

Again.

His thumbs press under my ears, anchoring me in place while my whole body tries to come apart. My shoulders are up around my neck. My teeth hurt. I can feel every pulse beat in my gums.

"We are going to find him," he says, low and flat and deadly calm. "Do you hear me?"

I do. I just don't know if hearing is the same as believing when my head is full of bathroom tile and torn straps and all the girls we didn't save.

"He doesn't get away with this."

My mouth opens. Nothing useful comes out.

Holden's grip shifts, one hand sliding to the back of my neck. "Milo."

"She isn't in them," I say, because apparently my mouth has stopped consulting me. "I know Sage isn't in those files. But my brain keeps doing this fucked-up slideshow from hell. Every time I close my eyes, it gives one of them her face, and I can't make it stop."

"Milo—"

"I can't—"

He closes the distance before I finish spiraling myself into the dashboard.

One second his hand is on my neck. The next his mouth is on mine.

I go completely still.

It is not soft. It is not tentative. It is not a question in any recognizable language. It is Holden shutting me up the only way he knows will actually work—cold mouth, hard pressure, one hand at the back of my neck and the other braced on the center console, pinning me in place without violence and with way too much of it. He tastes like coffee and hot sauce, and the kind of control that only exists because he's using all of it right now.

My brain, helpfully, stops.

Just—stops.

No bathroom tile. No white sneaker. No metadata. No girls in folders. No Sage's face where it doesn't belong.

Only Holden.

My mouth opens on instinct, shock, hunger, whatever fucked-up little circuit fires all at once and decides this is a much better use of electricity.

Oh.

Oh, that's—

I make a humiliating noise into his mouth. Something halfway between a gasp and a whimper and a public admission that I have absolutely no control over my life anymore. Holden takes it as permission. His hand tightens on the back of my neck, owning the line of me for one terrible, perfect second while he kisses me harder.

This is not how I expected my nervous breakdown to go.

I grab his wrist first because I need to hold on to something and then, apparently, because I'm me, I slide my hand up his forearm and into the collar of his shirt. His stubble scratches my upper lip. My heart is trying to file assault charges against my ribcage. The whole car goes hot and small and very, very not conducive to sane decision-making.

He pulls back just enough for air.

I follow him like an idiot.

His mouth brushes mine again, voice ghosting against my lips. "I can't lose you too," he whispers. "Please. I need you here."

For one stupid, suspended second, every joke I've ever made evaporates.

Not because I don't have one. I do. I always do. There's a whole line in my head about emotional support make-outs and state-sanctioned panic management and how if this is what near-death-bonding gets me, I'd like to submit a formal request for more efficient scheduling with comfortable seating.

But it all dies before it reaches my mouth.

Because Holden is looking at me like he means it. Holden, who would rather chew glass than ask for comfort straight. Holden, who treats need like a biohazard. Holden is looking at me with his mouth still damp from mine and his hand still curled around the back of my neck, and he's not even trying to take it back.

I blink at him.

My brain, apparently deciding today is a great day to become soup, offers: *He kissed you because you were having a murder panic attack.*

Which, honestly, is still kind of hot.

But the thing that lands isn't the kiss. It's the *too*. The *losing you too*. Like he put me in the same category as Sage without thinking about it first. Like I'm in the circle of people he can't afford to lose.

God. That does something chemical to me.

I swallow. My throat feels scraped out. "That is," I say, voice wrecked, "a deeply unfair thing to say while actively rearranging my sexual orientation."

He shifts back to look at me, and his face does the Holden thing where about four muscles move and the total effect is *you are impossible and I am, against my better judgment, aware of that.*

"Jesus Christ," he mutters.

"Don't invoke him like he's going to help. We wouldn't even exist in this moment if he was doing a better job at rallying the troops."

I'm still breathing too fast. My hands are still shaky. The horror is still there, waiting just outside the frame, but it's farther back now. Muted by the fact that Holden Cross just kissed me in broad daylight in a surveillance-adjacent sedan while we were theoretically on a stakeout.

He watches my face for another beat, checking. Assessing. Making sure I'm actually back in my body and not just making jokes from inside a fresh dissociative episode.

"You good?"

I give him my best approximation of a reassuring smile, which is difficult because I'm pretty sure my face is still rebooting, and my dick is painfully hard.

"I'm here," I say, quieter now. Less performance, more fact. "Unfortunately for everyone, especially law enforcement, I'm very resilient."

Holden's hand stays at my neck for one more second. Maybe two. Long enough for me to feel the heat of it all the way down my spine. Then he lets go and sits back in his seat like he didn't just alter the chemistry of the entire fucking vehicle.

I clear my throat. "So. To recap. We're repressing trauma with kissing now."

"We're not doing anything now except working."

“Right. Of course. Absolutely. Very professional.” I look down at the phone in his hand. “Can I have my nightmare rectangle back?”

He studies me once more, then gives it over. “You going to spiral again?”

Probably. I’m still one thumbnail away from another homicidal hardware failure. But I roll my shoulders, inhale, and pull my brain back online by force.

“I’m not making any promises. But if I do, can I request a blow job next time? I think that might really help to ground me.”

Holden looks at me like he’s considering whether mercy killing is legally defensible.

“No.”

“Counteroffer,” I say, sitting up a little straighter and dragging my dignity back on with both hands. “Hand stuff?”

“Milo.”

“Okay, wow. Hostile work environment.”

But his mouth twitches. Barely. I see it anyway, because I am, among other things, a connoisseur of facial cracks in emotionally constipated men.

And because I see it, I know I’m back enough to keep going.

I unlock the phone, square my shoulders, and make myself look at the files again with the part of my brain that functions best when everything else is on fire.

The girls in those photos had names before Brock turned them into folders. If the metadata gives me even one of them, I can give something back. Not enough. Never enough. But something.

I can’t undo what happened to them. But I can make sure they stop being anonymous—and make sure the man who helped do it pays.

“Hey, Holden?”

“If this is about my dick, Milo, I swear to—”

“It’s not.” I pause. “Well, it’s partially about your dick. But mostly it’s about the fact that I love you and I wanted to say it before we go back to hunting a psychopath, because this last twenty-four hours has made me realize that if I don’t say things when I feel them, I might not get another chance. So, yeah—I love you, Holden.”

The car goes quiet. Holden’s jaw works. The smirk is gone and what’s underneath it is something I’ve only seen twice—once in a kitchen when we had our “moment” with Sage, and once in the hospital this morning—

and it’s the thing he hides behind the discipline and the control because if people saw it, they’d know he’s made of the same terrified, desperate material as the rest of us.

He reaches across the console and slides his hand over mine, entwining our fingers. His thumb presses once against my knuckles.

“I love you too,” he says, like it physically pains him to arrange the words in that order. Then his eyes cut back to the house. “Now shut the fuck up and let’s find this asshole.”

I grin so hard it nearly hurts. “That is, hands down, the hottest declaration of love I’ve ever received.”

“Work, Milo.”

“Yes, Daddy.”

He goes back to watching an empty driveway. I go back to the nightmare rectangle.

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# TEN
# MICAH



"If you look at that monitor one more time, I'm biting you."

My head stops turning halfway to the screen.

Sage's eyes are still closed. She's curled on her side beneath Milo's cashmere blanket, one bandaged wrist tucked under her chin and Milo Number Two wedged against her chest. The oxygen came off after dinner. Now there's nothing helping her breathe except her own lungs.

Four nights ago, she was gray beneath the chemical burns. Every breath scraped. Every number on the helicopter monitor fell while I sat there useless and listened to the medic say things like maximum flow and neurological damage.

So I risk the bite and check her monitor, needing to see that number for my own comfort. Oxygen at ninety-six. *Good*.

"I saw that," she murmurs.

"Your eyes are closed."

"I can feel your worrying. You do it with your whole personality." Her mouth tips at one corner.

"Guilty," I say. "You gonna bite me now? Give me a matching scar on the other arm?"

"Maybe." Her eyes open. Gray and tired and sharper than they have any right to be after everything her body's been through. Her gaze moves over my forearm, where the scars from the night we met her live.

The knife left a clean line. Her teeth left something messier, and I've never admitted to a single person that I checked it every day that first week

—not for infection. To see if it was scarring. If her mark would linger.

She pats the mattress beside her. “Come here.”

I don’t move. “I don’t want to hurt you.”

“Micah.”

“Your rib—”

“Is cracked because you kept my heart beating.” She says it plainly, like she’s telling me the time. “Come here.”

There’s no version of this where I win the argument, and I don’t want one. I get up and toe off my boots, easing onto the mattress carefully—one knee, one hip, the slow lower of my shoulder to the pillow. She watches the whole production with open amusement.

“You’re very dramatic,” she murmurs. “It’s a bed, not a minefield.”

“Feels like a minefield.”

Then she arranges me. There’s no other word for it. She pulls my arm under her head, tucks her back against my chest with Milo Number Two hugged to hers, and drapes my free hand over her waist, wriggling until she’s close enough and comfortable.

“There,” she says.

“There?”

“Now you can feel it.” She lifts my hand and presses my palm flat against her ribcage—above the break, below the bandage. “In. Out. All by myself. No more machines. Just me. Breathing all by myself.”

Her ribs expand under my hand. Contract. Expand.

My throat closes, and it hurts to swallow.

In the helicopter, I couldn’t even touch her. Every inch of her belonged to wires and medicine and strangers with steady hands. I sat there with foam crusted on my arms and nothing to hold except Knox’s hand and my own terror.

Now she’s warm against the whole front of me, breathing under my palm like it’s the easiest thing in the world.

“What time is it?” she asks.

“Three-oh-seven.”

“Morning?”

“Generally what comes after midnight.”

She wriggles closer. “You’re getting mouthy, Raine.”

“Your attitude is contagious.”

She shifts again and immediately winces. I snatch my hand away.

“Ribs?” I ask.

“They’re attached to my lungs, so yes. They hurt when I breathe.”

“And you put my hand on them?” I try to pull away so I can get off the bed. “I’m getting Shahid.”

“No.” She grips the arm she’s using as a pillow. “You can stay right here and hold me.”

“I’ll stay as long as you need,” I say, and settle back against the pillows, curling around her until there’s no part of her back that isn’t against me.

Her ribs rise. Fall. Rise again. Her oxygen is at ninety-six percent, and my body is behaving like the screen says fifty, because my mind keeps circling questions I don’t want the answer to.

A few nights ago she needed me to breathe for her. Tonight she needs me to feel her breathe. But a week from now? A month? When the bruises fade and the rib knits and Stephen is a name we only say in past tense—what does she need me for then?

I’m the comfort guy. That’s my whole function here. Holden strategizes. Milo solves. Knox protects. Eli commands. And me? I’m the soft place to land. The safe harbor.

Harbors are where ships stop. Not where they stay.

“You’re doing it again,” she murmurs.

“Doing what?”

“Worrying with your whole personality.” She turns her head just enough that I can see the edge of her smile. “Your hand gets tense. Right here.” She presses her fingers over mine, flat against her hips. “Like you’re trying to hold my bones in place. Talk to me, Micah.”

“It’s nothing, baby girl. You should sleep.”

“Micah Jeffrey Raine.” Full name. I’m done for. “I got bricked into a wall a few days ago. Nothing you say is going to be the thing that breaks me. Spill.”

I stare at the ceiling. The machines make their polite, expensive noise. And because she’s Sage, because she’s the only person I’ve ever met who can drag the truth out of me with nothing but patience and a raised eyebrow, it comes out.

“What happens when you’re safe?”

She goes still. “What do you mean?”

“I mean—” My throat works. “This. Us. All of it. It happened in the middle of everything. The beach, the rope, the Kennel, the wall. Every

single milestone of our relationship has blood on it somewhere." I force the rest out before I lose my nerve. "What if that's all it is? Proximity and adrenaline. What if when the danger's gone, you wake up one morning and realize you don't actually need any of us—you just needed us to survive?"

"Micah—" She draws a slow breath, careful with the rib, and when she speaks again her voice drops into that low, direct register that means she's done joking. "We all just agreed to move in together. Permanently. Holden asked us. All of us. Milo even built fuck pit two-point-oh. So let me get this straight—are you having second thoughts?"

"No." It comes out fast, my arm tightening around her before I can soften it. "No. Absolutely not. I love you. I love Eli, I love all of them, I love the mess of it. It's the only thing I want."

"Okay. Then what is this?"

I stare at the ceiling because the ceiling doesn't ask questions I can't answer. "I'm good at this part. The holding. The watching monitors. Sitting up at three a.m. counting your oxygen. But when you're well—when nobody needs a soft place to land—I don't know what I am in that house."

Her fingers press over mine. Patient. Waiting me out.

"Where'd you learn that, Micah?" she asks, gently, like she already knows the answer will hurt. "That love only keeps you if you're useful. You didn't invent that tonight. Is this why you never mention your family?"

"We were poor," I say. "Grocery-list-memorized, lights-off poor. And I was the kid who was good at school. Tests. Grades. I was the golden ticket. Scholarship. Pre-med. I was going to be a doctor and drag my whole family out of the hole, and they loved me loud for it."

I swallow.

"They could tolerate me being bi as long as I kept it quiet. No boyfriends at dinner. Nothing too obvious for the neighbors. The scholarship made the rest of me easier to overlook."

"Then the attack happened." The words come out flat the way they do after years of practice. "I never told them. Not what happened. They saw me stop sleeping, stop going to class, flunk out and lose the scholarship, but they never knew why. All they knew was that the future they'd built around me disappeared."

Her breath moves under my palm. In. Out.

"They said I'd thrown everything away. That I was selfish. That after everything they'd sacrificed, I owed them more than failure without an

explanation.” My mouth twists. “But the only explanation I had would’ve meant handing them the part of me they’d spent years asking me to keep quiet.”

“What happened?”

“Eventually I stopped answering. They never came looking.”

“So when I stop needing protection,” she says, “you’re worried your usefulness will be gone and I’ll stop loving you too.”

I can’t say yes. I can’t say no.

She turns—slowly, wincing, refusing my help—until she’s facing me, eyes wet and sharp. “Micah, honey, I didn’t choose you because you were useful. I chose you because on the worst night of my life you looked at me and saw a person. And if you think that the moment Stephen is in the ground is the same event that evicts you from this bed, I will get Milo to tag you like a migrating bird.”

A laugh breaks out of me despite everything.

“Because we need you,” she continues. “We will always need and love you.” She settles carefully against the pillow without looking away. “Do you want to know what you actually are in that house? Because you’re not just a soft and convenient place to land or the guy who hands out ice packs and tells everyone to drink water.”

I nod, swallowing the lump in my throat.

“You’re the one who *sees* everyone. You notice when Eli’s going quiet before Eli even knows he’s going quiet. You put coffee in Holden’s hand before he’s admitted he’s running on fumes. You know exactly how to communicate with Knox without making him grunt, and you know Milo needs to be busy, so you make space for him to be.”

“He needs a lot of space.” I sniff.

“He does. But you see people for who they are—you see their hearts.” Her fingers trace the back of my hand. “That’s a gift, Micah. One we all love you for. And it doesn’t expire when I heal or when the threat is gone.”

My eyes burn. I blink at the ceiling.

“Your family sucks for making love feel conditional. I’m not going to tell you that shouldn’t fuck with your head.” Her fingers tighten around mine. “But look at the family you have now. We’re a collection of wayward assholes who keep choosing each other.”

“Trauma’s a hell of a way to build a roster,” I say.

“Maybe trauma marched us onto the same beach. Blood made us choose each other. Everything after that was us.” Her voice gentles. “The amazing sex helped.”

She nudges me and a sound breaks out of me—half laugh, half my heart cracked open.

“You’re stuck with me,” she says. “Permanently. And you’re stuck with them. All four of those idiots. God, can you imagine telling Milo you were leaving? He would never allow it. And do we really want to risk him going Gloria on you and planting a ‘memorial garden’ in the backyard?”

“I don’t think we should ever tell him what our favorite flowers are—just to be safe.”

She giggles. “I agree. And because he’s Milo, he’d be extra. Instead of the ‘garden stakes’ there’d be little plaques with your face etched in granite, a weeping angel statue wearing a wig made out of your real hair. He’d make Knox dig the holes and host candlelight vigils every Sunday to remind everyone left that leaving isn’t an option.”

I’m laughing now, wet and helpless, into her hair. That was Milo’s bit, start to finish—she’s been living with him long enough that it’s started to take. “So what you’re saying is that we’re all Milo’s love hostages?”

She nods, laughing. “In the best possible way.”

As the laughter drains out of us, her breathing starts stretching toward sleep. Then she surfaces one more time, eyes finding mine, half-lidded and fierce anyway.

“Hey. You know you were my first, right?”

“First what?”

“My first of all of you.” Her thumb brushes over my knuckles. “Before Holden. Before Knox. Before any of them. On the beach, covered in blood, surrounded by five masked strangers—I looked at you and decided you were safe. I picked you first, Micah. When I had every reason in the world to trust nobody.”

My throat closes. The machines hum.

“So if we’re ranking by usefulness,” she continues, “the guy who got chosen first wins. That’s just math.”

“That’s not math.”

“It’s Sage math. It’s better than regular math. I’ll probably start a podcast.”

“You should do that.”

“That’s what we can do when it’s over.” She yawns into Milo Number Two’s fur. “Milo will produce it. He’ll build us a sound booth with top-of-the-line everything, sourced questionably.”

“Sounds perfect.” I press my lips to her hair. Her breathing evens out. Slows. The rise and fall under my palm stretches long and easy, and I think she’s gone under when her voice surfaces again—thick with sleep, barely above a whisper.

“Micah.”

“Hm?”

“I’m gonna make sure you let me take care of you too.” The words slur at the edges, tangled up in Milo Number Two’s fur. “When I’m better. When this is all over.”

I go still. “Baby girl—”

“No, listen.” She doesn’t open her eyes. Her fingers find mine and hold on, loose and warm. “You take care of everybody. All the time. And nobody—” she yawns so hard her jaw cracks “—nobody ever asks who’s taking care of you. So I’m gonna. I’m gonna learn how to cook your favorite food for when you’re sad. I’ll give you snuggles and make sure you’re always noticed. I always want you to feel like you belong. You own my heart.”

My chest gets so tight it’s difficult to draw a full breath. My eyes burn.

“You deserve to get some of it back,” she murmurs as her grip goes slack. “So I’m gonna give you more, Micah. Promise. Gonna love you so hard you forget what it felt like to think you had to earn it.”

“Sage—”

“Shh. I’m sleeping now.” A pause. Her breathing deepens. Then, so quiet I almost miss it: “You were my first safe thing. Let me be yours.”

And then she’s gone. Actually gone this time—mouth soft, body heavy against me, Milo Number Two squashed between us.

Her hand stays wrapped around mine.

I lie there listening to her breathe and let the words settle without trying to argue them into something smaller.

*You were my first safe thing. Let me be yours.*

I press my face into her hair and close my eyes.

“You’re my safe thing too, baby girl,” I whisper, letting the tears roll onto the pillow.

She talked for over an hour tonight. About Milo. About Holden. About the family that stopped calling me.

Not one word about the wall.

I lie in the dark counting her breaths and start working out how you get a woman to tell you something she’s already decided not to say.

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# ELEVEN
# SAGE



“No strenuous activity for two weeks.” Dr. Shahid signs the discharge papers with zero enthusiasm. “Lungs are clear, but the respiratory lining is still healing.” He hands the paperwork to Holden because apparently I can’t be trusted with my own medical documents. “Avoid chemical exposure, dust, smoke, strong fumes. If she develops a cough, shortness of breath, or chest tightness—”

“We bring her straight back,” Holden says.

“Immediately. Not in an hour. Not after you’ve assessed the situation. Immediately.”

“Understood.”

Shahid turns to me. “The rib will take around six weeks to be fully healed. No heavy lifting. Hug a pillow when you cough.” He pushes his glasses up his nose. “Miss Adams. It’s been an experience.”

“I’ll miss you, Doc McStuffins.”

“Please don’t come back.”

“You owe me so many raspberry Danishes,” I say to Micah, because priorities are important and near-death has only sharpened my commitment to pastries.

Micah smiles, and it’s the first one in days that reaches all the way to his eyes. “As many as you can eat, baby girl. I’ll have them delivered daily.”

“Careful,” I say. “I will financially ruin you with pastry.”

“Please do.”

A nurse appears with a wheelchair, and I immediately object on principle. “I can walk.” Or sprint, honestly. Because after five days in this room I’m crawling out of my skin.

“Wheelchair,” Holden says.

I turn my head slowly and stare at him. “You know, one day, I might recover enough to become inconvenient again.”

“That day is not today.”

“Bossy.”

“Alive.”

It’s annoyingly effective, that one-word answer. Hard to argue with it when a chunk of my recent memories involves coughing up black filth and wondering if my lungs were going to dissolve in real time.

Knox takes the wheelchair from the nurse before I can mount a proper rebellion, and Milo’s already loaded the basket, the duffel, Milo Number Two, and approximately nine hundred dollars’ worth of cashmere into a rolling suitcase he produced from God only knows where.

“I can at least get myself into a rolling seat,” I object, while Knox lifts me off the bed and into the chair like my limbs are merely decorative.

“You weigh nothing,” he says, which isn’t what my objection was about but is apparently what he heard.

“I said I could get in the chair on my own.”

“Heard you.” He moves around to the back and releases the brakes. “Just don’t care.”

*Okay, then.*

Knox wheels me down the corridor, the others falling into formation around me—Holden ahead, Micah and Eli flanking, Milo bringing up the rear with the suitcase rumbling over the marble.

This is the first time I’ve seen the facility properly. I arrived unconscious on a stretcher, and I’ve spent the best part of five days in one room, so the compound beyond my door has been an abstract concept—footsteps in corridors, voices through walls, the occasional glimpse of mountains through a window.

Now, wheeling through the lobby, I see it. Stone floors polished to a mirror shine. Timber beams overhead. A wall of glass that opens onto a courtyard with beautiful landscaping—low hedges, gravel paths, a water feature that would either be relaxing or pee-inducing depending on how much you had to drink that day.

The place looks like somewhere Fortune 500 executives come to dry out, or where diplomats recover from things that never make the news. The fact that it exists, that Odin controls it, that he sent a helicopter to bring me here—the scale of his wealth is something I haven't fully let myself think about until now.

I'm wondering how many zeros are in Odin's bank account when I spot him.

*Speak of the devil.*

He's standing by the main doors like he grew there—charcoal suit, dark hair peppered with a touch of silver, those pale gray eyes that see everything and give back nothing. He's got two men behind him wearing suits and earpieces, the whole production, and through the glass I can see a black SUV idling on the gravel drive, mountain air hazing the treeline behind it.

"Miss Adams." He nods at me. "You look considerably better."

"People keep saying that. I'm starting to think the bar is catastrophically low."

The ghost of a smile. Maybe. With Odin it's hard to tell if it's genuine or if he's forcing the movement to appear polite.

Holden stops. Surveys the scene. "What's going on?"

Odin's eyes sweep the group, then return to Holden. "I don't think it's wise for you to go home."

Knox's hand tightens on the wheelchair handles. I hear the shift in his grip.

"Stephen knows where you live," Odin continues. "And for five days, all of you have been driving between Holden's house and this facility. If he was watching the house, it's not a stretch to think he might have tracked or followed one of you."

Holden's jaw tightens. "You think he knows about this place."

"I think he may. Between that possibility and what Fenrir found, I'm not gambling on your safety when we have no actionable information." Odin glances toward the glass doors. "You need somewhere Stephen doesn't know exists."

"So where do we go?" I ask, because someone needs to be direct here and I'm too tired to dance around this.

Odin reaches into his jacket and produces a folded piece of paper. Handwritten. Coordinates, a rough map, a gate code.

“A cabin. Private. Remote. Fully stocked. It’s not much. You’ll be roughing it, but it will do as a safe house for now.” He hands the paper to Eli. “It has no public connection to any of you or to me. It’s accessible only with these coordinates, and no flight path has ever been filed to or from it.”

“How long?” Eli asks.

“As long as it takes.”

“I’ll need to notify the school,” he says, brow furrowed. I can tell he’s worried about his students, the butterfly habitat . . .

“I’ll have my people arrange a substitute for your classroom,” Odin says. “The school will be told you have a family emergency.”

“A family emergency,” Milo repeats. “That’s technically true when your family is a murder polycule with a surveillance problem.”

“Jesus Christ,” Micah mutters.

“What?” Milo says. “If we’re doing forced trauma exile in the woods, the out-of-office language should be accurate.”

Eli unfolds the paper, scans it once, then again. His face doesn’t change much, but I know him well enough now to catch the tiny shift in his mouth.

“How remote is this place?” he asks.

“Deeper into the mountains,” Odin says. “Limited access. No nearby neighbors. Cell service is weak and inconsistent, which in this case is a feature, not a flaw.”

“Any cameras on the property?” Holden asks.

“Exterior only,” Odin says. “My system. Encrypted. Local storage, no cloud access. You’ll have the feed on a closed device when you get there.”

Knox hasn’t spoken. He’s standing behind my wheelchair with his hands locked on the grips, and every time Odin opens his mouth the chair shifts a quarter inch under me.

In true Knox fashion, he hasn’t said much about how finding me bricked into a wall affected him. But that doesn’t mean he isn’t hurting. And a hurting Knox doesn’t want to hide. He wants to hunt.

“Knox,” Odin says. “I understand your objection.”

“I didn’t make one.”

“You didn’t need to. It’s in your posture.” Odin meets his eyes. “Leaving isn’t retreating. It’s repositioning. Stephen succeeded because he could afford to be patient. Take yourselves out of every location he knows and he’ll have to search. Movement creates mistakes.”

Knox says nothing.

“Comforting,” I say.

“It shouldn’t be.” Odin glances toward the glass doors, toward the idling SUV, the mountains sharp against the sky. “You’re vulnerable during transitions. Discharge is predictable. Predictability gets people killed.”

I stare at him. “Jesus. You really know how to sell a vacation.”

“I’m not offering comfort, Miss Adams. I’m offering time.”

Holden lets out a slow exhale. “He’s right.” He turns to the group, and I watch the cop slide into the space where the boyfriend was standing five seconds ago. “Stephen’s had access to our lives for weeks. The house, the diner—everywhere we go, he’s already been.”

“So we stop going there,” Micah says quietly.

“So we stop going there.” Holden’s eyes move to Odin. “I want the house swept. Trackers, cameras, listening devices. If he’s been inside—”

“My team’s already on it,” Odin says.

I look down at my hands. Bandaged wrists. An IV bruise blooming purple across one knuckle. It wasn’t that long ago that we sat around the dining table and agreed on a future. Fuck pit 2.0. Milo measuring walls for a TV the size of a garage door. We were building something.

And a man who photographs unconscious women gets to take it by existing.

“Hey.” Milo crouches beside the wheelchair, light-brown eyes seeing straight through my mask. “The house isn’t going anywhere, kitten. It’s only a building. The polycule is portable.”

“The polycule is portable,” I repeat. “That’s going on a mug.”

“Merch ideas. See? Exile is already good for us.”

I reach up and back until my fingers find Knox’s hand on the grip. I pry one finger loose and wrap my hand around it, and after a second his fingers turn over and swallow mine.

“Knoxie.”

“I don’t like it,” he says. Simple. True.

“I know.”

“But I’m coming.”

“Never doubted it.”

Eli pockets the coordinates. “What about our clothes? We’ll need—”

“Already handled. The SUV is stocked. Changes of clothes, toiletries, food for the drive. My people will deliver anything else you need tomorrow. You get in the vehicle and you go.”

“Our cars—” Holden starts.

“Stay in the facility lot. The SUV is registered to a shell and has no connection to any of you.”

Holden’s jaw works, and I can see how much he hates this, the loss of control—his car, his house, his operational independence, all of it being managed by someone else. But he’s also the man who checks the logic before he checks the ego, and the logic is sound.

“Fine,” he says.

“Great,” Milo adds. “Love being kidnapped by a benevolent Norse god before noon. Do you think we’re off to Valhalla, Folkvangr, or Hel? Wait.” He narrows his eyes on Odin. “Unless you plan to drown us? If so, let me know because I’m not keen to spend eternity in Ran’s Hall.”

“You know he’s not literally a god, right?” Micah whispers.

Milo stares at him for a moment, then nods slowly. “Yes?”

Odin ignores him and gestures toward the SUV.

Holden steps closer to my chair. “Who’s driving?”

“My man will take you to the first switch point,” Odin says. “From there, one of you takes over in a different vehicle.”

“Why?” Holden asks.

“In case you’re being followed from here.”

There’s a beat where nobody says anything, because that answer is both infuriating and correct.

“Shotgun,” Milo mutters.

“You’re not calling shotgun in an evacuation,” Micah says.

“I’m absolutely calling shotgun in an evacuation. Civilization exists so that rules can endure under pressure.”

“No one sits shotgun,” Odin says. “The rear windows are tinted for a reason. Stay in the back.”

Milo’s face falls. “Spoilsport.”

Before anyone can say more, Odin steps closer to Holden. He lowers his voice—not enough to exclude the rest of us, but enough to signal a shift in register. “I’m still waiting on the complete Gable file.”

Holden glances pointedly at me in the wheelchair. “I’ve been a little preoccupied.”

Odin follows his gaze. His pale eye flickers, just once.

“Understandably,” he says. “That doesn’t change what I need. As soon as you’re settled.”

Holden nods.

Odin steps back and adjusts his cuff.

Knox apparently decides the discussion is over and starts moving. He wheels me toward the open door, and the others close around us automatically, a moving wall of muscle and vigilance and tailored menace in various states of casual dress. It should feel insane, being escorted like this. Excessive, even.

Instead, it feels safe enough to make my throat tighten.

I love these men. But *this*—the constant threat detection—I could do without.

The suited guy by the door steps aside when Knox reaches him. Up close, the SUV looks less like a car and more like something designed to survive a low-grade war. Blacked-out windows. Heavy frame. Clean enough to gleam, anonymous enough to disappear.

Outside, the air hits me. Pine and cold dirt and the thin, sharp clarity of altitude. Mountains on every side, dark green and silent, the sky a flat white overcast that makes the treeline look like a wall. After five days of recycled hospital air and antiseptic, it's so clean it hurts my lungs.

"Easy," Micah says, one hand hovering at my elbow as Knox turns the chair.

"I'm in a wheelchair, not active labor."

Milo leans in as he passes. "Debatable. You've been verbally dilating for twenty minutes."

I snort before I can stop myself, and it hurts just enough to remind me my insides are still tender. Micah's face tightens instantly.

"I'm fine," I say.

"You made a pained sound."

"I made an offended sound." I offer him a coy smile. "Give me a few more days and I'll make an aroused sound."

Micah's cheeks go pink.

"I'm really looking forward to those aroused ones," Milo says, bouncing on his toes.

Knox lifts me again. His forearm crosses the bad rib and I hiss through my teeth, and this time I don't bother protesting. His hands are warm and careful in a way that doesn't match his face at all. He handles me like I'm something breakable and expensive. I like that about him.

He settles me onto the leather bench seat and makes sure my legs are in before he climbs in after me, taking the spot beside the door like a barricade. Micah slides in on my other side immediately, all soft concern and restless hands. Eli takes the far back corner. Holden gets in from the opposite side after a quick scan of the gravel drive, and Milo folds himself in next to him with a suitcase balanced against his knees and commentary already loaded in the chamber.

The door shuts with a thick, airtight thud.

The outside world vanishes.

For one strange second, I sit there breathing cold air and staring at the tinted window, at my own pale reflection ghosted over the mountains and the facility compound behind us. A few days ago I went out to dinner with someone I thought was my best friend. Now I'm in a mobile panic room with five violently codependent men and a lifetime's supply of trust issues. If this was a game, I'd have maxed out the Survival and Inventory categories and left Sanity deep in the negative.

The suited driver starts the engine and hits the privacy screen as he eases us down the gravel drive, tires crunching slow, the facility shrinking in the rear window. I glance back, expecting to see Odin, but he's already gone. Dissolved into the building like he was never there at all.

No one talks for the first minute. Holden's inventorying his surroundings—the mirrors, the road, the treeline. Knox stares dead ahead, jaw in a murder line, hands fisted and close to his thighs. Beside me, Micah sits so close we're practically fused together. Eli stares out the closest window, deep in thought.

"Music," Milo says, like a light bulb lit up over his head. He reaches for the console panel and pops the radio on, scanning stations until he lands on some decades-old alt rock. "Cabin in the woods playlist, engage." He grins. "But if banjos start, it's Holden's fault."

Holden ignores him, eyes fixed on the rear window like he's expecting the devil himself to pull up in a Ford Focus.

Micah leans in, his voice for me only. "Do you want to sleep?"

"No," I say. "If I sleep you'll all do a secret meeting and decide to fill my pillows with sedatives and I'll wake up two months later in Canada with a new set of fingerprints."

He chuckles low. "That's just basic safety protocol, baby girl."

I open my mouth to deliver a witty retort, but he ducks his head to mine and catches my mouth with his. It's soft, the way he does it. Almost nothing, just his lips and breath, warm and slow, until I relax and let him in. Only then does he drag his tongue across the seam, coaxing, steady, and I'm gone, absolutely gone, half of me floating and the other half bricked in by pure want. I kiss back harder, and he makes a sound, this tiny, desperate exhale like I'm something he needs. When he pulls away there's a smear of melancholy and longing left on my lips, and the taste of him settles at the back of my throat.

Micah's thumb glances along my cheek, a one-two swipe before he turns away, just in time to catch Milo staring, eyebrows way up. Knox watches it all, face flat but eyes tracking it with a weird stillness. It makes the inside of the SUV feel two sizes smaller.

I'm not actually sure what the fuck to do with all of this. I want to laugh, or cry, or pick a fight just to have the pressure go somewhere. Instead, I look at Knox, who still hasn't moved, and I tap the outside of his thigh with my hand.

"Hey," I whisper, just loud enough for him to hear over the old Pixies song playing up front.

He glances down. I tip my head, and after a second of frozen consideration, he slides his arm along the top of the seat behind me. Like an invitation. I lever myself sideways and curl up, making my body as small as I can, and press my face into the space between his jaw and collarbone. He smells like cedar and aftershave and the unspoken terror of the last five days. His arm closes around me and holds, a perfect lock, like I'm a part of his own quietly loaded system.

His heartbeat is slow under my ear. Steady. The metronome I didn't know I needed—nothing like the last one, the scrape-tap-scrape-tap of bricks and mortar. This one says *here, here, here, here* and asks for nothing in return.

Micah's fingers find the back of my neck, tracing once down my spine before settling between my shoulder blades. A touch that says *I'm here too* without making me move.

"This is normally the part where I say something about wanting to get involved," Milo whispers from the seat beside Holden, across from us. "But you're still recovering and I know that would be inappropriate. So . . ." He mimes zipping his lips and locking them shut.

Holden glares at him, but Milo just shrugs.

With a shake of his head, Holden returns to watching through the back window. Eli keeps guard through the side window, both of them stoic.

The road winds deeper into the mountains. The paved surface gives way to gravel, then to something rougher—packed dirt and loose stone, the SUV rocking gently over ruts. The trees crowd closer, taller, blocking the sky. Cell signal disappears somewhere around the second switchback. Milo checks his phone, shakes his head, and puts it away without comment.

We climb. The air gets thinner. The world gets quieter.

Milo turns the radio down.

I close my eyes against Knox’s throat and feel the car carry us deeper into the silence, away from the compound. Away from the coast and the diner and the booth where a man pretended to be my friend. Away from the wall and the foam and the dark. Away from everything except the five heartbeats surrounding me and the slow, green silence of a world that doesn’t know our names.

And I wonder if we’ll ever get to go back.

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# TWELVE
# KNOX



That is *not* a cabin.

When the SUV rounds the final switchback and the trees fall away, a structure that is three stories of timber, stone, and glass appears, cantilevered over the edge of the ridge. Floor-to-ceiling windows catch the last of the afternoon light. A wraparound deck overlooks the valley.

“This is what Odin thinks is roughing it?” Micah asks, staring up at the deluxe retreat.

“This cannot be classed as a cabin,” Fury says from beside me, her face pressed to the tinted glass. “My god. Did we take a wrong turn?”

Eli pulls the SUV into a gravel circle with a stone path leading to the front door. It’s heavy timber, with iron hardware, built like the entrance to a fortress.

I scan the area. Cameras cover every corner. One visible road in. No neighboring roofs.

Defensible.

Excessive, but defensible.

Eli kills the engine.

“Dibs on the biggest room,” Fury says. “I almost died in a wall. So I think it’s only fair.”

Holden snorts. “No one was gonna fight you, wildcat. You always get the biggest room.”

She bats her eyelashes. “Because I’ve almost died twice now?”

Holden leans across the seats and presses his forehead to hers. “Because we fucking love you.”

Fury smiles as he presses a kiss to her temple and releases her. I open the door and stretch my legs, taking another look at our surroundings before I lift her out of the car.

While the gate leading into the property required a code, a discreet camera beside the front door scans my face. The lock clicks open before I’ve finished reading the housing. I lower Fury to the ground, handing her off to Micah, and go in first. At this point it’s muscle memory, a habit built into the subconscious part of my brain. With one hand on my weapon, I sweep the entry. Foyer. Whatever this room is.

*Seriously, Odin?*

The foyer opens into a great room with ceilings that go up thirty feet. Exposed timber beams thick as my thigh line the room, and a stone fireplace tall enough for me to stand inside without ducking dominates one wall. The far wall is floor-to-ceiling glass, framing the valley like a painting. Underfoot are wide-plank hardwood floors polished to a soft sheen.

There’s a sectional sofa the color of charcoal that could seat all six of us with room to spare. A coffee table made from a single slab of live-edge wood. Bookshelves built into the walls—these seem filled with an eclectic mix of battered paperbacks and dog-eared hardcovers, so surprisingly not staged. The art on the walls I don’t recognize but can tell costs money because the frames alone look handmade.

I clear the room. Check the sight lines. There are two exits visible from the front door—the main entrance and a set of French doors off the deck.

*Good.*

Behind me, Fury is still beside Micah, both of them frozen in the doorway.

“Roughing it,” she repeats, shaking her head.

“I wonder how we’ll cope,” Micah adds.

Milo pushes past them, abandoning the suitcase in the entry. He stands in the center of the great room, turning in a slow circle with his arms spread wide.

“No. No, no, no!” He points at the fireplace. “That is hand-laid river rock. That mantel is a single beam of reclaimed Douglas fir. Is that—” He

stops. Tips his head toward the ceiling. “Is that a Bose system built into the ceiling? Into the ceiling, Knox! He put surround sound in a safe house!”

“Keep moving,” I say, because I need to clear the rest of the first floor.

He doesn’t keep moving. He finds the dining room that has a table built to seat ten. It’s solid timber, with a chandelier made from antler and wrought iron hanging above it. He barges through the house. I follow, cursing him.

We clear the study, which holds a leather desk, floor-to-ceiling bookshelves, and bronze reading lamps.

“What *is* this place?” Milo whispers, shaking his head slowly.

I’m checking window locks in the mudroom when I freeze. There’s a whimper, followed by a strangled grunt.

I race back toward the kitchen, skidding to a halt in the doorway.

Holden is standing at one corner of the kitchen staring at a magnetic strip mounted to the wall. On it is a full set of Shun and Miyabi blades arranged by size and function. Each blade gleams under the cabinet lighting.

He picks up the chef’s knife. Tests the weight. Turns it. Runs his thumb a centimeter from the edge, checking the grind. Sets it down. Picks up the santoku. Does the same thing.

“Don’t say it,” he says, without looking at me.

“I thought you were in distress.”

“What can I say? Milo must be rubbing off on me because I swear I’m about to orgasm over some freaking knives.”

I shake my head, looking around the space. It’s professional grade, of course. Marble countertops run along every wall. There’s a six-burner range with a copper hood, double ovens, a built-in griddle, and a warming drawer. The island is eight feet long with a waterfall edge and bar seating for five. At the rear is a walk-in pantry through a glass door, stocked to the ceiling. There’s a wine fridge. A second fridge. An espresso machine with more buttons than Milo’s laptop.

Holden returns the santoku to the magnetic strip. His eyes move to the range. The griddle. The hood. The double ovens. I watch his expression cycle through denial, resistance, and what might be the early stages of love.

“I’ll inventory the kitchen,” he says. “See what we have in the way of provisions.”

I cock an eyebrow, glancing meaningfully toward the fully stocked pantry.

Holden ignores me.

Micah appears in the doorway, Fury leaning on his arm. His eyes land on the range and go wide.

“Is that a—”

“Six-burner with a griddle?” Holden nods. “Yes.”

“And those knives—”

“Shuns. Full set.”

A moment of silent communion passes between two men who have found their church.

“I’ll prep dinner,” Holden says.

“I’ll sous,” Micah replies.

“Agreed.”

I head upstairs.

The second floor has three bedrooms, each one more excessive than the last. The first two have queen beds, en suite bathrooms with rain showers, good linens, and mountain views. The third has a king and a private balcony.

I’m checking window latches on the landing when Eli’s voice comes from the end of the corridor.

“Uh. Knox?”

I head down the hall. He’s standing in a doorway at the far end, one hand on the frame, the other at his side. His mouth keeps starting something and abandoning it.

I look past him.

The room is smaller than the bedrooms, windowless, with motion-activated low ambient lighting set into recessed panels along the ceiling. The walls are upholstered in dark leather. There’s a padded bench along one wall, a St. Andrew’s cross mounted in the corner, and a glass-fronted cabinet displaying an assortment of implements—restraints, blindfolds, crops, things I can identify and a few I can’t—all arranged with the same curated precision as the kitchen knives.

A sex room. Odin put a sex room in the safe house.

The cross is bolted through the stud, not the drywall. The cuffs on the top shelf are lined and quick-release—the ones we buy for the club, because

the cheap ones take skin. The room is well stocked. And from the smell of it, cleaned.

"This is—" Eli starts.

"Yeah."

"I mean, I love it. But Odin has a—"

"Yep."

A beat. His throat works. His ears are turning red.

"Don't tell Milo," he says. "We'll never get him out of here."

"Don't tell Milo what?" Milo's voice sails up from the staircase. Footsteps, rapid, getting closer. "What did you find? Is it a pool? Please tell me it's a pool. I saw what looked like a—"

He appears in the hallway, running toward us like a kid on vacation in a hotel for the first time. He wiggles between us and stops.

Silence.

We bear witness to a full three seconds of Milo-silence.

"Oh," he says, practically vibrating. "Oh, this changes *everything*."

"It changes nothing," Eli says, ears now fully crimson. "We're here for safety. This is a safe house."

"It certainly is." He reaches over and pulls a condom from a jar near the door. "Very, very, very safe." He grins. "And very sexy."

Micah's voice floats up from the base of the stairs. "What's going on up there?"

"Eli found Odin's sex dungeon!" Milo calls back.

"It wasn't hidden!" Eli protests. "I opened a door."

From downstairs, Micah's voice again, warm with amusement: "Eli, should I be worried about how quickly you found that room?"

"I hate all of you," Eli mutters, only half serious.

Milo moves through the room. "Is that Italian leather on the walls? Who upholsters a sex room in Italian leather?" He runs a reverent hand down the padded wall. "Do you think the leather is structural or decorative? It's both. It's both, isn't it? Odin, you beautiful Nordic deviant."

Eli pinches the bridge of his nose like he's trying to compress his own skull.

I leave them to it. Milo will inventory every drawer in that cabinet before dinner whether anyone wants him to or not, and Eli's embarrassment is survivable.

The third floor is one room.

Master suite. King bed angled toward a wall of glass. A second fireplace—gas, remote ignition—set into a stone surround. Another deck wrapping the corner of the house. En suite with a soaking tub big enough for four, skylight above it, and a shower with more heads than a hydra.

I clear it. Closet. Bathroom. Under the bed, out of habit more than expectation. Window locks solid. The deck door has a secondary bolt. The drop below is thirty feet onto scree—nobody's coming up that way without climbing gear and a death wish.

Excessive, but defensible. Odin's whole brand.

A chime sounds behind me.

Soft. Musical. Completely out of place in a room I just cleared.

I turn, hand going to the small of my back, and watch a section of the walnut-paneled wall beside the fireplace slide open with a hydraulic whisper. Light spills out. Inside, in a wood-paneled elevator car, stand Micah and Fury. My hand lowers.

Fury's eyes go wide when she sees me. "Knox! There's an elevator!"

"I see that."

"It goes all the way down to the garage," Micah says, guiding her out with one arm around her waist. She's upright but moving carefully, one hand pressed absently to her ribs.

"Oh, wow," she says, looking around the room. "Odin has a really cool murder cabin."

"Safe house," Micah and I say in unison.

Footsteps sound on the stairs. Milo appears first, then Eli, then Holden. Now we're all up here, six people in one room, doing the slow collective turn like tourists.

Milo makes it three steps before he stops dead. "No. No, this is the one."

"The one what?" Holden asks.

"The room. The room-room." He crosses to the wall of glass and presses both hands to it like a kid at an aquarium. "We're above the treeline. You can see the entire valley. Do you understand what sunrise is going to do through this window? It's going to be a religious experience. I'm going to be moved against my will."

"It's a window," Eli says.

"It's a cathedral." Milo spins to face us, arms wide, and I already know what's coming. "We should all sleep in here. All six of us. We drag

mattresses up for the floor, there's an elevator so logistics are handled, and we wake up to that view together like the world's most heavily armed sleepover."

"No," Holden says.

Flat. Final. The way he says everything that isn't up for debate. He's already moving, easing Fury down onto the edge of the bed. She lets him, which tells me she's feeling worse than she's admitting.

"Holden—"

"Sage needs rest. Real rest. Not five people breathing on her all night." He pulls the duvet back and fluffs the pillows. "She gets this room. She gets a door that closes. Whoever she wants in here, stays. Everyone else sleeps on the second floor."

"I do want everyone," Fury says. "But I also want to sleep without somebody elbowing my cracked rib at three a.m. So—compromise. Space until I can breathe without pain. Then we renegotiate sleepover terms."

"Democracy in action," Micah says.

Milo opens his mouth. Closes it. Looks at the view. Looks at the bed. I can watch him recalibrating in real time, hunting for an alternative.

"Fine," he says finally. "Fine. But I want it on record that the second-floor bedrooms have significantly better access to the sex room, so technically I'm being upgraded. This is a promotion."

"Nobody's using the sex room," Holden says. "She's on doctor's orders. Two weeks."

"Two weeks of living twenty feet from a sex room I'm not allowed to use." Milo presses a hand to his heart. "This is my villain origin story. Remember this moment when I finally snap."

"You snapped years ago," Eli says.

"And yet I keep finding new depths."

I tune them out and do a last pass. Window locks. Deck bolt. Sight line from the bed to the door. The elevator panel—I find the manual lockout on my second look and engage it. Nobody comes up that shaft tonight without Fury's say-so.

When I turn back, Micah's got Fury settled against the pillows. He leans down and smooths the hair off her forehead. "Sleep, baby girl. We'll be right downstairs."

"Okay, I'll nap a little," she says, eyes already closing. "But if Milo tries to play in the sex room without me, I want video footage to masturbate to

later.”

“That is super hot, but I would never play sex dungeons without you, kitten,” Milo says.

Holden kisses her temple. Eli finds the panel and dims the lights. They file toward the stairs. I stay. Crouch until I’m level with her.

“Elevator’s locked out,” I tell her. “Opens from this room only. Windows are solid. Deck door’s got a second bolt. You’re safe.”

One eye opens. “Are you reciting my fortress specs?”

“Yes.”

The eye closes. Her hand finds two of my fingers. “You’ll be downstairs?”

“I’ll take a look around the grounds first. But then I’ll be downstairs. Or the porch. Nowhere else.”

“Okay.” A breath. “Knoxie. I really like this bed. Tell Odin I’m keeping it.”

“I’ll have him invoice Milo.”

Her fingers loosen around mine as she drifts off.

I stay until her breathing evens out.

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# THIRTEEN
# KNOX



Downstairs, the kitchen sounds like a church service. Cabinet doors. The whisper of a knife through greens. Holden has a wine glass going. Micah's reading pantry labels and gathering ingredients.

Milo's at the island with a tablet. "Camera feed, as promised. Eight exterior, zero interior, encrypted, local storage." He spins it so I can see the grid of trees and gravel. "Odin undersold it. This is genuinely good work and I'm annoyed about it."

"Where's Eli?"

"Second floor. Claimed the bedroom farthest from the sex room, which is a choice he'll have to live with." He reaches into the suitcase and produces a small white unit. "Also. Kitten monitor."

Holden looks up from the cutting board. "You packed a baby monitor."

"I packed a two-way audio monitor with night vision that I'm calling a kitten monitor because it will stop us all from creeping outside her door. One unit in her room, one down here. She wakes up, she talks, we hear. Nobody's alone in a strange house unless they want to be." His voice stays light, but his hands are careful with the thing, and what's under the joke isn't hard to read.

Nobody argues.

"Give it here," I say. "I'll set hers."

"Eat something first." Micah slides a wine glass across the counter at me. "You've been clearing rooms for an hour."

I slide the wine back. Holden sets a plate in front of me—cheese, bread, olives—and points at it without looking up from the shallots. Micah passes me a glass of water instead.

I eat standing. Bread, cheese, three olives, in that order, because food is fuel and this isn't a meal—it's a rest stop. Micah watches me inhale the plate with an expression that's half disapproval, half recalculating how long the food will last us.

"Perimeter," I say.

"Now?" Holden glances at the window. "You've got maybe twenty minutes of light."

"Enough to walk it once."

"I'll come with—" Milo starts.

"No." I take the tablet off the island, check the camera grid, and hand it back. "Watch the feed. If you lose me, call. We'll mark where."

He opens his mouth to argue, thinks better of it, and pulls the tablet back into his lap. "Rude. But fine. Surveillance duty accepted."

I take the flashlight from my pack, step onto the deck, and start walking the property line.

The gravel drive goes out one way. I follow it to the gate—heavy steel, code entry, camera covering the approach from both directions. Good.

I test the fence line where it meets the trees. The ground drops off hard on the south side, scree and rock, same as the master deck's drop. Nobody comes up that way. North side slopes toward the service road, easier grade, but the trees are dense and the underbrush is loud. Anyone pushes through that, we hear them before they're fifty yards in.

I check each camera against the angle Milo's tablet showed. Eight exterior. The two flank units cover the deck overlap. The one on the gate is clean. The one facing the treeline has a blind pocket where a low branch glows white in the infrared and blocks part of the view. I'll cut it back tomorrow.

I circle the foundation. Windows. Every one of them. Latches, frames, the glass itself. Thick, tinted, probably treated. When I put my palm flat to the pane and look in, I can't see more than a vague warm glow at most angles.

By the time I complete the loop, the light's gone. The mountains take the sun and give nothing back. The ridge goes black against black.

I click on my flashlight.

From outside, the house looks dark. Every window—every one of those floor-to-ceiling sheets of glass—is blacked out from this side. The whole structure reads empty. A dark timber shape on a dead ridge. You could stand twenty feet from the kitchen and not know a single lamp was on inside. Whatever glass Odin used, it renders the interior invisible from out here. Perfect.

I come up the deck steps and open the door. Only then does light flood out of the mudroom like the house has been holding its breath. Warm, bright, the whole great room lit and glowing, every window spilling gold onto the deck boards. The effect lasts one second before I step in and the door seals behind me, and the house goes back to being invisible.

The smell hits me right away. Garlic. Butter. Shallots gone soft and sweet in a pan. Wine reducing down to something rich. The smell doesn't belong in a safe house, it belongs to a home.

I stand in the mudroom for a second and let it register. Outside: black ridge, cold wind, a perimeter walked with a flashlight and a gun. Inside: *this*.

The kitchen glows warm. Holden's at the range, sleeves rolled, wooden spoon in one hand, wine glass in the other. Micah works beside him at the island, and they've fallen into a rhythm that doesn't need words—Holden reaches, Micah's already moved the pan. Micah opens his mouth, Holden hands him the salt before he asks.

Milo's on a barstool, feet hooked in the rungs, eating cheese straight off the block with a paring knife, watching them like it's television.

"Perimeter report," he says, without looking up. "Haiku form."

"Fences good. One blind spot in the treeline cam. I'll cut a branch tomorrow."

"That's eighteen syllables of disappointment."

Holden glances over. "Anything?"

"No."

He nods and goes back to the pan. That's the whole conversation.

Something in my chest loosens a notch. I've stood perimeter in a dozen places—motels, warehouses, back seats of cars watching doors—and the inside was always just the thing you protect. This is the first time the inside smells like something I want to come back to.

I take the stairs with the monitor unit in my hand.

Fury’s asleep exactly how I left her. Curled on her side, hand tucked under her chin, blanket hugged against her chest. I set the unit on the nightstand, angle the lens to cover the bed, and key the audio. Downstairs crackles through, then Milo’s voice, too loud: “Test, test, one, two—”

“Working.”

“Knox! Say something sexy for the record.”

I mute it. Then I stand there longer than I need to. Just listening to her breathe—slow, even, no catch, no rattle. The thing she almost stopped doing five days ago, doing itself like it was never in question.

Then I go down, because the food smells ready and sitting at a table with these men is, apparently, something I do now.

Eli’s surfaced at some point. He’s setting the big table—six places, actual napkins, like we’re people who live here. Milo pours wine. Holden plates food that belongs in a restaurant: chicken in cream sauce, potatoes crisped in oil, bread still steaming.

We sit. All five of us. The sixth chair stays empty, waiting.

Halfway through, the monitor on the counter crackles.

“Is that a baby monitor? What the hell, guys? And is someone cooking?” Fury’s voice comes through sleep-rough and suspicious. “I can smell garlic from the third floor. You animals are eating without me.”

Every fork stops.

Milo’s face lights up like Christmas came armed. “The kitten monitor!” He lunges for the unit and presses talk before anyone can stop him. “Kitten! You have discovered the kitten monitor!”

“Milo.” Her voice comes through tinny. “Why is there a baby monitor on my nightstand?”

“So nobody has to lurk outside your door. You’re welcome. We love you. Holden made chicken.”

A pause. Static. “I’m coming down.”

The elevator chimes from the hall off the mudroom. I’m on my feet before the doors part.

Fury steps out wrapped in a blanket, her hair flattened on one side. She looks like a shipwreck. She looks better than she has in five days.

“You started eating without me,” she says to Holden. “I trusted you.”

“You were unconscious. Food can be reheated.” He’s already pulling out her chair. “Sit.”

She sits. Micah plates her half a portion and sets it in front of her. Milo moves her water glass two inches closer to her hand.

“This smells amazing,” Fury says.

She spears a piece of chicken and eats slowly. We all watch, then pretend we weren’t when she looks up.

“It’s good,” she says, taking another bite.

Five forks start moving again.

“So,” Milo says, sipping his wine. “While you slept, I inventoried the dungeon. There’s a cabinet drawer labeled ‘sensory.’ Another labeled ‘impact.’ A third one just says ‘miscellaneous,’ and it’s locked. So I won’t know what’s in there until I pick it.”

“Nobody’s opening miscellaneous,” Holden says. “This isn’t our house.”

“I vote pick it,” Fury says. “I want a full report on what’s considered miscellaneous in a sex dungeon drawer.”

“It’s a room,” Eli says. “Not a dungeon.”

Fury and Milo look at him. “Same thing,” they deadpan in unison, and she points her fork at Milo in approval. He glows with it.

Dessert is Milo’s fault. He finds vanilla bean ice cream in the freezer, holds it up like a relic, and Holden—who cannot help himself—pulls shots from the espresso machine and pours them over the top. Affogato in a safe house. Excessive. Perfect.

Fury takes three spoonfuls and declares it the best thing she’s tasted since the wall, and nobody laughs because it’s too soon, and then everybody laughs because she laughs first.

I take my coffee black and wonder when she’ll talk about the wall without turning it into a joke.

“I’m going to sit on the deck,” she announces, pushing up from the table. “I want to see the stars.”

Micah starts to rise. I put a hand on his shoulder, and he settles. This one’s mine.

I walk her out slow. The night hits cold and clean, altitude-thin, pine on the wind. The ridge is just an absence now, and overhead the sky is doing something the coast never allows—stars in layers, deep enough to fall into. No light for miles. Nothing watching.

I settle her into the big chair by the rail. Blanket over her legs. Another one around her shoulders. She tolerates it, which means she’s tired.

“It’s quiet out here,” she says.

“Yeah.”

“Like, really quiet. No ocean. No traffic. No shouting.” She pauses. “Well. There’s some from Milo, but that’s it.”

From inside, we can hear him talking to whoever will listen. A muffled, *“Is there a generator? There has to be a generator. I refuse to believe Odin put us somewhere without backup power.”*

She chuckles.

We sit there for a while. The air cools and she pulls the blanket tighter.

“Knox?”

“Yeah.”

“Are you mad?” The question is practically a whisper.

I turn to look at her, but her eyes stay forward, on the trees darkening into shadow. “About?”

“About everything.” She’s avoiding looking at me. “About Jamie. About me letting him in. About me pushing so hard to have my freedom.” Her voice drops. “I treated the way you all protected me like a burden. Like you were all suffocating me. And the one time I got what I wanted, I ended up bricked into a wall.” She hiccups and sniffs.

“Fury.”

“I should have listened. I should have—”

“Fury.” I turn to face her. She doesn’t turn, so I do it for her—one hand on her jaw, gentle, tilting her face until she has to look at me. Her eyes are glassy, the tears threatening.

“There’s no part of this that’s your fault.”

“Knox—”

“None of it.” My thumb traces her cheekbone. Her skin is cool from the mountain air. “He fooled all of us. You. Me. Holden and his background checks. Milo and all his tech shit. You wanted a friend. That’s not a crime.”

“But if I’d just—”

“No, Fury.” I hold her face steady. Both hands now, her whole jaw cradled in my palms. She looks so small between my hands. “Listen, I’m not gonna lie to you—I never want to hold your lifeless body in my arms again.”

The memory of it is carved into me now. Her weight against my chest. Her mouth open and not breathing. The sound Micah made when he thought—

I cut the thought off before it finishes.

Her lower lip trembles. “I know.”

“I don’t think you do.” My hands slide from her jaw to the sides of her neck, thumbs resting under her ears. “Because if you did, you wouldn’t be standing out here apologizing for wanting a life.”

The blanket slips on one side. I pull it back up around her shoulders.

“You get to want normal shit,” I say. “Dinner with friends. Space. Freedom. Air. You get to want all of it. And I’m gonna make sure you have it.”

“But what if somebody uses that against me again? What if we never catch Stephen? What if we do, and the next asshole who wants to hurt one of you realizes I’m the easiest way in?”

“Then I kill them. Easy.”

“Every time?”

“Every time.”

“What if that’s all our lives become, Knox? You watching every door. Holden checking every name. Milo putting trackers in everything I own. All five of you building your lives around keeping me alive.” Her fingers twist in the blanket. “I know I’m important to you. That’s what makes me useful to people like Stephen.”

“Fury—”

“He came *for* me. But every time he does, he gets *through* me too. He hurts all of you.” Her voice breaks. “I’m not worth five men turning their whole lives into protecting mine.”

“You’re worth it. My life *is* yours.”

Her eyes flick down. “I’m not an asset you were assigned, Knox. There’s no medal of valor if you jump in front of danger to save me.”

“No.” I drag my knuckles down her cheek. “But you’re the beating of my heart.”

For a second, she just stares at me.

Then her whole face changes.

Her mouth parts. Her breath catches. Like I’ve hit a wire under the skin I wasn’t aiming for. I don’t take it back. I don’t know how.

I meant it.

Somebody else would put a joke on it. I don’t have one.

“Knox,” she whispers.

Then she breaks.

Her face crumples against my chest. Her hands fist in my shirt, and she shakes while I hold her. When she finally looks up, her eyes are wet but steady.

“I love you,” she says.

I lean down and kiss her.

She fists my shirt and pulls me closer, all cold fingers and desperate mouth. I brace her against me and let her take what she needs until the trembling eases.

Trust.

She gives it to me with her whole body.

I’ve protected people before. With Fury, I want to be where she feels safe.

When we break apart, her cheeks are wet but her eyes are sharp.

“You need rest,” I say, swiping my thumbs over her damp cheeks.

“I’ve been resting for five days.”

“You need real rest. Not hospital rest, no matter how fancy that place was.”

She opens her mouth to argue and I scoop her up before the first word lands. One arm under her knees, one behind her back, the blanket still draped around her shoulders. She makes an outraged sound.

“This is ridiculous. I can walk.”

“I know you can.”

“Then put me down.”

“No.”

“Knox.”

“Fury.”

She glares at me for three seconds and gives up. We both know she likes it.

I carry her inside.

“Fury’s going to bed,” I announce.

“It’s eight thirty,” Fury protests. “I napped before dinner.”

“Fury’s going to bed,” I repeat.

Milo looks up from his current mess across the coffee table. “Night, kitten.” He scrambles to his feet and crosses the room and I lower her just enough that he can reach. He cups her face and kisses her forehead, then both cheeks, then her nose. “Sleep well. Milo Number Two is already in position. He’s been briefed.”

Micah is next. He sets his book down, comes to us, and takes her hand, his thumb running over her knuckles. Then he leans in and kisses her mouth, soft and brief. “Goodnight, baby girl. I’ll keep my door open so you can call out if you need me.”

“Goodnight, Micah.”

Eli is by the fireplace. I carry her over and he straightens from the mantel, the firelight catching the amber in his eyes. He looks at her face—the tiredness, the lingering traces of tears on her cheeks—and something passes across his expression that he doesn’t try to hide.

He tucks a strand of hair behind her ear. Leans in. Kisses her, slow and aching, his hand resting on the side of her neck. When he pulls back, his forehead touches hers.

“Goodnight, little savage.”

“Night, Eli.” Her voice is barely there.

Holden stands from the table. Crosses to us and puts his hand on her face, tilts it toward him, and looks at her with complete, unwavering certainty.

“Goodnight, wildcat.” He kisses her once. Firm, brief, decisive. A stamp. “We’re all here. Nothing gets through that door.”

“I know,” she says.

He nods at me. I carry her up the steps two at a time because there’s no way I’ll fit in that elevator. Fury grumbles under her breath, refusing to admit she’s already melted halfway to sleep in my arms.

Her head lolls against my shoulder as I round the landing and step into the hallway. The lights in the cabin are low, every surface warm and golden, shadows soft at the edges.

I toe open her bedroom door and carry her straight to the bed. The sheets are cold, but I can fix that. I lay her down gentle, keeping the blanket wrapped around her so the air doesn’t bite. She tries to glare at me but the effect is ruined when she burrows down into the comforter, the muscles in her jaw unlocking all at once.

“I don’t need coddling,” she says, but her eyes are already sliding shut.

“I know.”

“Stop looking at me like that.”

“Like what?”

“Like I’m breakable.” I kneel next to the bed.

“Never. You’re the toughest person I’ve ever known. It’s why I call you Fury.”

She opens one eye at me, defiant. “Aren’t you supposed to put me in pajamas and read me a story, or whatever?”

We both look at the pile of new clothes, the silk pajama set Milo picked out sitting right on top. It shines in the lamplight, a faint pink glow against the dark wood.

I pick them up. “You want these?”

She bites the inside of her cheek, considering. “Yeah. But don’t tell Milo I said it.”

When she sits, I lift her arms and peel the hoodie off slow, careful not to catch any of the dressings. Underneath, her collarbone flares sharp in the lamplight, the skin marked by the pale bands of tape and deeper bands of bruise. She’s wearing a simple cotton bra, faded from too many washes.

“You want this off?”

She nods, and I reach behind her, unclasping it with two fingers. My hands are steady. I don’t think she notices. Still, even through the exhaustion, she manages a faint smile and shrugs the straps down, letting the fabric fall to her lap. The bruises on her ribs are worse than I remember—green and yellow, blooming up her side and over her shoulder. I set the bra aside and reach for the pajama top.

“Don’t you wanna touch me?” she whispers, sitting there topless and shivering, teeth chattering.

I pause, pajama top in hand, the air getting heavy. Not sexual. Not entirely. Her eyes find mine and there’s nothing careful left in them.

“I always want to touch you,” I say. “But you need to rest.”

She shakes her head, small but intent. “I don’t want to sleep. Not yet.” A tremor runs along her jaw, a muscle clenching, but she keeps her eyes on me and won’t look away. “Every time I close my eyes . . .” She doesn’t finish it, but I know. I was there. I saw what was left when we tore the bricks away.

“You don’t have to sleep.” I set the pajama top aside and take her hands. I kiss her knuckles, her fingertips, the soft skin between her thumb and palm until her breathing slows.

“Then touch me, Knox.” She takes my hand and rests it against her breast. “Please.”

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# FOURTEEN
# SAGE



Knox’s hand doesn’t move. Palm warm against my breast, fingers perfectly still, like starting means losing the thread of his control entirely.

“Fury.” One word. A warning and a surrender at the same time.

“Yes.” I cover his hand with both of mine. “Touch me like you know I’m alive. I need to feel like I’m still here.”

His breath goes ragged. That’s all the warning I get before his mouth is on mine—not careful this time, all that banked restraint finally giving way. His free hand slides into my hair and cradles the back of my skull like he’s holding something he already lost once.

“You tell me,” he says against my mouth. “Anything hurts. Anything.”

“I’ll tell you.”

Then his hands are everywhere, and I’m not cold anymore. He peels the blanket away, lays me back into the pillows, and maps me with his palms—skirting the bruises on my ribs, the healing burns, learning the difference between my body and my injuries like they’re two separate countries. His mouth follows. My throat. The scar at my neck, which he kisses like it isn’t evidence. My sternum. All the soft places between the damage.

When he reaches my hips, he pauses and looks up.

“Don’t stop.”

He doesn’t. He hooks his fingers into the waistband of my sweats and draws them down slow, easing the fabric over the burns on my legs like he’s handling something sacred. I lift my hips when he needs me to. My

underwear goes with them, and then I'm bare beneath him—bandages and bruises and trembling, but not from cold anymore. Not even close.

His gaze travels the whole length of me, slow and hungry and barely held.

"Tell me where not to touch."

"Nowhere," I say. "Just start slow."

He settles between my thighs, and the sheer size of him there should crowd the bed, should make me feel cornered. Instead it's like being sheltered. His hands slide under my hips, lifting me a fraction, careful of the ribs, and then his mouth is on me.

The first touch of his tongue rips a sound out of me I didn't plan. My back arches off the mattress before I remember the rib, the burn of it flaring. But I don't care, *I don't care*, because for the first time since the wall my body is producing a sensation that isn't pain, isn't fear, isn't the phantom grit of sticky foam against my palms.

"Knox—"

He hums against me, and the vibration makes my thighs shake around his shoulders.

Slow is an understatement. He works me in long, deliberate strokes, circling the places that make my breath stutter, learning me through his tongue while his hands anchor my hips in place. Every time the pleasure spikes too sharp and my hips jerk, he gentles, waits, starts again. Reading my body the way he reads a perimeter. Methodical. Thorough. Missing nothing.

I fumble down and find his head, gripping what I can of his short hair, and he growls low in his throat without stopping. The sound travels straight through me.

"Tell me," he says against my skin, and his voice is wrecked.

"More. Don't stop. Please—"

He gives me more. Two thick fingers slide into me, slow and deep, curling until I cry out, and his tongue stays on my clit, relentless and patient at once. The pressure builds, and I hear myself saying his name, saying yes, saying words that don't make sense anymore.

"Fuck. That's it. Make me come, Knox. Make me—"

I come apart with his name in my mouth and his hands holding me down like he's keeping me from moving so much I hurt myself. The orgasm

rolls through me slow and devastating, and I feel every second of it from somewhere outside the numbness I've been carrying since the foam.

"Better?"

I nod as I lie there breathing, staring up at the ceiling. "Much better."

"Good." He stands, straightens, and turns toward the en suite.

"Where are you going?"

"Getting something to clean you up." He's already moving, all that coiled strength pointing itself at a task. "Then you're going to bed."

"No."

He stops and looks back at me.

"I want you." My voice doesn't shake. "I want you inside me. Please."

For a long moment he just stands there, and I watch the war move through him—want against worry, the size of him against his fear of hurting me.

"Fury, I'm a lot to take when you're well." His voice is low, rough at the edges. "We can wait a little longer for that."

"I don't want to wait." I push up on my elbows, ignoring the pull in my ribs. "I told you I'd tell you if I needed to stop. This is me telling you—I don't need to stop. I just need you."

He doesn't move.

"Please, Knoxie."

That does it. He tugs his shirt over his head, dropping it on the floor before returning to the foot of the bed. His hands go to his belt.

The sound of that buckle opening is the best thing I've heard in days. I shift to the edge of the mattress and help him, fingers working the button, dragging the zipper down. The moment he's free, I wrap my hand around him—thick, heavy, more than my fingers can circle—and stroke once, twice, watching his jaw clench.

"Fury." There's a note of warning in his tone.

"I know." I lean forward and press my mouth to his stomach, feeling the muscles jump under my lips.

He kicks his jeans aside. Then his hands are under my arms and he lifts me like I weigh nothing, settling back against the headboard with me in his lap.

"You control the pace," he says, voice gravel-rough. "I'll take your weight. Anything hurts, you stop."

"Okay."

He guides me over him, one hand gripping himself at the base, the other spanning my hip. I sink down slow—so slow—and the stretch of him steals every thought out of my head. My mouth falls open. There's no room for anything but the feeling of him filling me, almost splitting me in half, my body stretching to its limits to take him.

"Fuck," I gasp. "I can feel all of it."

"Breathe," he murmurs. "You're gonna hurt yourself if you don't go slow."

I breathe. I take more. Inch by excruciating inch. Until there's nothing left to take.

We're flush together, and I sit there impaled and shaking, his hands bracketing my hips like he's holding something that might shatter. He bows his head against my chest. He's breathing like he's run miles, and he hasn't even moved.

"Fury." My name sounds dragged out of him.

"I'm okay." I roll my hips, testing, and the sound he makes vibrates through his whole chest. "See? Okay."

"Slow."

"You keep saying that." I lift, sink back down, and the drag of him inside me blanks my mind clean. "But you're not stopping me."

"Can't." His grip tightens. "Should."

"Don't you dare."

I find a rhythm. Careful, rolling, nothing that pulls too hard at my injuries, and every pass of him against that spot inside makes my breath break apart. His hands stay at my hips, taking most of my weight while I move. He lets me lead. Lets me use him, take from him, set every slow stroke.

This is what I needed. My body moving because I want this.

I do. His eyes are dark, blown, fixed on my face like there's nothing else in the room worth seeing. One of his hands slides up my spine, careful of every bandage, until it's cradling the back of my neck. My pulse kicks under his thumb before I can stop it—the old reflex, the one I've been told not to punish myself for. It comes. It goes. His hand doesn't move and neither do I.

"You're here," he says.

And I get it—this isn't dirty talk. It's the same thing I asked for. *Touch me like you know I'm alive.* He's saying it back.

“I’m here,” I whisper.

“Again.”

“I’m here, Knox.”

He kisses me then, deep and slow, and I keep rocking against him as the pleasure coils low and tight. His thumb finds my clit and circles once, twice, and the rhythm of everything—his mouth, his hand, the thick drag of him—winds me up until I’m gasping against his teeth.

“That’s it.” His voice is pure gravel. “Take it. It’s yours.”

I break with my forehead against his, saying his name into the inch of air between us. The orgasm is different this time—deeper, rolling up from under all the damage, and it doesn’t stop. Wave after wave while he holds me through it, murmuring things I can barely catch. *Good. I’ve got you. There you are.*

Then his whole body goes rigid beneath me. He groans, low and helpless, face pressed into my neck, and I feel him pulse inside me as he finally lets go—this mountain of a man, shaking apart in my arms because I asked him to stop holding back.

“Fury. *Fuck*.”

For a long time, neither of us moves.

Eventually he shifts, gentle, and lays us both down, side by side. His hand spans my belly, thumb stroking the one patch of unbruised skin near my navel.

“Hurts anywhere?”

“A little. Worth it.”

“Fury.”

“I’m fine, Knox.” I press my lips to his throat and feel his pulse still hammering. “Better than fine. I’m here. I’m with you.”

Alive.

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# FIFTEEN
# MILO



The kitten monitor has night vision, two-way audio, and—because I have standards—1080p resolution. Which is how, at nine o'clock on our very first night, I've just watched Knox and Sage have emotionally devastating sex in high definition.

Let the record show that I had pure intentions. This was just supposed to be a way to make sure our girl keeps breathing through the night without five grown men rotating shifts outside her door like haunted furniture.

The fact that I just watched our girl get worshiped by a man built like a load-bearing wall is simply a byproduct of my own foresight.

They're beautiful together. That's the thing about a polycule—sometimes watching your girlfriend with one of her other boyfriends is the single hottest thing in the known universe, and also you feel like a pervert at a very exclusive art film.

"What are you doing?"

Holden's voice, directly over my left shoulder. I nearly drop the receiver down the back of the sofa.

"Watching my favorite show," I say, without turning around, because turning around constitutes an admission of guilt.

Plus, he'd see my erection.

And the hand that's on it.

He comes around the sofa. Looks at the screen. And pauses. One beat longer than a disinterested man would pause. His jaw does that sexy

tightening thing as his eyes track Sage lying flushed and boneless beside Knox, Knox's hand splayed across her stomach.

Then he reaches down and switches it off.

"Not for you."

"Hey!"

"No."

"That was a shared resource—"

"It's a safety monitor, Milo."

"It's a kitten monitor, and kittens were being monitored—" I deploy the pout. Full lower lip. I've weaponized this face before and I'll do it again. "You are the worst daddy dom ever."

"I'm not your daddy dom."

"But you love me."

A half-smile tugs at the side of his mouth. "I said that in a moment of weakness."

"Because you're weak for me?" I grin. Because I can read this man like a redacted document, and I know he loves me a whole bunch. So when he crosses the space between us in two strides and palms my erection through my jeans, I'm not entirely shocked.

I do gasp though.

"Holden." My voice comes out strangled. "We have an audience."

My eyes cut across to where Eli and Micah are sitting together in front of the fire. Full view of what we're doing. Micah gives a finger wave.

Holden leans in, mouth at my ear. "Then you better get upstairs so we can do this properly."

I'm off the sofa before my brain finishes processing the sentence. My body held a vote, and it was unanimous.

"Don't mind us," Micah says, his legs draped across Eli's lap. "We'll just stay down here and keep watch on the place while you two fuck."

"Thank you, Micah," I call as I corral Holden toward the stairs. "You're a treasure."

I drag him up the stairs by the belt loop like a frisky, compliant hostage. Holden lets me for approximately three steps before his hand closes on the back of my neck, and then somehow I'm the hostage being marched down the second-floor hallway at a pace that constitutes a federal crime of hotness.

"Which room?" I ask.

“Mine.”

“Eli took the one farthest from the sex room, which means yours is closest, which means I’m legally allowed to call that fate.”

“Call it whatever you want.” He opens the door, pulls me in, and kicks it shut behind us. Then his mouth is on mine and my whole operating system blue-screens and reboots straight into Holden’s lips.

This is not the stakeout kiss. There’s no panic management to stop my brain from eating itself. This is Holden Cross kissing me because he wants to, and the difference is catastrophic in my favor.

“Clothes off,” he says against my mouth. “You. Then me.”

“See, this is why I love you. Everyone else gets tyranny in their plus-one packages, but I get a consensus-based approach.”

“Milo.”

“Naked, got it, enthusiastic compliance—” But my hands are already on his shirt because they move faster than his discipline. I hook my fingers inside his collar and he bites my lower lip, just enough to shut me up. Which is wildly unfair and also exactly what I asked for.

He strips me efficiently. Shirt off. Button. Zipper. Jeans pushed down. No wasted motion, because Holden undresses a man the way other men file paperwork. “Commando,” he says, looking down where my jockstrap usually lives.

“This isn’t a Russian nesting doll. We don’t need multiple layers.”

His mouth kicks up in a smirk. Then he pulls his own shirt over his head, and I get one whole second of Holden’s torso—scarred, lean, tattooed, and criminal—before he puts both hands on my waist and walks me backward until my thighs hit the bed.

“Up.” He boosts me onto the mattress and climbs over me like I’m a structure he’s clearing. “Good?”

“Extremely.”

His mouth goes to my neck. My jaw. The corner of my mouth. Then his hips drop and his cock slides against mine between us, skin to skin, and my voice does something I will deny under oath.

“Oh—okay. All right. Frotting. We’re doing frotting. I researched this during my bi-awakening and it seems very—”

“Shut up, Milo.”

“Shutting up.”

He rocks. Slow, deliberate pressure, both of us caught between his pelvis and mine, and every pass sends a white-hot stripe up my spine. One of his hands pins my hip. The other brackets my head against the pillow.

“You feel that?” he asks, low, right in my ear.

“Feel is a down payment—I am going to invent a religion around your dick—”

He drops his weight and grinds, and the religion gets founded immediately.

I make a sound that would embarrass a man with shame. Fortunately, I packed none.

“Denomination pending,” I manage. “The holy book is a work in progress—”

Holden silences me the only reliable way—he kisses me, deep and filthy, tongue sliding against mine while he rolls his hips again, and the joke dissolves on my tongue into something close to a whine.

Every pass drags my cock against his, trapped and slick between our stomachs, the friction perfect and maddening. No preparation. No logistics. Just pressure and heat and Holden’s body moving over mine like he’s conducting an interrogation and my dick is confessing everything.

“Holden.” I break the kiss to breathe. “Copernicus called—he wants to know what it’s like revolving around—”

He bites my neck. Hard. “Finish that sentence and I stop.”

“I recant. Science is dead. You’re the center.”

His laugh grazes my collarbone, and I feel it in my marrow, because rationing is Holden’s whole personality and I just got change back.

He shifts down, lines us up, and clamps one hand around both of us—as much of the two of us as his fist can manage—kneading us together from root to tip, pre-cum slicking the slide. The head of his cock bumps mine on every upward stroke, an obscene little handshake, and my brain short-circuits into static.

“Together,” I gasp, very enlightened. “We come together, like a sync, a duet, an extremely exclusive club—”

“Milo.”

“Sorry. Locking it.” I lock it by biting his shoulder, which, honestly, is a loophole, and his whole body tightens like I tripped an alarm.

He speeds up. The hand, the hips, everything—ruthless rhythm, his mouth back on mine, swallowing every noise I make. My heels dig into the

mattress. My orgasm climbs fast, stupid fast, and I warn him with a broken hum against his tongue because apparently vocabulary has left the building.

“Don’t care,” he mutters. “Go.”

“Fuck!”

My cum stripes our stomachs while he keeps moving, and I’m still mid-shudder when he groans low against my mouth and lets go—hot cum pulsing between us. His forehead drops to mine, the two of us a mess of sweat and heaving breath.

“That,” I finally manage, voice demolished, “was the single most efficient use of skin-to-skin contact since the invention of skin.”

His chest vibrates with what I’m choosing to categorize as laughter.

“Also, for the record,” I add, tracing the line of his spine with fingers that haven’t stopped trembling, “you switching off the kitten monitor because it’s ‘not for me’ while pinning me to a mattress within the hour is the exact brand of hypocrisy I find irresistible.”

“Milo.”

“I’m just saying. Daddy dom adjacent. The job is yours if you want it.”

His hand slides to the back of my neck, thumb dragging once through the sweat there, and the joking stalls because his eyes do the thing—the same thing from the car, the I can’t lose you too thing. The tell he’d flag in an interview room, on his own face.

“You’re in the circle, Milo,” he whispers. “Stop auditioning for the position.”

My brain loads twelve responses at once and rejects all of them.

Because the bit isn’t an *audition.*

I don’t run it so they’ll keep me around. I run it because there are two settings in my head and only one of them is habitable. When I’m talking, I’m a guy. An extremely irritating guy with strong opinions about thread count and a working knowledge of Norse afterlife logistics. When I stop talking for long enough, I’m the thing that killed fourteen men in four minutes, helped clean up the evidence, and didn’t feel any of it until Sage touched me at the funeral home.

So I keep the noise up. Constantly. Like a generator. Like one of those machines that beeps in a hospital room so everybody knows the person is still in there.

“That’s a really shitty thing to say to a man while you’re lying on top of me and we’re both covered in jizz,” I manage, trying to deflect. But it

comes out wrong. Too quiet. My voice wobbles a little because sincerity is the one kink I've never been able to get into.

Holden doesn't move. Just waits me out, because he's a cop and waiting people out is literally his whole skill set.

"I wasn't auditioning," I say.

"Then what were you doing?"

Ah . . . he wants the truth that's standing in the doorway of my mouth like an awkward party guest.

"If I stop, *he's* what's left."

Holden goes very still above me.

"He?" he says.

"Yeah." I look at the ceiling instead of at him, because this is significantly easier said to plaster. "The one who showed up at the warehouse. It's me. I'm still driving the bus. But that me doesn't have a personality, Holden. He doesn't have a bit. He's what I am when all the bad stuff leaks out." My hands won't stay still. "Everybody thinks the jokes are the mask. They're not. They're the lid."

For a long moment there's nothing but his breathing and my deepest regret over letting out even a shred of honesty. Then he clears his throat.

"That night. In the bathtub." His thumb hasn't stopped moving at the back of my neck. "You were folded up at the end of it with the shower still running. I reached over you and shut the water off. Micah took your top half, I took your legs, and we got you onto the mat. Then I was so fucking scared for you that I called your mother for help."

"Bet that made you even more scared," I quip, and a tear drops on my chest.

Holden Cross is crying on me.

Not, like, a lot. It's one tear. Maybe two. But this is a man whose emotional range runs from "grouchy" to "slightly less grouchy," and there is currently water falling out of his face onto my pecs, and I'm watching it happen with the same awe I'd have witnessing a solar eclipse.

"Hey." My hands find his face before my brain approves the mission. "Detective Cross doesn't leak. This is a design flaw. I'm calling the manufacturer."

"Shut up, Milo." But he doesn't pull away. His forehead drops to mine and stays there, eyes shut, breathing.

“You want to know what she said to me?” His voice is wrecked in a register I’ve never heard before. “Your mother. When I called her in the early hours of the morning because you wouldn’t talk and I didn’t know what to do. She said, ‘My son had better be breathing.’ I told her you were. But you needed help. There was this silence. Then she just said, ‘How bad?’ and then she showed up to sedate you.”

I don’t want to hear this. I want to hear it more than I’ve ever wanted anything.

“She told us the warehouse wasn’t your first break. That your brain moves so fast that sometimes there’s a crash and a reset. That the humor and the chaos are your coping mechanism. That when you crash you think you’re a burden.” His thumb drags through the tear on my chest, smearing it into my skin like he’s working it in. “She also said that you trust me. More than the others.”

My throat closes around all of my jokes and swallows them.

“She needs to stop reading my diary.”

Holden huffs—one short, ruined laugh—and it shakes loose something in my chest I was keeping on a high shelf.

“She doesn’t read your diary,” he says.

“You’re right. I don’t keep a diary.”

“She reads you. Because she knows you. Better than the rest of us.”

“Well . . . she *is* my mom.”

“And we’re your family,” he counters. “We should know you, Milo. All of you. The good, the bad, the noisy, *and* the quiet.”

Family. The word lands weird, like furniture I’m not sure I’m allowed to sit on.

“The noisy and the quiet,” I repeat. “Sounds like a deeply unsuccessful folk duo. They open for Simon and Garfunkel and get booed.”

“Milo.”

“I know, I know. Deflection. It’s my primary export, I’m the world’s leading supplier—”

“Milo.” His fingers slide into my hair and hold. “Try it.”

“Try what?”

“The quiet.”

*The quiet* . . .

That’s the problem. Eli gets his monster tattooed on his back, literal ink-based acceptance. Sage gets the knife and the name and the whole savage

redemption arc. My monster doesn’t do anything cinematic. He just sits very still and waits. And when the noise gets too much, too intense, he comes out so I don’t have to feel anything, which is way more crazy and significantly less marketable.

“I don’t like quiet,” I whisper, meaning it.

“I know.”

Holden shifts off me—about time, because the jizz situation has officially crossed from “hot evidence” into “structural concern”—and drags me with him so my head ends up on his chest. His heart is going faster than I expect. I take petty comfort in that.

“Try it. I’m here. You won’t be alone.”

That shouldn’t make my eyes burn. I blame the altitude.

So I do it. I shut up.

The first ten seconds are fine. Twenty, and my skin starts humming, the jokes queuing behind my teeth like commuters at a gate with no plane. Thirty, and the warehouse slides into frame—blood on concrete, knives swinging, music playing. The version of me that revels in the destruction and leaves others to deal with the consequences.

My whole body goes rigid.

Holden doesn’t say breathe. He just breathes—slow and audible, loud enough to copy—and lets proximity do the work. His thumb moves once over my skin. *Here*.

And the warehouse me doesn’t take the wheel. He sits there, small, one passenger among many, while the women in the files keep their own faces instead of my brain loading Sage’s into every frame. Progress. Apparently.

“He’s not so bad to hang around,” I whisper, “when I’m not alone.”

Holden’s mouth presses to the top of my head, and it’s not a kiss so much as a signature.

“Also,” I add, because the lid is sliding back into place and we both need it to, “just so we’re clear, I am now pillow-talking with a cop while coated in forensic evidence. It’s crystallizing.”

“I’ll get a washcloth,” he says, rolling away from me. I make a bereft sound at the loss of contact.

When he returns, he cleans us both up with an efficiency that shouldn’t be as intimate as it is, then he pulls the duvet over us and—this is the part that actually breaks me—tugs me back against his chest like it’s automatic.

Like it’s reflex. Like I’ve been sleeping there for years and he’s just correcting a temporary error.

“For the record,” I murmur into the dark, “if I ever go quiet for more than five minutes, someone should probably come check.”

“Someone always will.”

“I love you, Holden.”

“I love you too.”

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# SIXTEEN
# SAGE



Holden's arm tightens around my waist before I'm fully awake. His chest is warm against my back, breath slow in my hair, and for three whole seconds I let myself have it—the heavy sprawl of his arm, the steady drum of his heart, the impossible luxury of waking up feeling safe inside a dark room.

Then the wall of glass in front of the bed shivers as the tint bleeds out of it.

It drains from the edges inward, darkness rolling toward the frames like water circling a drain, and then the entire window goes clear. Morning light detonates through the room. The valley snaps into focus and I freeze with the sheet pooled at my waist. Knox has checked the glass from outside and swears it stays black, but my body doesn't care. It feels exposed.

I drag the blanket over my head and groan. "We *have* to figure out how to turn that off."

Ten days in the safe house and every morning still starts with a mugging by daylight. None of us have been able to figure out how to adjust the window settings—or even where they live.

There's no panel in the wall, button on a table, or remote in a drawer.

Believe me, we've looked. Milo spent an entire afternoon dismantling a light switch that operated, to everyone's astonishment, a light. Eli read the router manual cover to cover like it might confess something. Knox offered to shoot the glass, which—given this glass—would only have made the bullet feel bad about itself.

Under the blanket, Holden hauls me back against him, throwing one heavy thigh over both of mine like he's anchoring me to the mattress.

"Smells like pancakes for breakfast," he says, nuzzling the side of my hair.

"That's my shampoo."

"You don't have pancake-scented shampoo."

"I have vanilla-scented shampoo, and that's basically the same thing."

He chuckles. "Except this smells like cooking with butter and batter and fruit. So it's either pancakes or it's waffles."

Ten days with nothing to do but exist in a cliffside mansion, and we already have routines. Micah cooks. Knox walks the perimeter. Eli reads on the deck while *watching* the perimeter. Milo hunts Stephen across every device he can coax online. Holden lies beside me without sleeping and pretends it counts as rest.

Stephen has given us nothing.

Just like the last time he attacked me, the man has gone dark. No sighting. No messages. No digital trace. Nothing.

I'd like to hope that means he's tucked his tail and run. But I already know better. Stephen has proven he'll just lie low until he finds a new opening. Our job is to be ready for him when that happens.

No more letting our guards down.

"I really just wanna stay in bed and sleep all day," I grumble, turning so I can bury my face against his chest.

His hand moves to the back of my neck, thumb finding the rope scar there. He does that sometimes—touches it like it's a case he intends to solve retroactively.

"Then stay," he says. "I'll bring you pancakes in bed."

"I'd rather just have you in bed," I murmur, tilting my face up and kissing him against his jaw. He lets out a hum of pleasure and captures my mouth with his.

The monitor on the nightstand crackles.

"Good morning, sleeper cell." Milo's voice arrives bright and caffeinated and entirely too cheerful for whatever hour this is. "This is your captain speaking. Micah has prepared breakfast. Repeat: pancakes are imminent. Blueberry, because somebody—" a pause, stage-whispered, "—it was me, I did that—left them sitting in the middle of the counter with a note

that said ‘blueberry pancakes for breakfast in the morning.’ Also, Frank says hi.”

When Odin’s people brought our things to the cabin, Frank—the goldfish we won at the fair—was with them. He’s currently living on a windowsill in the kitchen because Milo insists he needs a view.

Holden groans into my hair.

“Also,” Milo continues, “the gate camera caught a sick-looking deer at four a.m., which I’ve named Stephen because I plan to go hunting later.”

Holden reaches across me and jabs the talk button. “Leave the deer alone.”

“The deer and I have unfinished business,” Milo replies. “He looked at the camera. Directly at it. He knows things.”

“Breakfast in eight minutes,” Micah calls from somewhere behind him. “And I’m not cooking anything he shoots.”

The monitor clicks off. Holden exhales through his nose, and I feel the debate happen behind his eyes—stay or duty—before his arm loosens.

“We should go down,” he says, like it physically costs him.

“We should.” Neither of us moves.

I give myself sixty more seconds against his chest. Count his heartbeats. Inventory my body the way I’ve learned to—ribs a dull ache instead of a knife, bruises gone yellow-green at the edges, lungs filling all the way now. Ten days of healing. Ten days of cooked breakfasts and overprotective men walking the perimeter while Milo narrates trail-cam footage like it’s prestige television.

I feel better. The nightmares aren’t so bad anymore. But I’m still bracing. Still waiting for the next brick to go in the wall.

Peeling myself out of bed, I pull on Holden’s sweatshirt, and we take the elevator down together.

The kitchen smells like butter and blueberries. Micah stands at the griddle in an apron, sweatpants, and nothing approaching a hurry, stacking pancakes tall enough to require balancing skills. Frank does laps in his bowl on the windowsill, living his best view-having life. Milo sits at the island in yesterday’s clothes with two laptops open and a coffee gone cold at his elbow, which means he hasn’t slept. Again.

“There’s my baby girl.” Micah crosses to me, kisses my temple, and sets a plate in front of me with extra blueberries arranged into a lopsided smiley

face. “They’re not anatomically shaped the way Milo’s pancakes are. But they taste good.”

“Thank you, chef.”

Eli comes in from the deck with his book tucked under one arm, and Knox appears through the mudroom door two minutes later, exactly on schedule.

“Still quiet,” Knox reports. And that’s the whole report. Same as yesterday and all the days before that. He takes the stool beside me and steals a blueberry off my pancake’s face—the left eye—and he grins at me, which for Knox is full-on flirting. My ovaries explode.

“Perimeter’s clean, gate’s clean, and Stephen-the-deer is still at large,” Milo announces, looking up from the screen. “The other Stephen continues his streak of aggressive nonexistence. I’ve got scripts running on every alias, every account, every crumb of the Mercer-Davis trail, and the man has apparently achieved digital nirvana. It’s offensive. It’s personally offensive to me.”

“He’ll move eventually,” Holden says, pouring coffee. “They always move.”

“Yeah, well.” Milo stabs a pancake with his fork. “I’d like him to move on my schedule for once.”

I eat. The pancakes are perfect because Micah made them, and Micah doesn’t know how to make anything less than perfect. For a few minutes it’s almost normal—six people and a goldfish in a glass house on a mountain, bickering over breakfast like the world outside isn’t continuing without them.

Milo swirls his last bite through the syrup and stands, dripping fork still in hand like a scepter. “Right.” He shoves the syrup-soaked bite into his mouth, forcing us all to wait while he chews and swallows. “I’m going to hunt through the storage sheds for actual hunting equipment. If Stephen-the-deer is going to taunt my cameras at four a.m., I’m taking him down.”

“He’s a deer,” Holden says, without looking up from his coffee. “A *harmless* deer.”

“That’s what he wants you to think.” Milo points at him. “Odin stocked the pantry, stocked the wine fridge, stocked the sex room—no way a man that thorough left empty sheds. There’s equipment in there. Ropes. Tools. Possibly a ranged weapon.” His eyes gleam. “Stephen-the-deer is about to learn a lesson.”

“Leave the deer alone,” Knox says, even though, historically, telling Milo to leave *anything* alone has never worked.

“I won’t be *touching* the deer,” Milo says, not technically disagreeing.

Holden mutters under his breath.

Micah catches my eye as Milo vanishes through the mudroom like a man on a mission.

The door clicks shut.

“He’s not actually going to hunt a deer, right?” Eli asks, slowly.

“Right?” Micah echoes.

Nobody answers. We all look at Knox. Knox shrugs, which from Knox means he has no intention of intervening and possibly finds the whole thing entertaining.

“He’s exhausted and running on caffeine and revenge,” I say. “Maybe someone should be out there with him? I’m not sure it’s a good idea for him to go out hunting alone.”

“There’s no hunting equipment,” Knox rumbles into his coffee. “No rifles. Any firearm here is on one of us or locked up.”

I glance at Holden. “Do we need to be worried for Stephen-the-deer? Or for Milo?”

Holden sets his mug down and doesn’t pick it back up. “If he finds weapons, we’ll hear something. If not, the deer is probably safe.”

“Unless he’s engineering a non-lethal trap,” Eli adds. “I’ve seen him build a potato cannon out of a shop vac and PVC pipe. The deer doesn’t stand a chance.”

“Poor deer,” I say. “Are we sure it’s sick?”

“Everything looks sick under night vision,” Holden says. “So who the fuck knows.”

Knox grins again and resumes demolishing his pancakes, obviously finding this whole situation incredibly entertaining.

Fifteen minutes later, a chainsaw coughs to life outside.

Every person in the kitchen stops moving.

The engine chokes, catches, then roars loudly enough to make the glass hum. Frank darts to the far side of his bowl.

Holden closes his eyes. “No.”

Knox tilts his head, listening. “Chainsaw.”

“Thanks for the mountain subtitles,” Eli says sarcastically.

The engine climbs into a furious whine. Somewhere beyond the deck, wood splinters.

Then the saw cuts out.

“TAKE THAT, STEPHEN!” Milo yells.

A tree cracks.

The sound rolls through the forest, followed by a crash heavy enough to make the coffee in my cup ripple.

Holden sets his mug down. “For fuck’s sake.”

The chainsaw starts again before the first tree has finished settling.

“I’m going out there.” Holden pushes back from the island.

“He knows how to use it,” Knox says.

“I don’t care. He hasn’t slept.”

Knox looks at Milo’s cold coffee. Then at the closed mudroom door.

He gets up too.

Through the kitchen windows, I catch a flash of orange moving between the trees. Milo has apparently found not only a chainsaw, but forestry chaps, a helmet, and protective goggles. He looks like a safety demonstration being conducted by someone who should not currently be trusted with demonstrations.

“At least he’s wearing the gear,” I say.

“That’s not comforting,” Holden mutters, pulling on his jacket. “That means he plans to keep going.”

He and Knox disappear through the mudroom.

The saw bites into another tree.

Eli picks up his book and coffee. “I’m going back to the deck where I can maintain visual contact without being asked to help hide a forestry-related death.”

“Coward,” I call him.

“Correct.”

He steps outside.

The kitchen settles around the noise. Micah carries plates to the sink, and I keep eating while Milo attacks the mountain in bursts—engine, wood, silence, engine again.

The first tree was funny.

The second is still fairly funny.

By the third, we’re getting concerned.

“Seems all the trees are named Stephen,” Micah says, watching through the window as Milo screams the name again.

“Do you know when the last time he slept was?” I ask, looking at the open laptops and the abandoned coffee.

“He’s always awake whenever I am, but that’s not unusual.” Micah’s mouth tightens, but he turns on the faucet and starts rinsing plates.

The saw screams again.

I swirl a piece of pancake through the syrup and listen to Milo murder trees. This is how Milo handles things—loudly, dramatically, and with enough equipment to require a safety waiver.

But the cold coffee and yesterday’s clothes keep pulling at me. So do the laptops, the deer, the light switch, and now the trees.

The saw sputters out mid-whine.

Through the glass, I watch Knox lift the chainsaw out of Milo’s hands one-handed, like confiscating a toy from a toddler. Milo’s arms go up, and even from here I can read the outrage in his shoulders. Holden stands in front of him with his arms crossed, saying something that makes the helmet droop.

For a moment, the quiet feels wrong.

“Talk to me,” Micah says.

“I’m fine.”

“Sage.”

“I’m eating pancakes in a mountain mansion while the man who makes the best coffee I’ve ever had washes dishes. I’m fine. I’m just worried about Milo. I don’t want him pushing too hard again. You saw what happened last time.”

“Hmm.” He dries his hands and turns around, leaning back against the sink.

He doesn’t push.

That’s Micah. He creates the opening, then lets me decide whether to walk through it. No demand. No interrogation. Just space with him waiting on the other side.

I eat another bite. Chew. Swallow.

“He’s doing what he always does,” I say finally. “Finding something he can fix because he can’t fix Stephen.”

Micah glances over his shoulder to where Milo is still talking with Knox and Holden outside. “I’ve been watching this build for three days.”

“You think he’s heading for another crash?”

“I don’t know. But this isn’t only Milo being Milo.”

“So we do something.” My fork is already down. “I’ll talk to him.”

“We are doing something.” Micah covers my hand with his. Warm. Steady. “Holden and Knox are with him.”

“Holden’s going to grouch at him.”

“Probably.” His thumb moves once over my knuckles. “But Milo trusts him. Enough to let him close when the jokes stop working.”

I think about the night after the warehouse. The afternoon between all three of us in the kitchen. The way Holden and Milo have moved closer ever since.

“Like you trust Eli,” I say.

Micah’s eyes shift toward the deck. Eli sits with his book open in his lap, his gaze fixed suspiciously on the trees instead of the page. The softness that moves across Micah’s face belongs to Eli alone.

“Eli is my person,” he says. “But you’re my home. One doesn’t take anything from the other.”

“I like that.” I slide off the barstool and cross the narrow gap between us. My ribs pull, but not enough to stop me. “And I don’t want you thinking I’ve forgotten you whenever nobody’s bleeding.”

“I don’t.”

“You better not.” I rest my palms against his chest. “Because I love you, Micah. Not just when you’re holding me through my shit or cooking smiley pancakes. Always.”

His breath catches. For once, he doesn’t rush to take care of me in return. He just lets the words land.

“I love you too, baby girl.”

His hands cup my jaw and he kisses me, slow and warm, coffee and syrup lingering on his mouth.

The mudroom door opens.

We jolt apart.

“—and I’m just saying, from a land management perspective, selective clearing is actually beneficial for—”

Milo storms into the kitchen covered in sawdust. His goggles are shoved onto his forehead, his cheeks are flushed, and his eyes are bright.

“Milo.” Holden’s voice is low and final. “Sit down.”

Milo sits as though his body voted against him. Knox sets the chainsaw on the mudroom floor and stands beside it like he's guarding a prisoner.

"The branch Knox cleared was only the beginning. We now have an unobstructed sightline from the north camera all the way to the service road"—Milo holds up a hand and starts counting off fingers—"enough firewood to survive a modest ice age, and several viable locations for an elevated observation platform. I'm thinking tree house, but tactical. A murder tree house. Possibly with a zip line."

"No zip line," Holden says.

"We'll workshop it." Milo reaches across me and steals a pancake from the stack with his bare hand. His fingers keep moving until they have something to hold. "Also, the hot tub is ready."

Micah and I look at each other.

"Hot tub?" I ask.

"Yeah. I found it behind the woodshed yesterday. I thought the control panel was fried, but it just needed power." Milo takes an enormous bite of pancake and talks around it. "It's been heating since before dawn. Currently approaching a medically irresponsible temperature."

"A medically irresponsible temperature," Micah repeats.

"One-oh-four." Milo licks syrup off his thumb, entirely unrepentant. "Give or take whatever it takes to parboil trauma."

Holden pinches the bridge of his nose. I look from Milo's bright eyes to the sawdust coating his clothes and the way he hasn't stopped moving since breakfast. Now he wants to add a body of hot water to the list.

"You know what?" I say. "That sounds amazing."

Four heads turn. Milo's eyes go huge. "Wait. Really?"

"My burns are closed, my ribs are healed enough for sitting in warm water, and I've spent ten days being a responsible convalescent. I'm owed."

"Amazing. Kitten's in!" Milo claps his hands together. "Cabin meeting in thirty minutes. Agenda items include hot tub usage, sleeping arrangements for tonight, whether or not we eat dinner in the hot tub—which I think is very European." He winks at me. "And my proposal for a tactical tree house. Dress code is as the gods intended."

"You mean naked," Micah says.

"Did I stutter?" Milo looks at me. "Sound good, kitten?"

"Naked hot tub in the woods?" I hold up my hand. "Sounds exactly like my kind of fun."

“Excellent. Time to gather the troops and lose the clothes.” Milo reaches for another pancake.

Holden catches his wrist before he gets there.

“Hey, daddy dom. Your guy is hungry.” Milo looks down at the hand around him.

“Quit calling me that,” Holden grouches. “When did you last sleep?”

Milo wiggles his fingers, stretching toward the pancakes. “I closed my eyes while the hot tub jets kicked on.”

“That isn’t sleep.”

“It was several moments of ASMR enjoyment. I had a very efficient dream.”

Holden’s jaw tightens, and Milo manages to grasp a pancake. He flicks it at his own face and catches it in his mouth.

The pancake vanishes between his teeth like a magic trick performed by a hyperactive raccoon.

“See?” he says through it. “Reflexes of a jungle cat.”

“You have syrup on your eyebrow.”

“That’s war paint.” He slips out of Holden’s hold, takes two more with his other hand and backs toward the stairs.

“Adding sleep to the meeting agenda,” he says brightly. “Right after nudity and before tactical construction. I’ll write up talking points now.”

“Milo—”

But he is already gone.

Holden watches for several seconds before following him.

Micah looks at the sawdust now covering the floor. Sighs, and then gets the broom.

“You love him,” I say.

“I love all of you.” He starts sweeping. “I’m increasingly uncertain whether that demonstrates good judgment.”

I sit at the island and watch him move through the sunlight, the easy roll of his shoulders, the quiet competence of a man who sees a mess and takes care of it without needing anyone to notice.

But I notice.

I notice the mess. The effort. The quiet moments and endless noise.

I want this kitchen. This man. Every stupid breakfast that comes after.

More than that, I want to be what Micah comes home to. Me, Eli, all of us.

Right now, the cabin feels like hiding. But this is what we're fighting for.

All six of us.

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# SEVENTEEN
# SAGE



"You sure about this?" Micah asks as we reach the back door, his hand hovering at my elbow like a spotter at a gymnastics event.

"I'm sure."

"Because if you're dizzy, or your breathing—"

"Micah. I'm getting in a hot tub, not running an ultramarathon. My lungs can handle bubbles."

He gives me a look that says *I love you and I'm worried and I know you're going to do it anyway, so I'm just going to stand here being supportive and devastatingly handsome about it.* That look should be illegal.

I tighten the sash on the Egyptian cotton robe Milo bought me—the one with the thread count that allegedly has its own zip code—and peer through the glass.

The water's been at temperature for hours. The sun's behind the mountains now, and the lights outside have come on.

"You know, the only reason Holden and Knox agreed to this is because there are security cameras all over the property," Micah says as we step outside.

"Because otherwise they'd both be lurking in the dark with guns and bad attitudes."

"Holden would say it's called overwatch."

"Knox would say nothing. He'd just loom."

Micah smiles and offers me his arm. Cold mountain air brushes my legs as we follow the lit path around to the woodshed.

Steam drifts into view first, rising in soft white sheets and carrying the smell of cedar and the promise of warmth.

Then we round the corner.

The hot tub sits on a wooden platform behind the shed, tucked under a pergola with retractable sides. All four sides are open now, and the roof is strung with fairy lights. Milo found them in a storage area and spent forty-five minutes hanging them while Knox stood below passing him nails with unending patience.

The result is annoyingly beautiful. Warm light, steam curling, the valley stretched out beyond the railing like someone hung a painting there just for us.

And in the tub: four of my men.

Knox takes up roughly a third of the available real estate, arms stretched along the rim, head tipped back, eyes closed. He looks like a boulder someone dropped into a hot spring—immovable, eternal, completely unconcerned with the water displacement crisis he's causing.

Holden is across from him, sitting upright because even relaxation is a posture he approaches with discipline. Eli is to Holden's left, chin just above the waterline, blond hair wet and pushed back, looking more relaxed than I've seen him in weeks.

And Milo is doing something that can only be described as holding court from the far corner, arms draped wide.

Milo spots us first, obviously.

"There she is," he announces, like I'm the headline act at a very niche festival. "Our convalescent queen. Stop everything. The robe has entered the chat."

Three more heads turn.

It shouldn't do anything to me by now, the way all of their attention lands at once. It should feel familiar. Manageable.

Instead, it hits low and hot, a pulse under my skin.

Knox opens his eyes fully and sits forward. Eli's mouth softens. Holden's gaze tracks from my face to the belt of the robe and back again, quick and cool and absolutely not cool at all. Milo grins like he personally invented desire and is waiting for applause.

"I feel judged," I say.

“You should feel admired,” Milo corrects.

Micah’s hand settles at the small of my back as we make our way down the steps under the pergola. Slow enough that nobody can accuse him of not taking the doctor seriously, possessive enough that it still makes my stomach flip.

The fairy lights reflect off the water in fractured gold. Somebody—Milo, almost certainly—set a tray on a side table with drinks, a plate of cut fruit, and a folded stack of towels arranged with obscene neatness. The whole thing looks like a luxury retreat for the emotionally unstable.

Apparently cutting down trees wasn’t enough to wear Milo out. It only gave him a new project.

Micah leans to my ear and murmurs, “Like Milo said, very European.”

“Nothing about this is European,” I whisper back. “This is woodland emotional support porn.”

Milo somehow hears me, or possibly knows how to read lips. “Thank you. I work very hard at my craft.”

He rises just enough to make room, water sluicing down his chest, and I have to actively not stare. Apparently near-death has not lessened my appreciation for absurdly beautiful men. If anything, it’s sharpened it.

And Knox—

Jesus.

Knox in hot water looks like a fantasy women have while ovulating. All broad chest and tan skin and heavy, patient stillness. He watches me approach with that locked-door face of his, but his eyes give him away. They warm. They sharpen. They claim.

I stop at the edge of the platform and hook my fingers in the knot of my robe. “Everyone’s being weirdly quiet.”

“That,” Milo says, fingers drifting through the water, “is because we’re all trying very hard not to tackle you into the bubbles like starving wolves.”

“Speak for yourself,” Holden says.

“Oh?” Milo turns to look at him in delight. “The detective has appetites?”

“I have restraint,” Holden says. “Which is more than I can say for you.”

“You have restraint the way I have chill,” Milo fires back. “Theoretically. Unverified. Possibly a myth.”

Knox says nothing. He just watches me, and the heat in his eyes makes the steam feel redundant.

Heat blooms across my face. “Maybe I should’ve stayed inside.”

“No,” Knox says.

One word. Low. Final. It slides right through me.

Micah’s hand strokes once over the center of my back. “You don’t have to do anything you don’t want to, baby girl. Sit on the edge. Dangle your feet. Judge them all from a safe distance. Entirely your call.”

That steadies something in me.

Not because I’m afraid of them. I’m not. But there is something in me that still startles at being seen this completely and not having to flinch.

It would be easy to make the moment about naked bodies and steam and sex and all the dangerous, glittering things we use to distract ourselves from fear. But underneath that, quieter and meaner, is the truth: taking off my clothes still feels like surrender in ways I don’t always control. Even here. Even now.

Especially now, with all the new scars and bruises still fading.

I loosen my grip on the robe tie and let out a breath. “Okay,” I say. “Nobody pounces. Nobody makes a big deal. I get in, I sit down, and if one of you splashes me in the face, I’m leaving and taking the towels with me.”

“That’s fair,” Eli says, laughter in his tone.

“Cruel, but fair,” Milo agrees.

“You want me to help you in?” Micah asks, his fingers leaving my back.

I shake my head. “I’ve got it. You get in first. Test the water for me.”

He grins and kisses my temple. “You got it.” He hooks his thumbs into the towel at his hips, lets it fall to the deck, and steps down into the water naked.

Every single thought in my head short-circuits as I watch the way the muscles in his ass move with each step. The hot water folds around his thighs, then his hips, and he hisses at the heat before turning back to me with wet dark lashes and that sweet, dangerous mouth curving at one corner.

“Feels good,” he says, easing down onto the bench. “Not too hot.”

*Liar.*

Everything about this moment has suddenly become *too hot*. I’m so wet I can feel it touching the inside of my thighs.

My grip tightens on the robe.

For one wild moment, embarrassment flares—hotter than the steam. I’m standing here practically dripping want in front of five men who can

probably smell it on me at this point. My face burns. My pulse jumps. I can feel every place my body has already betrayed me.

I had no problem being naked with Holden last night. Or any of the guys in the days before that. But each of those was different. Dark. Enclosed. Under covers and one on one.

Before the wall, being naked with all of them was something I reveled in. Out here, every new mark is visible. Every reaction has an audience. And some part of me still wants to bolt inside and hide under the bed, ashamed of what Stephen left mapped over my skin.

Then I look at them.

At Micah, smiling softly like he'd catch me if I fell. At Knox, all that dark, heavy muscle and brutal patience. At Eli, warm eyes gone a shade deeper. At Milo, openly delighted by the entire concept of me existing. At Holden, watching me with a dark hunger.

I've had their hands on me. Their mouths. Their bodies. I've bled with them, watched them come apart. Watched them harden. Watched them fuck. Watched hunger move through them like a living thing and never once thought they should be ashamed for letting me see it.

*So why the fuck should I be?*

What Stephen did to me changed more than my body. But he doesn't get to take this from me too.

Five men who look at my wreckage and see something worth wanting.

I loosen the knot.

The sash slips free in my hands with a whisper of cotton. I don't drop the robe right away. Instead, I slide one shoulder loose, then the other, slow enough that even I know I'm performing now. The steaming air kisses my skin. I let the thick white fabric hang open just enough to reveal the line of one breast, then drag it closed again, teasing myself as much as them.

Milo makes a sound low in his throat that is absolutely not subtle.

"There should be music for this. I'll hum," he offers.

"Please don't," Holden says.

But Milo hums anyway. Something that sounds vaguely like a strip club remix of a classical piece, which is such a specifically Milo choice that I nearly break character laughing.

The humming dies in Milo's throat when I let the robe fall.

The cotton slides off my shoulders, snags at my hips for one heartbeat, then puddles at my feet. Cold air moves over everything—the yellow-green

bruises fading along my ribs, the rope scar at my neck, the pale, shiny patches along my legs—and then the heat of five held breaths replaces it.

I force myself to stand there, naked under fairy lights and steam. My hands want to cross over my stomach. I keep them at my sides like a little act of war.

Nobody moves. Nobody speaks.

I lift my chin. “If any of you look at me like I’m fragile, I will drown you.”

Milo puts a hand to his chest. “Kitten. I’m looking at you like you’re the final boss in a very horny video game.”

Eli laughs, soft and helpless, and it breaks the spell just enough for me to breathe again.

“Come here,” Micah says, holding out his hand from the water.

I take it.

The first step into the tub is almost painful with heat, a sharp sting over cold skin, but then the warmth climbs my calves and knees and thighs and turns into something lush and enveloping. By the time I sink to my hips, I’m already half gone with relief. The heat loosens muscles I didn’t realize I’d been clenching for days. It gets into the deep places. The bruised places. The places still braced for the next brick.

Micah guides me down onto the bench beside him, one hand braced at my waist, the other keeping my balance as the jets push against me.

“Oh,” I breathe.

“Yeah,” Milo says smugly. “Therapeutic relief.”

I sink lower, letting the water climb to my collarbones, and a groan escapes me before I can edit it for dignity. The jets find the exact knot between my shoulder blades that’s been there since the wall, and I briefly understand why people marry rich.

“That sound,” Milo says, pointing at me with a slice of pineapple, “is going in the mental archive. Glorious.”

Micah laughs against my shoulder, his arm coming to rest along the rim behind me, not quite touching, offering. I lean back into him anyway, and his fingers curl around my shoulder like he knew I would.

Across the tub, Holden hasn’t said anything in a while. He’s watching me with a look that seems like boredom from far away and arson up close. His eyes drop to where the water laps at my chest, then lift, unhurried, back to my face.

“Ribs?” he asks.

“Happy.”

“Lungs?”

“Also happy.”

“Good.” He reaches for his drink on the edge, and the flex of his arm steals my concentration. It’s possible I drool. “Then enjoy it. This might be the first night in ten days one of us doesn’t hold a mirror to your face while you sleep.”

“You looked at me with a mirror while I slept?”

“It was a small mirror,” Eli says mildly, like confessing to a shared hobby. “Held in front of your mouth at random intervals to make sure you were breathing.”

“Not at all creepy.”

“It was hard to tell sometimes, and we didn’t want to wake you. You needed your sleep to heal,” Micah says into my hair, entirely unashamed.

I should be annoyed. Before Stephen took me, I would’ve performed annoyance, at minimum. Instead my insides go all soft and stupid, because this is what life looks like now—five men who love me so much they check my breathing, and none of them is asking me to be smaller so the fear feels bigger.

Knox’s foot finds mine under the water. Just rests there. Anchoring.

I look over at him. His eyes are closed again, head tipped back, throat exposed to the fairy lights, steam curling off his shoulders like the mountain is exhaling him. He looks like something carved. He also looks like a man who hasn’t unclenched since he pulled me out of a wall, and I make a decision.

“I’m relocating,” I announce.

“Relocation approved,” Milo says. “Please route through my section for a toll.”

I ignore him and wade through the churning water—slow, because the jets keep shoving at my bruised ribs and I refuse to give Holden an excuse to end this. Knox feels me coming before I touch him. His eyes open. His arm lifts from the rim, making space, and I settle over him, my front against all that warm, immovable chest, my thighs bracketing his under the water.

His hand goes under the water behind me, and the jet that’s been shoving at my ribs dies to nothing.

He doesn’t say anything about it. He doesn’t look at Holden either.

“Hi,” I say.

“Hi, Fury.”

I roll my hips.

Knox’s gaze drops once. A slow drag down my throat, my chest, the line where my body meets his under the water. Then back to my face.

“You sure, Fury?”

I nod.

His hand slides up my spine, warm even through the heat of the tub, and he leans in just enough that his forehead nearly touches mine, close enough that our breath mixes.

“You’re staring,” I murmur.

“Yeah.”

“At my boobs?”

“Yeah.”

He huffs a laugh, the vibration moving straight through my pelvis.

“I can’t help it,” he says, voice low. “You’re gorgeous.”

The compliment detonates somewhere behind my ribs. Knox doesn’t hand those out—he hoards words like he’s expecting a shortage—so when one drops, it sends shockwaves.

I kiss him.

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# EIGHTEEN
# SAGE



Knox kisses me back—steam-wet and slow, a little hungry from the outset. His mouth opens over mine and the whole world shrinks to steam and tongue and the low sound he makes when I bite his bottom lip. He kisses with the same level of patience he does everything, and even with four other men watching, it feels private. Created just for the two of us.

My hands climb to cup his face. His rough stubble scratches my palm, familiar and grounding.

He tastes like mint and coolness, like he drank iced water after brushing his teeth.

His tongue licks into my mouth, and my thighs clench around his. I forget about the scars, the healing, the fact that if anyone saw this scene from the outside they'd think we were running some kind of sex cult or filming a porno.

"Knox," I moan, breaking for air.

He kisses the line of my jaw, sucks the spot behind my ear, and it scrambles my thoughts. My hips slide up, just a little, and the only thing that stops me from grinding down is the grip Knox has on my hips—two big hands clamping down like I'm about to leap from a moving vehicle.

"Easy," he rumbles against my ear.

That one word does things to me. I melt against his chest.

"I know what I want," I whisper.

"And I know you need careful." His thumbs stroke slow circles over my hips. "So we go easy, or we stop."

I nod. “Okay.”

“That’s my Fury.” Knox’s lips ghost my ear. “You want them to watch you come?”

I suck in air through my teeth and glance over my shoulder. Just enough to catch the men behind me.

Micah sits easy, arms splayed wide, dark eyes gentle and open. Milo’s knuckles are white on the rim, lower lip bitten raw where he tries not to smile too hard. Holden is motionless, a single muscle riding in his jaw, but his eyes burn with focus. Eli meets my gaze and nods once, slow and sure, as if passing something directly into me.

The power to choose. The power to own it.

I turn back to Knox, who’s watching all of it over my shoulder, a near-smile bleeding through the hard set of his mouth.

I slide my hands down his chest, braced against the solid plane of muscle and tattoos, and roll my hips. Once. Twice. The friction is barely anything, but it shocks me with a jolt straight to my clit.

“Fuck,” I murmur.

Knox’s eyes go black, wild, but he doesn’t move. He’s letting me take what I need. Which is somehow so much filthier than if he just grabbed my hips and ground himself into me.

I rock my hips again, dragging my pussy along his thick shaft.

“So good,” I gasp.

Micah moves behind me. His hands hover beside my shoulders, close enough that I can feel their warmth through the steam.

“Can I touch you, baby girl?”

I turn my head enough to meet his eyes. “Please.”

His palms settle on my shoulders as he slides in close, water lapping between us. His chest is softer than Knox’s, his hands gentle as they stroke down to my elbows. He’s careful not to crowd my healing ribs, but I tip my head back, needing more. Micah nuzzles into the curve of my neck, his lips brushing the sensitive skin.

“You’re so fucking beautiful, baby girl.”

He kisses the damp curve of my neck, steady, deliberate, and then slides one hand to my chest.

“Micah.”

One palm brackets my breast, thumb circling the nipple. Sparks go all through me. The sensation so sharp I jerk, and Knox’s hands clamp down

on my hips.

“Steady, Fury.”

A sound escapes me, high and broken, and Micah laughs against my throat, breathless and sweet. I push back into him, arching into his palm, offering more, and he takes it—cupping me fully, rolling the tight peak between finger and thumb with a pressure that makes my toes curl.

“Oh fuck,” I moan, rocking over Knox while Micah kneads my breasts. “God, I’ve missed this.”

“There she is,” Milo breathes from across the water. “There she fucking is.”

Heat gathers low in my belly, coiling outward. I grab the back of Knox’s neck for balance. I want more—more hands, more mouths, more eyes on me. The hunger inside me, bright and bottomless, has teeth.

I tip my head back and open my mouth on a shameless gasp.

Knox’s hands tighten at my waist, and his cock is hot, hard, and perfectly positioned between my thighs.

He lets me do all the moving. Lets me use him how I want. Lets me ruin myself, slow and aching, rubbing myself along the massive column of him.

Micah’s lips trace a slow path behind my ear. “How does it feel?” he whispers.

I can’t answer. My body does it for me—pulse racing, thighs tightening, every breath breaking apart before it reaches my mouth.

“Tell me,” Micah coaxes, his fingers circling my nipple until I want to scream. “Tell me how good it feels to grind against him.”

“God. So good. I can’t—”

I break off on another moan as the thick pressure pulses inside me.

“Please, don’t stop.”

“We’re not,” Knox answers. His voice cracks on it. “We’re never stopping.”

Micah pinches my nipple and the surge of pleasure makes me jerk. I arch, exposed to every set of eyes.

I can’t look at them. I’m too close. All I can do is hold Knox’s shoulders while his hands guide my hips, each controlled roll carrying me closer to the edge.

“Easy, baby girl,” Micah soothes.

I shake my head. “No. More.”

I twist, just enough to find his mouth, and drag Micah’s lips to mine.

He kisses me like he’s starving. Deep and tongue-heavy, hands never stopping on my chest. He tastes of fruit and iced tea and need. I want his hands everywhere. All over me, all at once.

Knox keeps the rhythm slow, supporting every movement even as his breath turns ragged and shuddering.

“I’m close,” I admit, the words slurred.

Micah pulls back. “Then show them how gorgeous you are.”

“Yes,” I say, not even pretending. “Fuck, yes.”

Knox grunts, his cock throbbing where it presses against me. “Take it, Fury. Show them.”

I brace both hands against Knox’s chest and let them see. His hands lift and guide me through each slow roll until the pleasure pulls impossibly tight.

“Fuck,” I hiss as my orgasm crashes over me, too fast, too sudden.

Knox holds me tight, one hand braced at my low back, the other splayed on my hip as I shudder through it. Only when I’m limp and wrecked and trembling in his arms does he ease me back against his chest, mouth pressed to my temple.

Micah’s lips move gentle across my neck. “You doing okay, baby girl?”

Knox’s thumb presses once into my hip.

“I’m good,” I breathe. “I want more.”

Micah’s mouth finds mine, and I turn in his arms, wrapping myself around him.

“Fuck me,” I murmur.

Micah groans, one hand cupping my jaw and the other palming my ass.

His mouth moves over my throat and the corner of my lips while I tangle my legs around his waist.

“That’s it, baby girl,” he breathes, lining himself up against me.

“Fuck. Yes,” I hiss as he slides in slowly, filling me inch by inch until I gasp against his mouth. “Please don’t be gentle.”

Micah holds me steady and rolls his hips. Each thrust drags deep, hitting exactly where I need him. I tangle one hand in his curls and pull his face to mine.

“Fuck me. Fuck me. Please.”

He pistons his hips in response, kissing me like he needs to devour me to survive.

“Baby girl—fuck, you feel so good—”

I clench around him, and his careful rhythm breaks. His grip tightens, helping me move as he drives up harder.

“Don’t stop,” I gasp.

“Not stopping.” His forehead drops to mine, breath ragged. “Never.”

He rolls his hips again, and the climax tears through me. Micah comes with me, cock pulsing deep while I cling to him through every aftershock.

When he finally stills, we’re both trembling, forehead to forehead.

“Baby girl,” he whispers, reverent and wrecked.

“Thank you.” I kiss him once, soft, then twice because I can’t stop.

Then I pull back and my eyes find Eli.

“My turn, little savage?” he asks, voice rough with want.

I hold out my hand. “Your turn.”

Micah eases out of me, helping me move as Eli takes my hand and pulls me onto his lap. I’m facing away from him, his cock pressing against my ass, hard and insistent, as he bands one arm around my waist and slides the other between my legs.

“Lean back and show off those beautiful tits,” he commands. “Let me make you feel good.”

I do as I’m told, reclining against his chest. His fingers find my clit, circling with that perfect pressure while his other hand explores—tracing scars, teasing nipples, mapping me like he owns every inch. Milo watches with wide eyes, one hand disappearing below the surface, while Holden shifts closer.

Eli’s thumb presses into the hollow of my throat, feeling my pulse race against his palm. “I can feel Micah’s cum leaking out of you,” he growls, and I arch into him, his cock jumping against my lower back.

His fingers circle and pinch my clit. “Look at them all watching you,” he says. “You want them to see what I do to you?”

“Yes.” The word tears out of me.

He slides his hand down my chest and pinches my nipple, rolling it slowly, just past the edge. I cry out—then he flattens his palm, soothing the ache.

“Too much?”

“Not even close.” I reach back and grip his hair, pulling him closer. “Do it again.”

“You heard Fury,” Knox says, and my eyes find him across from me, his big hand working up and down his thick shaft. My insides clench.

I keep my eyes locked on Knox while Eli's fingers work my clit in tight, merciless circles and his other hand alternates between my breasts—pinch, soothe, pinch again—until I'm writhing in his lap, completely beyond caring.

"Please," I gasp, not sure what I'm begging for.

He knows anyway. His fingers slide down, two of them pushing inside me, curling immediately to find the spot that makes my vision spark white at the edges. I clench around him, and he groans, the sound vibrating through his chest into my back.

"That's it," he murmurs. "Let them see you come apart."

His thumb stays on my clit while his fingers work inside me, holding me directly against the edge.

"Look at them," Eli commands, his voice dropping to that register that makes my stomach flip. "They all want to be where I am."

I force my eyes open. Milo is watching with his lower lip trapped between his teeth. Holden is beside him, jaw tight, one hand moving below the surface.

"Eli—" I choke out. "I want you inside me."

His fingers still. "You ready for me, little savage?"

"Yes."

He withdraws his hand, lifts and turns me, settling me on his lap with my knees bracketing his hips.

I sink down as he guides himself into me, thick and hot, and I watch his face transform, dissolving into raw hunger. He pushes in slow, filling me inch by deliberate inch until I'm panting against his mouth.

"Fuck," he breathes. "You feel—Sage, you feel—"

"Don't stop," I beg, rolling my hips just enough to take him deeper. "Please, Eli. I need you to punish me."

His jaw clenches. His hands tighten on my hips, fingers digging in hard enough to bruise, and something in him finally gives way.

"Hold on," he growls, and then he moves.

He fucks up into me with a force that sends water crashing everywhere, his hips snapping against mine while his mouth devours any sound I try to make. I grip his shoulders, nails scoring his skin, and ride him as best I can from above—but he's controlling this, angling me, hitting that perfect spot inside on every thrust until I'm sobbing his name into the steam.

"Look at me," he commands. "Look at me when you come."

I force my eyes open and find his blown-wide gaze, wild and completely undone. It sends me over—clenching hard around him, milking him, my whole body shaking apart while he keeps moving through it, chasing his own release.

“That’s it,” he gasps. “That’s my girl. Come for me, little savage—”

He breaks on a groan, burying himself deep and pulsing hot inside me.

Knox lets out a groan from behind me, and I turn just in time to see his cock spurt cum across his fist, his head thrown back, the muscles in his neck standing out like cords.

The sight of him—Knox, always so controlled, coming apart just from watching me—sends another aftershock through my body. I clench around Eli, and he groans, still sensitive, still buried deep.

“Fuck,” he breathes against my throat. “Fuck, Sage.”

I want to answer, but my voice is gone. Used up. All I have left is touch—my hands sliding down Eli’s back, my forehead dropping to his shoulder, the way I keep clenching around him like my body refuses to let go.

I look at Holden and Milo while I catch my breath. “Give me a minute.”

Holden watches me with controlled, burning focus. Beside him, Milo’s grin keeps slipping toward something too bright and desperate as Holden brushes his fingers against the back of Milo’s neck. Milo turns into the touch before he seems to realize he’s doing it.

“I want both of you,” I say. “Together.”

Milo’s eyes go wide. “We would love that. Right, Holden?”

Holden’s gaze drops to Milo’s mouth. “Right.”

“Kiss him for me,” I say. “Give me something to watch while I catch my breath.”

Holden closes his hand around the back of Milo’s neck and pulls him in. Milo meets him eagerly, all that frantic energy narrowing beneath Holden’s grip.

I’ve watched them do far filthier things on our kitchen floor, but familiarity doesn’t dull the effect. Holden’s precision collides with Milo’s chaos and my body responds immediately.

“Fuck,” Eli breathes against my ear when I tighten around him.

Holden angles Milo’s head and deepens the kiss. Milo’s fingers fist in his hair, holding him there. The kiss turns slow and thorough. Holden controlling all of it while Milo melts into him, the performance briefly, beautifully, stripped away.

Eli shifts beneath me. “You want to keep watching, or do you want to be closer?”

“Closer,” I say immediately. “I want to be between them.”

Eli eases out of me and helps me stand. I cross the tub on unsteady legs, every step sparking through my oversensitive skin.

Holden’s free hand hooks around my hip and draws me against his side without breaking the kiss. I’m pressed between them—Holden’s hard muscle on one side, Milo’s lean warmth on the other. Holden’s arm bands around my waist, keeping me steady while Milo trembles against me, still vibrating with more energy than this moment can contain.

“Touch her,” Holden says against Milo’s mouth.

Milo’s hand slides down my stomach, and I spread my legs for him.

“Please.”

Holden breaks the kiss and puts his mouth against my throat. “You want him inside you?”

“Yes. Both of you.”

Milo reaches toward the side table and produces a small bottle of silicone lubricant. Because of course he came prepared.

“Contingencies,” he says breathlessly, handing it to Holden.

Holden turns me until I’m facing Milo with my back against his chest. Milo lines himself up, and I lower myself onto him, gripping his shoulders as he fills me.

“Fuck, kitten.” Milo’s forehead drops to mine.

Holden coats his fingers and reaches between us from behind. The first finger circles slowly before pressing inside. He takes his time, working me open while Milo holds still and kisses me. A second finger follows only when I push back against him.

“Still want me?” Holden asks against my neck.

“Yes. I want both of you.”

He slicks himself, removes his fingers, and presses against me.

“Relax, wildcat. Let me in.”

I breathe out and push back. Holden works inside slowly, stopping whenever my body tightens, until the overwhelming stretch becomes deep, impossible fullness.

They pause with me between them, all three of us trembling and connected.

“Move,” I beg, because I can’t bear the stillness.

Milo takes my face in his hands and kisses me—messy, desperate, all the noise I've been holding back finally finds somewhere to go. I *groan.*

"Okay?" Holden asks against my neck, his voice barely there.

"Yes," I gasp. "Move. Please."

Holden sets the rhythm—slow, deliberate, and controlled. Milo matches him with less grace but more desperation.

"Fuck," Milo gasps against my mouth. "Fuck, fuck, fuck—"

I want to agree. I want to form words. But Holden chooses that moment to shift his angle, and the sound that comes out of me is barely human.

Holden's free hand finds my breast, kneading. His mouth stays at my neck, marking me, claiming me, his breath hot and ragged against my wet skin. I can feel him everywhere—the thick press of him behind me, the sure grip of his hands, the way his whole body holds me steady while everything else threatens to come apart.

Milo's hands slide down my back, gripping my ass, pulling me harder against him. His eyes find mine, blown wide and dark, all the jokes finally burned away. "You still good, kitten?" he manages, the words torn out between thrusts.

I nod frantically. "Don't stop. Don't you dare—"

Holden growls and drives deeper, and the sound Milo makes is pure surrender. Soon we're moving in sync, and everything narrows to this—being held, being filled, being witnessed.

Knox's gaze meets mine, heavy and heated, his hand moving slowly over himself. Eli watches with his jaw tight, Micah beside him with an arm draped across his shoulders.

"Look at them," Holden commands, teeth grazing my shoulder. "Look at what you do to all of us."

I force my eyes to stay open. Their hunger feeds mine. I clench around both men inside me and feel them groan in stereo, the vibration traveling through my spine.

Milo's forehead drops to mine, his rhythm stuttering. "I'm close," he warns, like I couldn't feel him swelling, couldn't feel the tension coiling in his thighs where they're pressed against mine.

"Wait," Holden orders, and Milo whimpers—actually whimpers—but obeys.

Holden's hand slides from my breast to my hip, then lower, his fingers finding where Milo and I join. He touches us both, slick and intimate, and I

feel the shock of it everywhere.

“Now,” he says, and it’s permission and command all at once.

Milo breaks with a cry that echoes off the mountains, his hips jerking forward, his whole body shuddering against mine. I feel him pulse inside me, feel the hot spill of him, and it triggers something in Holden—his grip turns bruising, his thrusts lose their precision, and then he’s groaning against my neck, buried deep, coming apart with my name scraped raw on his tongue.

“Fuck, wildcat. Fuck, you feel so good.”

I collapse forward into Milo’s arms, sandwiched between them and shaking hard. Holden’s forehead presses to my spine, his breath hot and uneven, his arm banded around my waist. Milo’s hands cradle my face, thumbs stroking my cheekbones, his eyes on mine with something that looks almost like awe.

“Holy shit,” he breathes. “Holy shit, kitten.”

“So good,” I manage, grinning, delirious, my whole body humming.

Holden eases out of me slowly, and I whimper at the loss. He stays close though, his chest to my back, his mouth finding my shoulder and pressing there—gratitude, I think, or possession, or maybe just the only way he knows to say what words can’t carry.

Milo’s still inside me, still twitching with aftershocks, and he laughs against my mouth, breathless and wrecked. “I think I died. I think I actually died and this is the afterlife. Odin put a hot tub and sex room in heaven, it all makes sense now.”

“You’re not dead,” I say, rolling my hips just to feel him gasp. “But you might need to carry me inside. I don’t think my legs will work.”

“That can be arranged.” He slips out gentle, hands at my hips keeping me steady, and I mourn the emptiness immediately, but he quickly gathers me back against him and I’m cradled in the middle of a Milo and Holden aftercare bundle.

Across the tub, Micah catches my eye. He smiles—that soft, devastating smile that says he saw everything and loved all of it. Eli’s watching too, his eyes still warm, still present. Knox hasn’t moved from his spot, but his hand finds mine under the water, fingers threading through mine and squeezing once.

“Okay?” he asks.

I squeeze back. “Better than okay.”

And I mean it. I didn’t disappear. Not once. I stayed inside every touch, every choice, every filthy second of it.

“You know,” Milo starts when we’re all breathing normally again. “I really hope the filtration system in this thing is industrial grade. Because right now this is less of a hot tub and more of a jizz-cuzi.”

“Oh my God,” I say, moving fully into Holden’s lap.

“I’m serious. The PPM count alone—”

“Milo, shut up.”

“Chemistry doesn’t care about your feelings, kitten.”

Knox dunks him. One hand on the top of his head, pushed straight under. Milo surfaces sputtering, hair plastered flat, mouth already open with a rebuttal that dies when Knox gives him the look.

“I think I just choked on semen,” Milo says, wiping water from his eyes.

“Consider it communion,” Holden says dryly.

That does it. I laugh so hard I nearly slide right off his lap.

Every man in the tub reacts at once—hands tightening, arms bracing, Knox catching my waist before I can do something stupid and concuss myself on cedar. The whole thing only makes me laugh harder, which is unfair because my ribs are still healing and my body is one giant exposed nerve ending.

“Okay,” Micah says, smiling despite himself. “That’s enough. Everybody stop making her laugh before we end up back with Doc McStuffins and need to explain this.”

“I’m fine,” I manage.

“You sound like you swallowed a harmonica,” Holden supplies.

I turn my head just enough to bite lightly at the inside of his wrist where it rests near my shoulder. “Rude.”

“Alive,” Holden says.

That one lands in me the way it always does now. A joke with teeth. A reminder dressed as banter. My smile softens around the edges.

Alive.

I lean back and look around at all of my men.

“You know,” I say. “I’m starting to think Odin had the right idea sending us out here. We should do this every night.”

“The hot tub or the orgasms?” Milo asks.

“Both. And I’d like to start using the sex dungeon too.”

“It’s literally just a room,” Eli says.
“Motion carried,” Holden says. “Unanimously.”

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# NINETEEN
# MILO



"Of course the fucking lawyer did," I sigh, closing the John Grisham thriller I plucked from Odin's bookcase.

The two laptops Odin's people brought let me chase Stephen through every digital gutter I can reach. What they don't give me is my full server room—or anything remotely recreational.

So I've been forced to seek entertainment in analog form. Which is fine—if you were born in the eighties and have a high tolerance for waiting and disappointment. I was born on the ass end of the nineties, which means I expect my stimulation to arrive instantly and with backlighting.

So far, I've read a field guide to North American birds and a memoir by some man who climbed seven mountains to learn humility, which could've been a paragraph if he'd just gone to therapy.

I'm getting so bored I could sleep. But I already did that after the hot tub—several uninterrupted hours of drooling on my pillowcase while Holden snored beside me like a lawnmower with emotional issues. Apparently the solution to my lifelong sleep problems is communal depravity in dangerously unhygienic water. Who knew?

Unfortunately, it's almost three in the morning, and every light in my brain is back on.

I carry the Grisham downstairs in bare feet and sweatpants, finding a lamp burning beside the living-room bookshelves. Holden sits at the dining table watching the security monitor, a mug of coffee beside him that looks old enough to have developed a pulse.

I slide the book back into its place and start pulling titles at random, reading spines with growing contempt. *The Wealth of Nations*. Boring. *A Brief History of Time*. Mind-numbing. *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*. I toss it on the coffee table with enough force to slide the whole stack toward the edge. *Meditations* by Marcus Aurelius. *The Art of War*. Toss.

“You’re making a mess,” Holden says, not looking away from the monitor.

“I’m making decisions.” I pull down another row. *The Federalist Papers*. *Das Kapital*. A complete collection of Shakespeare’s tragedies, which at least explains why Odin has the personality of a man who enjoys suffering.

Boring. Boring. Boring.

I reach the end of the shelf and something catches my eye—a gap where the books don’t quite sit flush against the wall. I pull the last visible title—*The Prince*, naturally—and behind it, I can see the edge of something else. Pages. Not spines.

“Wait.” I crouch down, peering into the shadowed space. “Is this a rotating bookshelf?”

Holden actually looks over. “What?”

“Holden. Holden.” I’m already running my hands along the edges, hunting for seams, catches, anything that screams secret mechanism. “Odin has a rotating bookshelf. This is the most Odin thing that has ever Odin-ed. This man has a sex room and a rotating bookshelf and probably a panic room full of ethically sourced coffee beans—”

My fingers find it. A small depression, thumb-sized, perfectly camouflaged against the wood grain. I press.

The shelf clicks. Then it eases toward me and stops.

“Curiouser and curiouser,” I say, giving the entire thing a gentle pull. It moves out of the wall and the whole section rotates on a single axis, smooth and silent, revealing its other face like a coin flipping in slow motion.

“You sneaky billionaire bastard,” I whisper. Odin hasn’t failed me. The other side is nothing but pure filth and smut. He’s hidden the good books behind the legal thrillers like a teenager concealing porn from his mother.

Shelf after shelf of erotica. Vintage pinups, leather-bound Victorian filth, Japanese shunga art books, modern BDSM manuals, and something simply titled *Training* that makes my eyebrows attempt to escape my

forehead. It spans centuries and appears to be organized by intensity, which means Odin hasn't just built a secret smut library. He's cataloged it.

"Well," I say, running reverent fingers across spines that have clearly been handled often enough to soften the edges. "Well, well, well."

I drop to my knees for a better angle, because this requires full investigative posture. The bottom row isn't classics. These are *contemporary*. Glossy covers, algorithm-friendly typography, and titles I recognize from the endless scroll of social media recommendations.

Masked men. Mafia. Reverse harem. Why choose.

"Holden," I say, trying not to giggle with pure joy. "Odin reads dark romance. Odin—our serious, morally flexible, Scandinavian furniture of a human being—reads *why choose*."

"I don't know what that means," Holden says, still focused on the monitor, but I can see his reflection in the glass—the slight tilt of his head, the curiosity he's pretending not to have.

"It means he understands that one man is never enough." I pull out a title at random, the cover featuring four hooded figures surrounding a woman in a red dress. "See? Masked. Plural. She's not choosing between them, Holden. She's choosing *all* of them. It's revolutionary. It's *communist*, actually, if you think about distribution of romantic labor—"

"Stop explaining."

I ignore him because I've found it. The shelf has a whole subsection of what appears to be a specific author's collected works—Elle Thorpe, the colorful spines lined up in groups of threes. Blue, red, green . . . I reach for the first in the vibrant pink trilogy, *X's and O's.* The cover features a rather attractive man without his shirt on, a necklace held between his teeth.

"Oh. Sexy."

I pull it free and flip to a random page. A character named X is trying to present his love interest with a pet duck. I find myself chuckling, because X sounds *cool*. I think we could be friends.

"Maybe we should get kitten a duck?"

"We are *not* getting Sage a duck," Holden snaps.

"Okay. Fine." I close the book before I get any more ideas.

Sliding *X's and O's* back into its slot, I continue browsing the shelves until I come upon a blue spine with black writing, a love heart, and a skull image.

“Oh, I love skulls,” I breathe, already pulling it free. The cover is simple—black with an illustration of a blue skull and what I think are blurred flowers around the edges.

“Okay. Cute skull with a love heart for an eyeball. Interesting.”

I flip the book over and read the blurb. Something about thirst traps and darkness. I’m on the fence, so I flip open the cover and go straight for the menu—the content warning page. On there, it lists a whole bunch of shit I’m here for. *Stalking, invasion of privacy, hacking, hidden cameras* . . . and a lot of other things ending in the word *play* which are all wonderfully sexy kinks that I definitely want to read about.

“This is the one.”

I tuck the book under my arm and head over to Holden.

“What’d you choose?” he asks, and his voice carries a note like he’s pretending not to be interested while absolutely being interested.

“Professional development,” I say, showing him the cover. “See? It’s a stalking rom-com. Very on-brand. Very me.”

He studies it, the wrinkle between his eyebrows appearing.

“Stalking,” he says flatly.

“Romantic stalking,” I correct. “Which is apparently a genre now. The line between felony and foreplay is really just marketing.”

“You don’t need inspiration.”

“I need entertainment, Holden.” I gesture at the security monitor with my free hand. “You’re watching empty cameras. I’m reading about fictional men who watch fictional women. We’re both staring at something waiting for stuff to happen. At least mine has a plot.”

He turns back to the monitor, but I catch the edge of his mouth twitching. Not quite a smile. The precursor to one, held back by sheer force of will.

“I’m taking this upstairs,” I announce, already moving toward the stairs. “Don’t wait up. I might need to finish it in one sitting. For research purposes.”

“For research,” he repeats, deadpan.

I pause and turn back to him. “Unless you want to join me? We could read it together. I do voices.”

“Goodnight, Milo.”

“Your loss. I do excellent villain voices.”

I make it three steps toward the stairs before something catches my eye—movement on the windowsill, a flash of orange darting through the water of Frank's bowl. The little goldfish is at the surface, mouth working open and closed like he's trying to tell me something urgent, probably about the service in this establishment.

"Hold on." I backtrack to the kitchen counter, leaning close enough that my breath fogs the glass. Frank bubbles enthusiastically, his fins fanning the water. "When was the last time someone fed you, buddy?"

Holden glances toward the bowl. "You fed him this morning."

"That was hours ago. He has the metabolism of an elite athlete trapped in the body of a carnival prize."

I set the paperback on the counter and look into the food container. It's almost empty—just a scattering of dusty flakes at the bottom, not even enough to coat the surface tension. Frank bumps his nose against the glass like I'm personally insulting him.

"Okay, okay. Emergency rations."

I head down into the garage where Odin's people stacked our plastic tubs in orderly rows. I find the one marked *KITCHEN* and pop the lid.

Inside is chaos. It's obvious Odin's people went room to room and just shoved anything noteworthy in. I dig past a tangle of charging cables, the entire contents of the bowl we keep our mail in, and what appears to be a bag of rice that exploded during transport. My fingers close around a familiar cylinder—fish flakes, thank God—and then knock against something harder.

Two pharmacy bottles. Amber plastic, white caps, my name on the labels.

I pick them up.

Modafinil.

Zolpidem.

*How the hell did these get here?*

Shoving the pills in my pocket, I go back up to the kitchen and shake a pinch into Frank's bowl, watching him attack it with all the urgency of a shark finding a wounded seal.

Then I pull the bottles from my pocket and study them.

*They shouldn't be here.*

I swallow around the lump in my throat. The tub was marked KITCHEN, which means these came off a shelf in our kitchen. They've

been in the house the whole time.

“Everything all right?” Holden calls out, because I’ve gone quiet and I never go quiet.

“Um.” I rub a sweaty palm against my leg, torn between asking the question and tossing the pills down the garbage disposal. I go with the former. “Do you know how Odin’s people got these?”

I move over to the table and set the pills in front of Holden. He goes still.

“Your mother gave them to me.”

“My mother,” I repeat, the words landing weird in my mouth. “My mother gave you my pills.”

“The night you crashed. After she sedated you.”

“Of course she did.” I look at the labels again. My stomach gets annoyingly tight. “And what, exactly, did Gloria expect you to do with her pocket pharmacy?”

Holden’s jaw tightens. “She said you wouldn’t take them if you thought you didn’t need them.”

“She’s right. They fuck me up and I hate them.”

“Okay.” He nods. Slowly. “She told me that if you started escalating, I should crush them into your food.”

“Crush them into my food,” I repeat, and the words come out flat, stripped of all their usual decoration. “Like I’m a cat who won’t take his thyroid medication. Like I’m—” I stop. Swallow, my hands shaking. “She told you to drug me. Without my knowledge. My mother told you to secretly drug her adult son.”

Holden’s expression doesn’t change, which is worse than if he’d flinched. “She said you needed the reset. That you’d refuse if asked.”

“She’s right. I would refuse. Because they’re mine.” I gesture at the bottles a little too fast, and my fingers clip one, sending it skidding toward the edge of the table. Holden catches it. “My brain. My pills. My fucking choice whether I want to feel like a zombie for three days while my brain chemistry reboots.”

“I know.”

“You know?” I laugh, and it sounds wrong—brittle, sharp, a noise that belongs to someone else. “You knew and you didn’t tell me. You’ve been sitting on this for—how long? Weeks? You knew my mother was treating

you like her personal compliance officer and you just—” I gesture at him, at the monitor, at everything. “You went along with it.”

“No. I put them in the kitchen cabinet that same night and didn’t touch them again. I couldn’t do that to you. Not without your knowledge. Not without your consent. You’re not—you’re not someone I get to manage, Milo. You’re someone I love.”

I stare at him. I want to throw something at him. I want to crawl into his lap and let him hold me until the shaking stops. I want to rewind fifteen minutes and pretend I never found the bottles, never asked the question, never saw the way his face went carefully blank when I set them on the table in front of him.

My mouth opens. Nothing comes out. The jokes are queued up—dozens of them, reflexive, protective, the usual Milo-brand deflection—but they taste like ash. I can’t make the noise. Can’t perform my way out of this one.

Holden watches me. It’s his job and his nature and what I find simultaneously the safest and most suffocating about him. Right now his eyes are doing that thing where they look flat and cold while something underneath runs hot enough to burn.

“You didn’t tell me,” I finally manage. My voice sounds scraped out, hollowed. “You didn’t tell me what she asked. What she expected.”

“Would you have wanted to know?”

“That’s not—” I stop. Press my palms flat against the table and feel the wood grain bite into my skin. “That’s not how this works, Holden. You don’t get to make that call. You don’t get to decide what I can handle knowing about my own fucking life.”

“I was *scared*, Milo,” he blurts. “Ever since that night. Ever since . . .” He clamps his mouth shut and shakes his head. “I have never been so afraid.”

“Holden—”

“Let me finish,” he says, holding up his hand. “I’ve never been afraid of what you became that night. I understand the why and the how. I’ve done the same thing in different rooms for different reasons, and I was fully aware the whole time. Hell, if we could be guaranteed to never get caught, going on a murder spree would be my favorite weekend activity.”

“Then what?”

“*I couldn’t reach you*.” His voice pitches upward. “Afterward. In the bath. It was like you couldn’t even see me.”

I stare at the table. There's a knot in the wood grain that looks like an eye. I trace it with my fingernail.

"I'm sorry," I say, quieter now. Less bite. More wreckage. "I remember enough of it to know I went somewhere ugly. I'm sorry you had to see me like that."

"That's not what I'm saying."

"It kind of is." I shrug one shoulder, flimsy as a defense.

"No," he says, pushing his hands through his hair like he wants to claw through his own skull. "It's not about you being ugly. Or broken, or violent, or even what you did, Milo. It's about me. About how I keep thinking I'm the guy who protects the people he loves, and then every fucking time, I'm not."

He stares at the wood grain between his splayed fingers. When he speaks, his voice has that thin edge, almost trembling with all the things he never lets out until they start leaking through the cracks.

"First it was Sage in the bushes. Then it was fucking Tyler, right under my nose, and if Amy hadn't been there, she'd have died on my fucking watch. You went catatonic, and I couldn't bring you back, and now—" He cuts off, jaw working, his eyes flicking up to meet mine as if he's daring me to stop him. "Now we're all in hiding because some asshole bricked our girlfriend into a wall. And all I could do was fucking stand there. Make some fucking phone calls. Manage the scene."

He's still staring down, the muscles in his jaw locking and releasing as if the act of remembering requires insane, physical effort.

"I thought I'd be the one who knew how to protect her," he says, voice barely above a whisper. "I thought that was the whole point of me."

"Holden."

I move closer and hook two fingers around his. His fingers are ice-cold. I fold them into mine and wait until his eyes finally lift.

"Listen to me," I say, my voice low and serious—something I rarely am. "The whole point of you isn't being some infallible human shield. It's that you're the one who always shows up. Sage in the bushes—you took the heat off her. Tyler—you made sure no one went to jail for that. Me—you called my mother, which, for the record, is a bravery level no weapon on this mountain could match. You show up, Holden. Every single time. Showing up is the point."

His jaw works. The forehead wrinkle is in full rebellion.

“And for the record,” I add, squeezing his fingers, “the guy who defines his entire worth by whether he can physically intercept every threat is setting himself an impossible standard—even Knox, the literal human wall, doesn’t expect that much of himself. You’re exhausted, and you’re sitting here at three a.m. monitoring empty cameras because duty is easier than rest, so kindly stop narrating our shared trauma like it’s a highlight reel of your own failures.”

“I should have—”

“You should have told me about the pills,” I say. “That part, yeah. That part’s real. Hiding what she asked you to do—that was wrong, and I get to be mad about it, and I am mad about it. I’m just not going to stay mad, because you refused. You heard her pitch pharmaceutical stealth ops against your boyfriend and you shelved it. That’s the thing I’m choosing to hold on to.”

He exhales slowly. “I didn’t refuse her to her face. I just never used them.”

“That’s a refusal, Detective. She’s Gloria. Nobody refuses her directly. Even her gynecologist probably negotiates.”

That gets me the pre-smile, the one I collect like limited-edition stamps.

“I should’ve told you,” he admits, because Holden needs the absolution formalized, signed in triplicate.

“Yes. You still should have told me about the pills.” I tap the bottles resting between us with one finger. “No more managed secrets—between us *or* the group. We’ve all got enough loose threads without adding personalized pharmaceutical cover-ups. Deal?”

“Deal,” he says, and it sounds like a vow because he can’t do casual.

I slide into the chair beside him, and because he just popped his own chest open and showed me the wiring, I owe him something equal.

“Since we’re doing honesty,” I say, “there’s something I need to tell you.”

Holden’s attention sharpens. Waits. Cop’s patience, the professional bastard.

“You remember when you told me to try the quiet?” I ask.

His expression changes slightly. “Yes.”

“Turns out it wasn’t empty.”

He waits for me to fill in the space.

“Sometimes my brain erases things for me,” I say. “Not properly. The files are still there, but it revokes my access. Puts them somewhere I can’t reach so I can keep functioning without knowing what’s inside.”

“Okay . . .” He draws the word out. Kind of like a question.

“Every now and then the permissions reset.” I lean back and fold my arms across my middle. “Then everything comes back online at once.”

“The warehouse did that?”

“Yeah.”

His attention sharpens. “What came back?”

“My father,” I say.

“We don’t talk about your father,” Holden says, the words I’ve always said by rote echoing back to me.

“Yeah.” I take a slow breath. “Well, I remembered why . . .”

Holden doesn’t move.

“I killed him.”

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# TWENTY
# HOLDEN



I had a hunch when we first met Gloria that Milo had something to do with his father's death. He was too wooden, too closed off at the mention of the lavender bed. It was like a steel door slamming shut on the topic, the words "We don't talk about my father" forced through clenched teeth like a protective chant.

Years of interrogation rooms taught me that the worst thing you can do with a confession is react to it. Milo's hand is still on mine, his pulse going hard enough against my fingers that I could take his heart rate without a watch.

"Is that what happened when you were sixteen?"

Milo flinches like the question has teeth. His hand jerks in mine, an aborted pull, and I close my fingers before he can take it back. Interrogation rule one: don't let them leave the table.

"Hey." I keep my voice level. Low. "Look at me."

He does, and it's like he's watching me from the far end of a hallway.

"Your mother told us that night," I say. "She said you've been having episodes since you were sixteen."

The last of the color leaves his face. Somewhere behind me, Frank's filter hums. The security monitor on the table cycles through empty cameras, one gray frame at a time.

"So, she just—handed you the warranty information. Here you go, Detective, my son's been defective since puberty, here's the receipt—"

"Milo."

“Why are they even called ‘episodes’?” He laughs, and it’s all edges. “Like it’s a TV show. Season one, episode one: the kid kills his—” He stops. Swallows it. Looks down at our hands like he’s surprised they’re still connected.

“She said sixteen,” I repeat. “So I’m asking you. Is that when it started? When you killed your dad?”

He’s quiet for a long time. Ten seconds. Twenty. I count them the way I counted Sage’s breaths behind the oxygen mask, and I let him, because Gloria was right about one thing—he trusts me, and I’m going to earn that retroactively if it kills me.

“Yeah,” he says finally. “That was the first time my brain let him out.”

“Okay. Want to tell me what you remember?”

His eyes shift to the bottles again.

“My father wasn’t important,” he says. “Not really. He wasn’t some criminal mastermind running an empire from a volcano. He was just mean enough to make people confuse fear with power.”

“What did he run?”

“Small crews. Collections. Stolen goods. Enough low-level crime to keep money coming in and enough violence to stop anyone asking where it came from.” His thumb moves restlessly against the side of my hand. “Dennis and Gene worked for him.”

“As in two of your dads?”

“They weren’t my dads then. They were his muscle. Henchmen. Lackeys. Minions.” His mouth twists. “Minions if minions wore cheap suits and broke fingers instead of stealing the moon.”

The joke arrives, but it doesn’t lift anything. It sits between us with the pills and the confession.

“They hated him,” Milo continues. “Everyone hated him. But he knew where their families lived. Who owed money. Who had something to lose. He was very good at making men feel trapped.”

“And Gloria?”

“He thought she belonged to him too.”

The words are light, but his face isn’t.

“He hit her?”

“He hit everyone.” Milo stares at the table. “Her. Me. My brother and sister. Dennis and Gene whenever one of them got between us. He liked making people watch. Said it taught the rest of us how to behave.”

My grip tightens on his fingers, and I make myself ease it.

“What happened?”

Milo’s knee starts bouncing beneath the table. Fast enough to shake the floorboards.

“One night, he had Gene down. Gloria tried to stop him, so he turned on her.” His voice flattens. “I remember her mouth bleeding. I remember him knocking her into a table. Then I remember hitting him with the first thing I could reach.”

He swallows.

“I don’t remember picking it up. I just remember swinging it. Then he was down and I kept going.”

“How long?”

“Until Dennis pulled me off.”

The security monitor changes feeds. Empty porch. Empty driveway. Empty trees.

“He was dead?”

“Extremely.”

The answer comes automatically. Milo’s standard method of making horror ridiculous enough to hold.

His knee keeps bouncing.

“One of the dads cleaned everything,” he says. “Him. Me. The room. He washed the blood out of my hair and put me in the back seat of his car while the others figured out what story they were going to tell.”

“What story?”

“My father stole from the wrong people and ran. It wasn’t difficult to sell. He’d made enough enemies that everyone had their own theory about where he went and who put him there.”

“And the body was buried in the backyard under the lavender?”

“I don’t know.” His hand moves to rub at the back of his neck. “I never asked.”

I believe him.

Not because I think he doesn’t know. Because I know what it looks like when Milo has found a locked door inside his own head and decided not to test the handle.

“After that, the dads stopped pretending they still worked for him,” he says. “They protected Gloria before, when they could. Once he was gone, there was no one left to stop them from choosing her properly.”

“That’s how the family started.”

“Blood, crime, and shared administrative burdens.” He gives me a fractured smile. “The traditional foundation of every successful polycule.”

“Did your brother and sister know?”

He shakes his head. “They were both at college by then. They got the same story as everyone else.” His eyes come back to mine. “And then we just stopped talking about him.”

Sixteen. Protecting his mother from a man who beat people to teach rooms full of witnesses how to behave.

I’ve sat across from killers in interview rooms who had less reason and more planning. If the system had worked the way it was supposed to, someone should have stopped his father long before Milo had to. Instead, nobody with a badge came.

“Say something,” Milo says, his voice slow and stripped. “You’re doing the processing face, and it’s making me nervous.”

“You want to know what I hear?”

His jaw tics as he shakes his head.

“I hear a sixteen-year-old kid who watched his father beat his mother bloody and did the only thing that was ever going to stop it.” I keep my voice level. “I’ve read a thousand reports that start exactly like that, Milo. Most of them end with a body anyway. The only difference is whose.”

“That’s a comforting reframing—”

“It’s not a reframing. You know what I am.” I lean in a little to make sure he keeps looking at me. “I’ve put rope around the necks of men like your father. Men the law looked at and left standing because the people they hurt weren’t worth the paperwork. I planned it. I felt nothing but certainty—before, during, after. You did at sixteen what I’ve done as a grown man with training and a team behind me, and you’re sitting here wondering if I’ll flinch?”

His eyes come up. The far-end-of-the-hallway look flickers.

“Stop waiting,” I say. “I’m not going to.”

“You didn’t see me at the warehouse. Fourteen men. I don’t even remember their faces—”

“No, but I saw what was left afterward.” I don’t look away. “I knew exactly what had happened in that warehouse, and I saw what it cost you. That was the moment I knew I was in love with you.”

Milo blinks at me.

“That’s—” He stops. Starts again. “That’s the most unhinged declaration of love I’ve ever received. You can’t say things like that. You can’t just look at the worst thing I’ve ever done, at the literal worst version of me, and go ‘yes, that one, I’ll take that one.’ That’s not how people work, Holden.”

“It’s how I work.”

“Because you’re also broken!”

“Yes.”

I’ve found that agreeing with Milo mid-tirade is the only reliable way to stop one. He builds his arguments expecting resistance. Take the resistance away and he’s left holding a speech with nowhere to put it.

“But I’m also serious.” My thumb moves once over his knuckles. “You were folded up and gone somewhere I couldn’t follow, and I crouched on the floor next to you and realized there wasn’t a version of my life anymore where I didn’t want you in it.”

His eyes shine. He looks away fast, at Frank, at the monitor, at the pill bottles—anywhere that isn’t me.

“For the record,” he says, thick-voiced, “you’re supposed to be the emotionally constipated one. This role reversal is deeply upsetting, and I’d like to speak to the manager.”

“I am the manager.”

“That tracks. That’s very on-brand for you.”

He picks up the bottles, and I wonder if he’s going to pocket them or pitch them, and then he sets them deliberately in the center of the table, labels facing out, like evidence entered into the record.

“These are going to stay visible,” he says. “Not hidden in a cabinet. And definitely not crushed in my food. They go right there, where everybody can see them. So if I ever actually need one, it’s my hand that reaches for it. Transparency. It’s my new kink. Very niche. There’s no subreddit.”

“You’ve given up on the masked stalker already?”

Milo looks at the book still waiting on the counter. “Oh, God no. I intend to finish that book cover to cover and take notes. There might be diagrams.”

“There aren’t diagrams in romance novels.”

“Obviously—but there should be. *I’ll* be the one making diagrams.” He yawns, huge and unguarded, the kind that cracks his jaw. It surprises him more than it surprises me. “Huh. That’s new. Apparently confessing

patricide is excellent for sleep hygiene. Somebody tell the wellness industry."

"Then we're going to bed," I say. "Knox is on watch next. I can already hear him moving this way."

Knox materializes at the bottom of the stairs. He takes in the scene in one pass—the pill bottles centered on the table, Milo's wrecked face, my hand still wrapped around his.

"Everything good?" he asks.

"I killed my dad," Milo says.

Knox doesn't blink. He comes the rest of the way down, boots silent on the wood, and stops at the end of the table. His eyes move over Milo's face.

"He earn it?"

Milo laughs—wet, startled. "Extremely."

"Good." Knox puts one hand on the back of Milo's neck, the way he does with Sage, and holds it there. Milo's shoulders drop two inches.

"You know," Milo says to the table, "when I pictured telling people about this, there was more screaming. Some fainting. A dramatic exit, minimum."

"You want screaming?" Knox asks.

"No, this is great, this is exactly my speed—"

Knox pulls him in. One-armed, against his chest, Milo's face disappearing somewhere around his collarbone. Milo goes rigid for half a second, then folds. His hand comes up and fists in the back of Knox's shirt.

"Can't breathe," he mumbles. "Death by pectoral. Tell the group chat I died doing what I loved."

"He says that every time," Knox tells me, rolling his eyes.

"It's true every time."

Knox lets him go and takes my chair like we're changing shifts at a precinct, because we are. He drags my cold coffee toward himself, frowns at it, and starts scanning the monitor feeds without being asked. Handoff complete.

"Wait," Milo says from the stairs. He darts back, grabs the stalker rom-com off the counter, and hugs it to his chest like a teddy bear with felony charges. "Okay. Now I'm ready for bed."

Upstairs, he lasts exactly as long as it takes to brush his teeth and narrate, in exhaustive detail, the hidden-camera diagram he intends to draw

once the book gives him enough material. Then he’s horizontal, curled into my side, still talking.

“—and the thing about hidden cameras is you need plausible maintenance access, otherwise it’s just set dressing—”

“Milo.”

“Hmm.”

“Sleep.”

“Fine.” He yawns again, jaw cracking. “For the record, telling people things is exhausting. I don’t know how you do it.”

“Practice.”

“You never practice. You store everything in a vault and let it out once a year like a murderous groundhog.” His voice is going soft at the edges, consonants giving up. “Six more weeks of emotional honesty . . .”

Then he’s out. Mid-sentence, one hand still curled in my shirt, breathing slow and even against my ribs. No generator hum or queued-up jokes rattling behind his teeth. Just Milo, quiet, and still here.

I lie awake and listen to the house. Knox’s footsteps on the lower level. The wind pressing against glass. Then I think about the pills sitting on the table, and how he just promised to reach for them himself if he needs them.

Progress.

Sixteen years old, and he picked up the first thing within reach because nobody with a badge was coming to save his mother. I’ve spent my whole career cleaning up after the system that failed her, and him, and Sage, and everyone else who learned the law was a locked door.

I never want to let the people I love down again.

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# TWENTY-ONE
# SAGE



The axe bites into the log with a crack that carries across the clearing, and something low in my stomach tightens in appreciation.

Three weeks in, the cabin has reshaped us.

Not all at once, or in any dramatic kind of way. More like the way water changes a rock, slow and constant, smoothing away the roughest edges before anyone notices the shape has changed.

When Odin first suggested coming out here, it honestly felt like giving up—like running away when all of us wanted to charge headfirst into whatever it took to find Stephen and make him pay for what he did to me and all those girls.

We still want that. But out here, with nothing to chase and nowhere else to look, the urgency has been forced to cool into patience.

Don’t get me wrong, we still lock every door. Knox still circles the house before bed, the others still sit around the table with Milo, going over whatever scraps Odin’s people have sent through on the two laptops, and every unexpected sound in the trees still draws eyes and held breath. Stephen is out there. Nothing about the cabin changes that.

But my lungs are clear now, and the daily hikes we’ve been taking are getting longer. I made it all the way to the lookout this morning without stopping once. Dr. Shahid would probably prefer a medical assessment to prove I’m healing, but I did it with sweat between my shoulder blades, mud on my boots, and the deeply satisfying memory of all five men trying not to look worried every time the path got steep.

I’ll take it.

Knox lifts the axe again, the gray thermal stretched across his shoulders dark with sweat, then brings it down in one clean, brutal arc. The log splits neatly and drops away from the block.

“You know staring is considered rude.” Holden’s voice comes from behind me a second before his hand settles on my hip.

“I’m appreciating the view.”

“There’s a valley right there.”

“I’ve seen the valley.”

His mouth brushes the side of my neck. “Cold, wildcat.”

“Not really. This is making me pretty hot.”

He chuckles as I lean back against him, tilting my head to find his gaze fixed on Knox too.

“Hypocrite,” I tease.

“I didn’t say you should stop.”

“Good.” I tip my chin back and give him my mouth.

He kisses me slow at first—thorough, unhurried, like he’s got all afternoon and intends to use every minute of it. His hand tightens on my hip. His tongue slides against mine, and I forget the valley, the cold air, everything except coffee and control and the low sound he makes when I bite his bottom lip.

When he lets me breathe again, his mouth stays close to my ear. “I like knowing what gets you worked up. Watch him all you want.”

I rest my head against his chest, catching my breath while I do just that.

Knox works like the wood personally offended him. Lift, swing, split. The rhythm settles into something almost meditative, and then—because this cabin loves me—he straightens, drags the hem of his thermal up, and pulls the whole thing over his head.

The groan leaves me before I can stop it.

Sweat runs down the broad plane of his back, carving clean lines over his skin. His shoulders roll as he tosses the shirt onto the woodpile, every muscle moving like it was engineered specifically to ruin my concentration. He picks up the axe again. Swings. The crack of splitting wood echoes off the trees.

“I want to lick him,” I say, gripping Holden’s shirt. “You’re going to have to do something before I jump this railing to get to him.”

His arm bands across my ribs and hauls me flush against him, and his mouth crashes into mine—no patience this time, none of that slow, measured discipline. He kisses me hard enough to steal my balance, one hand fisted in my ponytail, the other splayed low on my stomach, pinning me to the solid line of his body. I whimper when he pulls away.

"There," he says against my lips. "Something."

"Not enough."

"Greedy."

"You knew what you were signing up for."

Across the clearing, the axe pauses mid-swing. Knox looks up at us. Even from here it lands—dark, deliberate, missing nothing. He takes in Holden's arms around me, my flushed face, the way I'm half-melted against him.

The corner of his mouth moves. Barely. A Knox smile.

He sets another log on the block, unhurried, and splits it clean in half.

"He's doing that on purpose now," I say.

"Obviously."

"Somebody better get him up here in the next five minutes, or I'm starting without either of you."

At the far end of the porch, Milo joins in with a groan of his own. "Oh, she's ovulating."

I choke on air. Holden closes his eyes like he regrets every choice that led him here.

"Milo," he says.

"What? I'm observing nature. We're in the wilderness. David Attenborough would want me to document the mating behaviors of horny humans."

"I am going to throw your knife into the ravine," Holden says.

Milo lifts the carving and squints at it critically. "Then you'll never know what I was making for Sage."

In an effort to keep himself busy, he's taken over the far end of the big wooden table with a collection of knives, sandpaper, wood shavings, and several objects that might become recognizable if viewed after a significant head injury. His whittling has so far produced a bird with three wings, a cat that looks like it knows too much about taxes, and the lump currently cradled in his bandaged hands.

I cross the porch and pick up one of his carvings before he can stop me. “Is this a potato?”

“It was going to be a fox.”

I turn it over. There are four stubby legs on one side and what might be a tail emerging from its head. “It looks like a potato that got left in the dark too long.”

“That’s because you’re judging it before it has discovered itself.” He snatches it back, offended. “Also, this is a practice piece. My real project is significantly more sophisticated, and nobody is allowed to see it until it’s ready.”

“Is the real project why you’ve used half the first-aid kit?” Holden asks.

Milo tucks both hands against his chest. His fingers have been wrapped so often over the past week that Micah has started leaving fresh dressings beside his breakfast plate. “Blood is the price of creative genius.”

“Blood is what happens when you carve toward your hand after being told six times not to.”

“Rules like that are how we ended up with mass-produced furniture and no sense of wonder.”

Holden reaches past me, takes the small knife from the table, and closes it before Milo can protest. “You’re done for today.”

“You can’t suppress art.”

“I can suppress you.”

“Promise?”

Holden’s expression barely changes, but the back of Milo’s neck turns pink.

It’s small enough that I might have missed it before the cabin, when everything moved too quickly and danger had a way of drowning out anything that wasn’t screaming. Now I see the way Holden’s hand lingers after he confiscates the knife, his thumb brushing Milo’s wrist, and the way Milo lets him do it without turning the moment into anything louder. I love this for them.

And I love it for me because I like to watch too, and my mind is conjuring up a pretty detailed fantasy involving the two of them and the St. Andrew’s cross in the sex room.

Then Milo looks at me and ruins it.

“Stop watching us like we’re emotionally constipated zoo animals. I have deadlines.”

“For the secret project?”

His eyes brighten. “For the future of sexual craftsmanship.”

“No,” Holden says.

Milo gathers the wood shavings into his shirt, presses the lumpy fox into my hands, and darts through the kitchen before Holden can catch him.

“That’s not suspicious,” I say.

“Everything he does is suspicious.” Holden watches the door swing shut. “The problem is working out which version of suspicious is going to cost us our sanity.”

By dinner, Milo has reappeared in fresh bandages and a clean shirt, which means he’s raided the first-aid kit again. Micah’s gaze drops to his hands the moment he sits down, and Milo immediately tucks them beneath the table.

He takes his seat between Eli and the bread basket like a man with secrets, and I take mine between Knox and Holden like a woman with absolutely none.

Micah’s made short ribs—the kind that surrender if you look at them too long—over polenta I’m going to think about on my deathbed. Eli pours wine. Knox puts a roll on my plate, and it shouldn’t be so hot, but everything these men do with their hands is hot. I’ve made my peace with it.

Nobody has said the word Thanksgiving out loud. It’s Thursday, it’s the end of November, and Micah has spent four hours cooking for six people who can’t go home. I’m not going to be the one to point it out. Say it, and it stops being a dinner we’re having and starts being a holiday we’re missing.

“So,” I say, because I’ve never once left a pot unstirred. “Are we going to talk about the sex room?”

“No,” Holden says, through bread.

“I’m not asking to be hung from the ceiling,” I say. “I’m asking for the basics. A little light spanking. Some group play. The St. Andrew’s cross is—”

“Baby girl.” I’m shocked that it’s Micah who cuts me off. “Six to eight weeks is the estimate for a healthy rib to knit. Not to be strong. To knit. You had a cracked rib and bruising across half your torso. The bruising’s faded. The bone hasn’t finished.” His voice stays soft, but there’s steel under it, and I must be ovulating because I’m finding his stern voice hot too.

“A spanking isn’t just your ass,” Eli adds. “It’s your core bracing. It’s your back arching. It’s every impact traveling up through your spine while your ribs take the vibration. One wrong angle and you’re back at week one.”

“I’ve been careful for weeks—”

“And it’s working,” he says. “That’s why it’s working.”

I hate that he’s right. I hate it so much I take a bite of polenta just to have somewhere to put my frustration.

“Two more weeks,” Holden says. “Minimum. Then we reassess.”

“Two weeks,” I repeat. “Of what? Celibacy?”

Milo makes a strangled noise into his wine. “Kitten, you had five men in a hot tub last week, and at least one of us in your bed most nights. Celibacy left this conversation in a helicopter.”

“Oral exists,” Knox says, turning his water glass. “Hands exist. Whole menus that never touch your ribs.”

My breath quickens. “Tell me about them.”

Knox sets his water glass down and leans back. “You. On the table.” He gestures at the space between the polenta and the bread basket like he’s clearing a perimeter. “Hands and mouths only. Nobody moves you. Nobody bends you. You lie there. We do the work.”

Every nerve in my body stands up and volunteers.

“That’s the appetizer,” Eli says, and his voice has dropped into the register that makes my thighs press together under the table.

“Entrée,” Micah says, “is you in the big bed. On your back. Ribs supported with pillows. One of us between your thighs until you forget why you wanted the cross in the first place.” He says it so gentle, it somehow makes it filthier.

“Dessert,” Milo says, hand raised like he’s waiting to be called on, “is me at the foot of the bed providing commentary, color, and emotional support—”

“You’re not narrating,” Holden says.

“I narrate everything. It’s my gift.”

The conversation grows loud and overlapping, punctuated by Milo’s commentary, which is constant and rarely helpful and absolutely essential. For one stretch of time, the world stops existing past the perimeter cameras. There is only the table, the bread passing from hand to hand, Knox’s knee

pressed against mine, and Micah leaning over to add more food to my plate while they discuss low-impact group sex.

This is what I want.

Not the hiding or the waiting, and definitely not the threat that brought us here, but this—the domestic mess of them. Holden telling Milo to quit while he's ahead, then cutting the meat on his plate without a word when the bandages make the knife awkward. Eli pretending not to notice as I take a piece of bread from his plate instead of mine. Knox listening to every word while adding very few of his own. Micah touching my shoulder as he moves behind me because contact has become its own quiet language between us.

The world isn't safe, and perhaps it never will be, but for one perfect meal it is exactly the size of this table, with everyone I love sitting around it.

A timer goes off upstairs, and Milo shoots to his feet.

"It's cured."

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# TWENTY-TWO
# SAGE



Holden lowers his fork. “What’s cured?”

“The solution.” Milo points toward the ceiling. “Everyone upstairs. Master bedroom. Mandatory attendance.”

“We’re in the middle of a discussion,” Eli says.

“Exactly. And the solution to kitten’s low-impact group needs is ready.”

“What’s ready?” Micah asks.

“Technically, it’s a gift for kitten, but in the same way the internet is technically a communications network. We all benefit.”

“That explanation made it worse,” Micah says.

“Good art challenges people.”

He dashes for the stairs before any of us agree, and because our collective response to Milo doing something alarming is apparently to follow him toward it, we clear the table and go after him.

He’s waiting in the master suite when I step out of the elevator, standing at the foot of the enormous bed with a long parcel wrapped in one of the kitchen towels. The fire is burning low in the stone surround, warming the room against the cold gathering on the other side of the glass, and Milo has turned on every lamp as if he’s about to auction something illegal.

Which, knowing him, he might be.

“Kitten.” He holds out his bandaged hand. “Front and center.”

I move closer while the others spread through the room behind me. Holden stays by the elevator with his arms folded, already braced for

property damage. Knox takes up position by the fireplace, his attention fixed on the parcel.

“Before the unveiling, I’d like to explain my creative journey.” Milo lifts the parcel. “It began with disappointment. John Grisham gave me a judge who complained for several hundred pages and not one useful felony. Then I found the blue-mask book and, finally, an author brave enough to ask the important questions.”

“What questions?” I ask.

“What if knife, but sex?”

Holden looks at the ceiling like it might intervene.

Milo unwraps the parcel with a flourish, his bandaged hand wrapped firmly around the handle.

The blade is long and bright, polished until the firelight slides along its edge. What I can see of the handle is a pale honey-colored wood, sanded smooth and sealed to a deep shine. Even gripped in his hand, I can see the hours he’s put into it.

Milo made me a knife.

“The book had this *scene*,” he says, too excited to notice that every man behind me has gone still. “With a knife.”

“A sex scene?” Micah asks.

“Yes. And it’s excellent in theory but deeply irresponsible in execution. I went downstairs to inspect Odin’s knives and discovered that most commercially manufactured handles are a vaginal disaster. There are rivets. Seams. Aggressive angles. One had a decorative ridge that could sand the finish off a table.”

I bite the inside of my cheek. “You were worried about my vagina?”

“Your delicate insides,” he corrects. “I learned a lot about the female reproductive system when I researched your menstrual cycle. Cuts, abrasions, and infections are all mood killers. So I found the smoothest wood available, designed a more anatomically considerate handle, sanded it through eight grades, and applied three coats of body-safe resin.”

Eli’s attention snaps to the knife in Milo’s bandaged hand. “How long did you let that cure?”

“For exactly as long as it needed. I’m chaotic, not negligent.”

“Those aren’t mutually exclusive,” Holden mutters.

“I also created a sanitation protocol, because the blade can still be used for murder.” Milo flips the towel over to reveal a hand-drawn chart.

“Murder and masturbation are separate hygienic events. I can’t believe I need to say that.”

“You didn’t need to at all,” Micah says.

“I absolutely did. Some of you heathens have a blood kink.” He looks pointedly at Holden.

“Okay, you’ve obviously put a lot of thought into this,” Eli says, still eyeing the knife. “But what are you genuinely expecting to happen here?”

“This.” Milo places one knee on the corner of the bed, raises the knife, and drives the blade into the mattress.

The entire room freezes.

The handle stands upright in the corner, and now that it’s positioned the way he intended, there is no mistaking what he’s carved. The smooth wooden shaft has a slight upward curve, a defined head, and enough careful attention to proportion that I’m forced to reassess the artistic merit of the tax-paying cat carving downstairs.

Holden is the first to find his voice.

“You just fucking stabbed a hole in a mattress on a bed that isn’t ours.”

“I used the corner,” Milo says. “And Odin is a billionaire. This is barely vandalism at his tax bracket.”

“You made me a cock-handled knife,” I say.

His grin nearly splits his face. “Your fucking knife. You can use it for murder, and then, after following the clearly marked sanitation procedure, you can use it to get off. It’s practical, it’s personal, and it celebrates all your interests.”

I stare at the knife. “I love it.”

Holden looks resigned. Eli looks tired. Micah bites the inside of his cheek, and Knox studies the knife as if he’s deciding whether Milo should ever be allowed near wood again.

“What?” I look between them. “He thought about my interests.”

“Exactly.” Milo grabs the hem of his shirt. “And because the gift is really for everyone, I have planned what could be the best group session we’ve ever had. Knox holds the knife, Holden gives directions, Eli handles positioning, Micah monitors—”

He whips the shirt over his head, and a gasp tears out of my throat.

Not the good kind.

Red welts stripe his chest and stomach, disappearing beneath the waistband of his jeans and spreading over both arms in angry, raised

patches. Some have been scratched open. Others cluster beneath the edges of the bandages around his hands, where the skin looks hot and swollen.

Micah is moving before Milo finishes pulling the shirt free.

“Don’t touch him,” he says, catching my wrist as I reach forward. “Not yet.”

Milo looks down at himself as if he’s only just remembered the rash is there. “There has been a minor complication.”

“That’s not from cutting yourself.” Micah takes his wrist carefully and starts peeling away one of the dressings. “How long has it looked like this?”

“Define looked.”

“Milo.”

“It got dramatic this afternoon.”

Micah exposes the skin beneath the bandage, and his expression changes. “What wood did you use?”

“Tree of heaven.” Milo smiles at me, proud all over again. “It’s called the tree of heaven, so I thought I’d show you God with it.”

For one long moment, nobody speaks.

Then Micah looks up. “You fucking idiot. That sap causes skin irritation.”

Holden drags a hand down his face. “I thought you knew wood.”

Milo frowns. “Why would I know wood?”

“You work at a hardware store,” Eli says.

“Work is such a broad term.”

Knox pushes away from the fireplace. “How did you know what the tree was called?”

“It had a sign with a hand on it.”

Knox stops beside the bed. “Did the hand have a cross over it?”

“Yeah, like a treasure map.”

“God save me.”

Knox pulls the knife out of the mattress and throws it into the fire.

“The fucking knife!” Milo lunges, but Holden catches him around the waist before he gets within reach of the flames. “Do you know how long I spent getting the head symmetrical? I modeled it after Holden’s beautiful dick.”

Holden’s arm tightens, and the tips of his ears turn red.

“Nothing about this was body-safe,” Eli says as Holden hauls him back.

“The resin was certified.”

“The tree tried to kill you.”

“That’s how you know it was perfect for kitten. She survives everything.”

The handle catches with a small, tragic flame.

I press my lips together, but a laugh escapes anyway. It hurts Milo’s feelings for approximately half a second before he points at me from inside Holden’s grip.

“She loved it. Witnesses heard her. When we get back home, I’m going to get one of those build-a-dildo kits and make you an even better fucking knife. The fucking knife two point oh. I’ll make you one in every size so you can pick if you want to fuck Knoxie Knife or Milo Machete.”

“I would love that,” I say, laughing so hard I’m wiping tears from my eyes.

“Holden, get his clothes into a bag and wash your hands,” Micah says, taking control of the room. “Eli, there’s colloidal oatmeal in the medical supplies. Knox, find every piece of that wood and anything he used to carve it, but don’t touch it with bare skin.”

“I wore gloves,” Milo says.

Micah looks at his bandaged hands. “Clearly.”

“One tore.”

“And the rash across your chest?”

“It was hot, so I took my shirt off. Then I carried the branch inside.” He glances down at the welts. “In retrospect, pressing it against my body may have been an intimacy the tree hadn’t consented to.”

“Bathroom,” Micah orders.

The room breaks into motion. Eli and Knox head for the stairs, while Holden releases Milo only long enough to strip the contaminated jeans from him, bundling them with the shirt and kitchen towel. Micah turns on the shower and pushes Milo under lukewarm water, ignoring every complaint about his creative process being washed away.

I stand beside the bed for one second longer, watching my beautiful, ridiculous knife blacken in the fireplace.

Then I follow Milo and help by filling the giant tub.

By the time Micah is satisfied that every trace of sap is gone, Eli has returned with the oatmeal treatment, clean towels, and enough antihistamines to make Milo suspicious. The bathwater clouds as Micah

empties the packet beneath the running faucet, turning pale and milky while Milo peers over his shoulder.

“This isn’t how I imagined getting naked with kitten tonight.”

“Get in,” Micah says.

“You’re very bossy when my epidermis is compromised.”

“Get the fuck in the bath, Milo.”

“I’d have preferred a fucking bath with the fucking knife . . .” Milo gets in.

The tub is large enough for four, but the others leave us after Micah gives us strict instructions about water temperature, scratching, and what to do if the rash spreads or Milo starts having trouble breathing. Holden pauses at the door to make sure Milo actually takes the tablets. Eli collects the contaminated towel and clothing. Knox returns long enough to report that the remaining wood, shavings, and tools are secured outside, then looks at Milo soaking beneath the skylight.

“Treasure map,” he mutters, and walks away.

I wait until I’m sure they’re all downstairs, then strip and climb into the bath next to Milo.

“You know what, this is probably better than what I imagined,” Milo says as I sink into the water across from him.

The water is warm rather than hot, the oatmeal making it silky against my skin. I don’t move to wrap my arms around him because nearly every part of his torso is irritated, but I rest my hands against the porcelain and let his legs entwine with mine.

“It’s kinda nice, huh?”

I tip my head back and look up at the stars. Night has gathered over the cabin while everything went wrong. Through the skylight, the stars look close enough to touch, sharp white points scattered across a black so deep it makes the bathroom feel like the only lit place left in the world.

“Yeah,” Milo says. “I mean, it’s not group sex and knife fucking. But it is nice.”

“I really did love it,” I tell him, lifting my head so I can look at him. “The only way it could be better is if it vibrated.”

He perks up. “Oh! I should work on a taser version.”

“You made me something that was a weapon and a sex toy. I don’t think anyone has ever understood me so accurately.”

“It was ergonomically designed.”

“I could tell.”

“The curve took four attempts.”

“The practice shows.”

He shifts against me, and the water laps softly against the sides of the tub.

“This really is nice,” he says after a while. “It’s itchy. But it’s nice.”

“High praise.”

“I’m sorry I fucked up your fucking knife.”

“It’s okay.” I smile as I keep my eyes on the stars. “It’s the thought that counts.”

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# TWENTY-THREE
# SAGE



"Good girl. That's it. Let him have you."

*Good girl.* For half a second I'm in a car with a bottle of water in my hand.

Then I shove it back down, because Stephen doesn't get this too. He doesn't get to have *this*. He doesn't get to ruin Eli's voice in my ear, Micah's tongue between my thighs.

One week after Milo's fucking knife went up in smoke, I'm finally in the sex room, stretched along the wide padded bench with Eli behind me and Micah kneeling between my thighs. The St. Andrew's cross stays in the corner, still forbidden for another week, but I'm too busy appreciating the compromise to care.

Eli's chest is warm against my back as he keeps my bound wrists steady beside my hips. The silk rope loops clean and snug, fastening each wrist to a low ring set into the bench, while an angled cushion supports my upper body and keeps the strain away from my ribs.

I'm restrained, open and completely at their mercy.

Which is exactly where I want to be.

Micah's tongue drags slow and flat before curling, finding the exact spot that makes my hips jerk so I'm pulling against the restraints. He hums—a low, satisfied vibration that I feel everywhere—and his hands press my thighs wider, holding me open while Eli holds me still.

"Breathe, little savage," Eli murmurs. His lips brush the shell of my ear, and a drop of heat lands on my chest. A single point of fire between my

breasts.

I hiss, and my whole body jolts against the rope. The restraints catch me—silk snug around my wrists—and the wax hardens as fast as it burned, leaving a tight little spot cooling on my skin.

“You’re tensing,” Eli says, entirely too calm, and when I twist my head I see it in his hand. Crimson taper, steady flame, a glisten of melted wax trembling at the rim. One hand wraps around my neck, thumb tracing my jaw. “Relax.”

He tilts the candle.

The next drop hits my collarbone. Then the slope of my breast. Each one is a small detonation—white-hot for a heartbeat, then a slow, spreading warmth that sinks through skin into muscle into bone. I hiss through my teeth and Micah groans against me like he felt it too, his hands tightening on my thighs, his tongue never stopping its slow, devastating work.

“They say wax play is about trust,” Eli murmurs, hovering the flame over my nipple. Waiting. Letting me feel the heat of it before a single drop falls. “I think it’s about attention. One second of looking away and someone gets hurt.”

“Eli—”

“Watch.”

The wax falls directly onto my nipple and the sound that tears out of me is raw and cracked and honest. My hips buck so hard Micah has to wrap an arm across my pelvis to pin me down. The pain is perfect.

“Again,” I gasp.

“Greedy.”

“You knew what you were signing up for.”

Eli laughs—low and dark, the sound of a man whose compartments are burning down right along with the candle—and drips a line across my other breast. Slow. Deliberate. Painting me. I watch the wax land and splinter into crimson petals across my skin. I watch myself take it. Every drop is proof that I’m here. I’m feeling this. Nobody took this from me, because I’m the one who asked for it.

Micah chooses that moment to slide two fingers inside me and curl them.

“Don’t stop,” I manage. “Either of you. Don’t you dare stop.”

“Never,” Eli says, and tilts the candle again.

This time the wax lands as Micah’s tongue ruins me.

“I can’t—fuck—Micah, right there—”

“Come on my face, baby girl.” Micah’s voice is muffled against my skin, his breath hot, and then his mouth seals over my clit and sucks and the world whites out at the edges.

The sensations collide—fire on my chest, his mouth between my thighs, rope at my wrists—and I come apart so violently that the bench creaks under me.

Eli’s hand wraps around my jaw. “Eyes up. Look at me.”

I force my eyes open. He’s looking down at me with that amber gaze, and the combination of his control and Micah’s mouth is a kind of sensory annihilation I will never get used to.

My back arches.

“You’re so beautiful like this,” Eli says, and his voice cracks on *beautiful*, just barely, just enough to hear the man behind the discipline. “Taking everything we give you. You know that?”

“Yes,” I breathe, and then, because his voice cracked and I want to hear it break completely, I add, “More.”

Something moves behind Eli’s eyes. The teacher and the executioner, finally standing in the same room.

He sets the candle in its holder. The loss of the flame should disappoint me, but then his hands are on me—both of them, free for the first time—and I understand he’s done playing at a distance. He peels a cooled wax petal from my breast with his thumbnail, slow enough that I feel every edge lift, and then his mouth replaces it. Hot. Wet. Sucking the sensitive skin where the wax burned.

“Oh—fuck—”

“Micah.” Eli’s voice against my chest. “Move.”

They rearrange me like a shared project. Micah slides out from between my thighs, mouth shining, eyes dark, and kisses his way up my stomach while Eli pulls the cushion from beneath me and lays me flat. My wrists stay bound. My ribs don’t even twinge—they’ve thought of everything.

Eli strips his shirt over his head. Then his pants. He climbs onto the bench between my spread knees and the look on his face is not controlled at all anymore. It’s hunger wearing the costume of control, and the costume is in tatters.

“Hold on to the rope,” he says.

I wrap my fingers around the silk at my wrists.

He pushes into me in one long stroke, and the groan that leaves him is broken. Grateful. Starving. He fills me so deep my heels dig into the padding and my back bows off the bench, and Micah is there instantly, one hand cradling my skull, his mouth finding mine.

“Breathe, baby girl,” Micah whispers against my lips, an echo of Eli’s earlier command, and the symmetry of it makes me dizzy. They share everything now. Even the words.

Eli sets a rhythm that isn’t gentle. Each thrust rocks me against the restraints, the silk biting my wrists, the remaining wax petals cracking loose from my skin and scattering across the black padding like evidence. I love it. I love the mess of it. I love that there’s no part of me they’re being careful with right now except the parts that still need it.

“Look at her,” Eli grits out. “Look at that hunger in her eyes. She wants more.”

“Is that right, baby girl?” Micah asks, his thumb circling my nipple where the wax burned it. “You still need more?”

“More,” I confirm, because I’m greedy, because I’m the kind of person they make these rooms for.

“Tell us what you need,” Micah says, his gray-blue eyes steady on mine. There’s no demand there, just openness, like always—the quiet offer to give whatever I ask for, no matter how raw or reckless.

“You in my mouth,” I manage, breathless. “I want to choke on you.”

Micah’s breath catches, and for half a second the gentleness wars with the want on his face. “Your ribs—”

“My ribs aren’t in my throat.”

Eli huffs a laugh that breaks into a groan as he shifts his hips, staying buried but going still. “You heard her,” he says. “Give the lady what she asked for.”

Micah moves up my body, kissing the redness between my breasts where the wax has been removed, and then he’s rising over me, one knee braced beside my shoulder, his hand wrapping around the back of the bench above my head. He’s being so careful with me, even now, even with his cock flushed dark and inches from my mouth.

“Shake your head if it’s too much,” he says, voice gone rough. “Then I stop. No negotiating.”

I answer by licking the head of him, slow, tasting salt and the faint sweetness of his skin.

“Fuck.” His whole body shudders. “Sage—”

I take him into my mouth, and his words dissolve. He eases in shallow, trembling with the effort of holding back, and I make a low sound of protest and take him deeper myself. My bound hands can’t guide him, so I use my throat instead—relaxing, opening, swallowing around him until his head drops forward and the noises coming out of him aren’t words anymore.

“So fucking perfect,” Eli breathes, and I feel him start to move again, slow and deep, matching the rhythm of Micah in my mouth. “And she’s ours, Micah.”

Micah looks down at me through his lashes, his curls falling forward, and the expression on his face is ruined in the best way. “Baby girl,” he manages. “You feel—God, your mouth—”

I hum around him, and he curses. Eli picks that exact moment to roll his hips, and my vision sparks. The moan that comes out of me vibrates straight through Micah, and suddenly we’re a closed circuit, every movement feeding the next. Eli’s thrusts rock me up onto Micah, Micah’s gasps spur Eli harder, my body the wire the current runs through.

“I’m close,” Micah warns, giving me every chance to turn away. “Sage, I’m—”

I keep my eyes on his and swallow him deeper, and that’s what does it. He breaks with my name cracked open in his mouth, spilling down my throat while his whole body shakes over me, and I take all of it, greedy, triumphant, drinking down the proof that I can still undo a man this completely.

“Beautiful,” Eli grits out. His rhythm stutters, and his hand slides between us, thumb finding my clit. Three strokes is all it takes, and I’m coming with Micah still in my mouth and Eli buried to the root, everything tightening and releasing at once, the rope creaking at my wrists as I pull against it just to feel it hold.

Eli lasts exactly as long as it takes Micah to ease gently from my mouth, his thumb tracing my swollen bottom lip as he whispers, “Breathe, baby girl.”

“Sage—fuck—I can’t—” The sentence dies unfinished.

Eli’s hands grip my hips, and his rhythm falls apart. All that discipline disappears as he buries himself deep and comes in hot pulses while I clench around him. “Fuck—Sage—”

When he finally stills, the three of us breathe together in the flickering dark. My skin is mapped in cooling petals and sweat, my wrists aching sweetly against the silk.

“Okay?” Eli asks, panting.

“Very okay,” I say. “Somebody untie me before I fall asleep like this and wake up cranky.”

Micah laughs—wrecked, warm—and moves first. His fingers work the knots at my wrists while Eli eases out of me slowly, one hand braced on my hip, his mouth pressed to my temple through the whole withdrawal like he’s apologizing for leaving.

The silk falls away. Micah lifts each of my wrists to his mouth in turn, kissing the reddened skin where the rope bit, checking the circulation with his thumbs, watching my fingers flex.

“Good?” he asks.

“Good.” I catch his face before he can retreat into caretaking and kiss him properly. I can taste myself on his mouth, and underneath it, him. “Thank you.”

“For what?”

“For giving me what I asked for. For trusting me to know my limits.”

His eyes go soft in the way that still makes my chest ache. Then Eli’s hand slides up my spine, and he peels another wax petal from my collarbone—slow, deliberate, every edge lifting free.

“We’ve made a mess,” he says, holding the crimson wax between his fingers.

“You love the mess,” I say.

“I love you.” He says it like it comes easy for him now, and I’m glad it does, because we’ve conquered a lot to get here.

Micah leaves the room for a moment, and Eli’s eyes move over my body, taking in the marks, the rope burn, the wreckage he helped make. When Micah returns, he has a blanket and hands Eli a washcloth.

“Lie still,” Eli says. “I’m going to clean you up.”

He works the washcloth over my chest while Micah wraps the blanket around my shoulders. The wax comes away piece by piece.

“I could stay in this room all day,” I say, sighing happily.

“That could be arranged,” Eli murmurs, and when he drags the washcloth over my collarbone, I shudder. He presses his mouth to the hollow of my throat, and suddenly I’m reaching for them again, one hand

sliding into the back of Micah’s hair while the other drags Eli toward my mouth.

Our lips have barely brushed when the security chime sounds downstairs.

Then voices.

Eli’s head snaps up. Micah freezes, eyes hard, every trace of softness replaced by alert.

“Is someone here?” I ask as all three of us go silent, listening to what’s happening below.

Those aren’t the voices of the other men—theirs I’d recognize through walls, through floors, through anything. This is different. A voice I know, but that doesn’t belong in this cabin, in these mountains, in this carefully sealed world we’ve built.

Odin.

“Shit,” Micah says.

“Shit,” I agree.

Eli is already moving, untangling from both of us, reaching for his jeans on the floor.

Micah pulls on sweatpants. I grab the first thing I can find—Eli’s hoodie, because his hoodies have become my unofficial uniform—and yank it over my head. It falls to mid-thigh and smells like cedar and laundry detergent.

We look at each other. Hair wrecked. Faces flushed. Micah has a hickey blooming on his collarbone that I vividly remember giving him.

“We look like we just had sex,” I say.

“We did just have sex,” Micah points out.

“We look like it, though.”

“Sage.” Eli cups my face, kisses me once, brief and firm. “Nobody in this house thinks we were up here talking. Now, come on.”

We head downstairs.

The living room is full. Knox is standing by the fireplace, arms folded, face giving away nothing. Across the room, Milo scratches at one of the last stubborn patches on his forearm until Holden catches his wrist and lowers his hand, but the second Holden turns away, Milo starts again.

Odin is in the center of the room, wearing a charcoal suit. I genuinely don’t think he understands the term “smart casual.”

He looks at the three of us coming down the stairs and says nothing of how disheveled we all look.

“Miss Adams. Good to see you looking well.”

“What’s happened?” I ask, because Odin doesn’t strike me as a person who makes house calls for good news, and he definitely doesn’t seem the type to drive to a classified mountain cabin for a wellness check.

“Nothing has happened. That’s precisely the issue.” He folds his hands behind his back. “The man we now know as Stephen Mercer-Davis is in the wind.”

The room exchanges glances.

“My team tracked him across state lines—Ohio, then Pennsylvania, then briefly into Maryland. Cash transactions only, no digital footprint, different vehicles at each stop. He was moving fast and moving smart.” Odin pauses. “Then the trail vanished. Completely. Outside Annapolis, three weeks ago. No credit activity. No phone pings. No vehicle sightings.”

“He got on a boat,” Milo says. Not a question.

“That’s our assessment. The marina in Annapolis showed a private vessel departing on the same date. No passenger manifest required for that class of craft. If he’s on it, he could be anywhere—Caribbean, Mediterranean, South America.”

“Okay, but how?” Milo’s hand goes still on his arm. “I’ve had scripts running on every alias, every plate, every card hash that man has ever breathed near. Four weeks. I got aggressive nonexistence. You got him through three states with vehicle swaps and cash only. So either your people are better than me—respectfully, no—or somebody handed you a trail.”

“My people have access you do not,” Odin says.

“Everybody has access I don’t have.” Milo shrugs. “I take it anyway.”

“Yes.” Odin lets that sit one second too long. “Which is why I use my people.”

“Or he could have doubled back,” Holden says. Flat. The cop brain running. “He went quiet for six weeks before the beach house too. We called that an absence. It was a man working.”

“Possible but unlikely. My team has maintained surveillance on your property, the beach house, and every known associate. Nothing. No approach, no contact, no indication he’s returned to the area.” Odin meets Holden’s eyes. “We’ll keep the investigation open, of course. Every

resource stays active until he's found or confirmed dead. But at this moment, the immediate threat has dissolved."

"Dissolved," Knox repeats, and the word sounds heavier coming out of his mouth. Like he's testing its weight and finding it insufficient.

"For now," Odin says. "Which means it's time to come home."

Nobody speaks.

We've had an entire month of mountain air and safety and bread and sex and fairy lights and wood carving and nobody trying to kill me—well, except Milo with his "fucking knife"—and now the door is open and the world is on the other side of it and I'm not sure any of us are ready to walk through.

"The house has been swept," Odin continues. "Clean. No devices, no surveillance, no evidence of entry. My team will maintain a presence for as long as you need—rolling patrol, exterior cameras. You'll have a security upgrade installed before you arrive."

"And then what?" Eli asks.

"You resume your lives. With appropriate caution."

"Appropriate caution," Milo repeats. "Is that the official Odin term for constant low-grade terror?"

"It's the official Odin term for reminding the Hangmen—as you like to call yourselves—that they have work to do. The list of men requiring a reckoning hasn't gotten any shorter in the last month."

I get it. We're being told to resume the culling. No more vacation.

There's a sharp, sudden ache in my chest—a combination of dread, and relief, and a tiny, sick thrill that I'm too ashamed to name. We were always going to go back. This moment was coming since the morning I woke up with an oxygen mask strapped to my face.

"Cool," Milo says, with all the conviction of a wet bag of Cheerios. "Are we allowed to get groceries, or do we just start hunting predators the moment we set foot in Hunter Harbor?"

Odin's mouth twitches. "Live as you wish. Just be watchful." He lets the words hang, then turns his gaze on me. "I also understand you have a birthday approaching, Miss Adams."

I blink. "How do you know that?"

"I know most things," he states. "I'd like to offer one of the private rooms at the club for your celebrations. I'll have my assistant reach out to you with details."

“Um . . . thanks,” I say, glancing past him toward the valley and the life we’ve left scattered through every part of the cabin. The fairy lights Milo hung. The woodpile Knox built. The kitchen Micah took over. Eli’s books and the notebooks Holden has stacked beside Milo’s laptops.

For a month, this borrowed place has given us somewhere to breathe. Now the door back to the world is open.

“When do we need to go?” I ask.

“Tomorrow,” Odin says. “Same protocol as the arrival. I’ll have a vehicle here at dawn.”

He buttons his jacket and adjusts the cuff. Whatever human warmth might exist underneath the charcoal and the silver and the pale eyes, he doesn’t let us see it.

Odin turns toward the door, then pauses beside Holden and lowers his voice.

“The expanded report I requested is overdue.”

Holden’s shoulders settle. “I’m still verifying a few details. You’ll have it at the next strategy meeting.”

“Verifying,” Odin repeats, studying him. “Of course.”

Holden doesn’t look away. “Next meeting.”

Odin inclines his head, but the look he gives Holden makes it clear he hasn’t mistaken the delay for inefficiency. He knows Holden is stalling, and I have no idea why.

“See that I do.” Odin turns back to the rest of us. “Rest well tonight. Enjoy your last evening.”

He leaves. The front door closes, and we all stand there.

Micah is the first to move. He lets out a long, thin sigh and rakes a hand through his hair, then glares at the floor. “Well. I guess the honeymoon’s over.”

Eli rubs the back of his neck, processing. “Does anyone think this is actually done?”

“Absolutely not,” Holden says, but his hands have relaxed. “Mercer-Davis is a man with a vendetta. He won’t run forever.”

“Assholes always have a way of making everything shit,” Milo adds, voice too steady for how his fingers vibrate against the armrest.

I look around the room and see the same thing on every face. Even Knox has a crease between his brows.

“Then we make tonight count,” I say, because if this is our last evening, I’m not spending it bracing for tomorrow. “Whatever that means. Together, separate, quiet, loud. I’m not sitting in a chair waiting for dawn.”

Milo’s fingers still against his arm. “Kitten’s going sentimental on us.”

“I am,” I admit, my throat tightening. “I forgot what it was like to live without looking over my shoulder or scanning every room for danger.” I glance toward the windows and the valley beyond. “Out here, the most we had to worry about was Stephen the deer.”

“Stephen the *sick-looking* deer,” Milo corrects. “He could be rabid. We just don’t know.”

I snort, the sound breaking some of the tension in the room, and Milo’s grin sharpens with victory. “Rabid deer, land management, tactical tree houses—you’ve had a very full month, Milo.”

“Productive,” he agrees, but his eyes are on me, searching for something underneath the joke.

I find myself moving toward Knox without deciding to, drawn by the same gravity that’s always pulled me to him—the promise of stillness inside all his mass. He unfolds his arms when I reach him, and I step into the space he makes, his hand settling heavy and warm at the base of my spine.

“One night,” I say into the quiet. “That’s what we have. What do we do with it?”

Micah answers first, because Micah always knows what people need before they ask. “We finish what we started upstairs. Properly. With all of us.”

My stomach flips. “All of us?”

“You wanted the cross,” Eli says, voice careful. “We can adapt. Ropes instead of straps. Support instead of suspension. You’ve earned the room.”

“And after?” Holden asks.

“After,” I say, turning in Knox’s hold so I can see all of them, “we sleep together. Actually sleep. In the big bed, limbs tangled, someone snoring—”

“Holden snores,” Milo volunteers.

“I do not.”

“You absolutely do. It’s like a piglet snuffling around on the ground.”

I laugh, and Knox’s hand tightens at my back.

“Then it’s settled,” I say, and my voice comes out steadier than I feel. “We play until we’re all sated and exhausted. Then we sleep. And tomorrow

we go back to being people who hunt monsters. And who monsters hunt back."

Knox's hand slides up my spine, stopping between my shoulder blades. "Fury." Just my name, but it carries everything—warning, want, the size of what we've just agreed to. "We don't have to. If you don't want to. We could leave. Start again somewhere else."

"I read that contract, Knox. There's no leaving this. And honestly, I don't want to." I turn my face into his chest, breathe in the smell of woodsmoke and clean sweat. "I can't let Stephen chase me out of my own life. And none of us can walk away when what we do is making the world safer."

I lift my face from Knox's chest and look around at the five men I've chosen.

"Take me upstairs," I say.

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# TWENTY-FOUR
# SAGE



The stairs creak under my bare feet. Eli's hoodie brushes my thighs with every step, and the rope burns on my wrists sting in a way I've decided to enjoy. I don't look back. I don't have to—five sets of footsteps behind me, and only one of them is trying to be quiet. The sex room door is still open.

I step inside and turn, already reaching for the hem of the hoodie. "Safe word is Hangmen," I say, my voice steady even as my pulse kicks.

Eli nods. "Ropes," he says to the others. "Just enough to hold her open for us."

The others file in, and the air thickens with intent. Knox moves first, his hands gentle as he guides me to the cross, while Holden unclips the leather cuffs and threads silk through the waiting rings. The cool wood presses against my spine as Knox settles my wrists into the wide loops, positioning them above the marks Eli left earlier.

I breathe through the stretch in my shoulders.

"You say if it's too much," Knox says.

I nod.

Holden drops to his knees and binds my ankles, spreading me wide while keeping the loops loose enough that my ribs don't pull. The air is already stifling with the heat of five men closing in.

Milo steps up beside me, tracing a single finger down the center of my stomach. "I think we should start with sensory deprivation," he says, a

smile curving his lips. “It’s scientifically proven to heighten nerve responses. I read an article. Well, half an article, but I got the gist.”

Holden sighs, a sound of profound suffering, but a long strip of black silk appears in his hands. “For once, the menace makes a valid point.”

He steps behind the cross, and the silk slides over my eyes, pulling snug and plunging me into absolute darkness. My breath hitches. Without my sight, the room shrinks down to the sound of five men breathing, the crackle of the fire, and the sudden, acute awareness of my own exposed skin. The loss of control makes my anxiety give a familiar little spike.

*In for four. Hold for four. Out for four.* The same count that did nothing for me inside a wall. It works here. Here I picked the room.

“We’ve got you, Fury,” Knox rumbles, his massive hands settling heavily on my outer thighs. The heat of his palms anchors me instantly, grounding me in the dark.

“Just feel us, little savage,” Eli murmurs from somewhere to my right. His knuckles graze my hip bone, sending a shiver skating up my ribs.

Then they’re everywhere.

Micah’s mouth finds my neck, his lips soft and open, sucking a fresh mark onto my skin. Milo’s hands trace the dip of my waist. Holden shifts lower, his thumbs pressing into the sensitive flesh of my inner thighs, parting me wider.

“Beautiful,” Holden breathes. “Fucking perfect.”

He coats his fingers in my slickness and slides them deep inside me with the exact ruthlessness I crave from him. I arch against the cross, a broken sound tearing from my throat. The silk rope pulls taut against my wrists.

“Careful,” Micah whispers, his hand coming up to cup my breast, thumb rolling the nipple that’s still wildly sensitive from the wax. “Don’t fight the bindings, baby girl. Just let us give it to you.”

I nod frantically, unable to form words. Holden’s fingers curl inside me, hitting that deep, aching spot again and again. At the same time, Eli’s mouth closes over my other breast, his teeth scraping the peak in a way that makes my hips buck instinctively. Knox’s hands clamp down over my thighs, holding me steady, absorbing the shock of my movements so my healing ribs don’t have to take the strain.

They are a machine built entirely for my undoing.

The dread of tomorrow—the return to Hunter Harbor, the hunt for Stephen, the blood and the shadows—melts away under the absolute sensory overload. There is no past and no future. There is only the heat of Eli's mouth, the frantic glide of Holden's fingers, Micah's soothing whispers, Knox's immovable strength, and Milo dragging his teeth lightly down the center of my stomach.

I throw my head back against the wood, blind and bound and completely free, and let my Hangmen take me apart.

Holden's fingers slow before the pleasure can tip me over.

I make a sound of pure betrayal.

"No."

"No?" His voice comes from below me, calm enough to be criminal. "You want to reconsider that answer?"

"No, don't stop."

"That's better."

He withdraws anyway.

The emptiness is immediate and infuriating. I pull against the silk before I remember not to, the rope tightening around my wrists as Knox's hands shift higher on my thighs.

"Easy, Fury."

"I'm going to kill him."

"Tomorrow," Milo says against my stomach. "Tonight's schedule is full."

His teeth catch lightly at my hip. Micah's thumb continues its slow pass over my nipple, soothing where Eli's mouth left it aching, and somewhere close, Holden gives a quiet laugh.

"You wanted all of us," he says.

"I do."

"Then you wait for all of us."

A mouth replaces his fingers.

My entire body jerks.

Knox takes the movement without letting my back lift from the cross. His palms bracket my hips now, so large they feel like restraints of their own, and Holden's tongue moves over me with none of Micah's gentle patience. Precise. Ruthless. Like he's gathered evidence on every reaction I've ever had and is building a case designed to destroy me.

"Fuck."

“That’s the idea,” Milo says.

“Not helping,” Eli tells him.

“I’m providing emotional continuity.”

A hand closes around the back of Milo’s neck. I know it’s Holden’s even before Milo’s breath catches against my skin.

The picture builds in my head because the blindfold makes imagination vicious. Holden kneeling between my legs, one hand holding Milo exactly where he wants him while his mouth works me. Milo bent close enough that every restless breath ghosts over my stomach. Eli beside my breast. Micah at my throat. Knox standing in front of me like the last solid thing in the room.

I want to see.

The need hits almost as hard as the pleasure.

“Blindfold off,” I gasp.

Everything stops instantly. All five men obeying one request without hesitation.

Micah’s hand cups my jaw. “You okay, baby girl?”

“Yes. I just want to see you.”

The knot loosens behind my head. Silk slides over my lashes, and the room returns in lamplit pieces.

Micah is closest, watching my face with open concern. Eli stands at my right shoulder, one hand resting against the cross beside my head. Knox is exactly where I imagined him, filling the space in front of me, his expression hard with concentration.

And below . . . Holden kneels between my spread legs, mouth shining, one hand still wrapped around Milo’s neck. Milo is beside him on his knees, pupils blown wide, lips parted, the frantic brightness in him narrowed into want.

They’re all so fucking beautiful. So *mine.*

“Better?” Eli asks.

“So much better.”

Holden releases Milo and rises, mouth glistening with my juices. He lifts the fingers that were inside me, and without taking his eyes off me, he slides them between Milo’s lips.

Milo sucks them clean.

For one suspended second, nobody breathes.

Then Holden withdraws his fingers, catches Milo by the jaw, and kisses him.

It isn't gentle.

Milo makes a startled sound that disappears between them, his hands landing on Holden's shoulders as Holden takes over the kiss the same way he takes over everything else. Milo melts into it almost instantly. Holden's thumb presses beneath his chin, tipping his face exactly where he wants it, and Milo follows.

The sight hits me low and sharp.

"Fuck," I breathe.

Holden breaks away just enough to look at me. Milo's lips are flushed, his eyes wide and dark.

"Keep going," I gasp.

Holden smirks.

"Yeah, Detective," Milo says, wrapping his hand around the back of Holden's neck. "Keep going."

Holden kisses him again.

I turn my head toward Eli and Micah.

They stand on either side of the cross, watching, both of them hard and silent in a way that makes my pulse jump. Eli's hand is braced beside my head. Micah's fingers rest lightly at my throat, feeling the race of my heartbeat.

"Kiss," I tell them.

Eli's eyes flick to mine. "Sage—"

"Kiss him." I swallow, my voice rougher this time. "Please. If I can't get a spanking, I'd like to watch you."

Eli's throat moves. Then he turns his head, and Micah is already there, already leaning in, and their mouths meet.

It's nothing like watching Holden and Milo. Where that kiss was a claiming, this one is soft at first—years of physical familiarity folded into it, two men who learned each other's bodies long before any of the rest of us existed. Micah's hand slides up to cup the back of Eli's neck. Eli's fingers curl into the front of Micah's shirt.

Then it deepens, and I forget how to breathe.

"Oh my God," I whisper.

Knox's hands tighten on my thighs. "Watch," he murmurs, his fingers finding their way between my legs, two of them sliding through my

slickness.

“Knox—”

“Just watch them.” His voice is a low rumble, barely audible over my own pulse. “I’ve got you.”

He presses inside me, slow, deliberate, and curls his fingers exactly the way he knows will unravel me. My hips try to chase the sensation, and the ropes hold me, spread and bound and utterly at his mercy while Eli and Micah kiss like they no longer care who sees how badly they want each other.

Eli’s hand slides down, cupping Micah through his sweatpants, and Micah groans into his mouth.

“Fuck, Eli—”

“Shh.” Eli’s voice is wrecked already, all that careful control from earlier completely gone. “Let her watch.”

Knox’s fingers curl again, and my whole body jolts, but he doesn’t speed up. He keeps the same maddening rhythm, drawing me right up to the edge and then easing off, over and over, like he has all night and nowhere else to be.

“Knox, please—”

“Not yet, Fury.” His thumb brushes my clit, feather-light, just enough to make me sob. “Watch them first.”

Micah pulls back just far enough to shove his sweatpants down, and Eli wraps a hand around him, stroking slow while his own hips rock forward, seeking friction. Micah’s forehead drops against Eli’s shoulder as Eli’s hand moves faster, twisting on the upstroke exactly how I’ve watched him do it to himself, and the sight of them makes something greedy and bright roar through me.

“Knox,” I beg. “Please, I need—”

“You need to watch,” he says again, and this time his fingers still completely inside me, just resting there, filling me without giving me anything to move against. The ache is unbearable. My legs shake against the ropes.

Holden has Milo braced against the equipment rack, one hand fisted in his hair, holding him exactly where he wants him while he sinks down. Milo’s head falls back, mouth open on a moan as Holden drags his pants down and takes him deep.

“Holden—fuck—” Milo’s hand scrabbles against the rack for purchase. “I’m not gonna—if you keep—”

Holden hums around him, and Milo’s whole body seizes.

“Knox,” I gasp, because the ache between my legs has turned unbearable, because watching four of my men lose themselves to each other while I’m bound and needy and burning is its own particular torture. “Please. I need—”

“I know what you need.” His fingers curl deep, dragging that slow perfect pressure right up to the edge again, and then—nothing. He stills completely, buried inside me but motionless, and I let out a sound that’s half sob, half snarl.

“You’re doing this on purpose.”

“Yes.” No apology in it at all.

Across the room, Eli’s hips stutter into Micah’s fist, and Micah swallows the groan that follows with his mouth, his own hand working faster now, less controlled.

“Eli,” he breathes against his lips. “Look at her. Look how wrecked she is for us.”

Eli’s eyes find mine over Micah’s shoulder, dark and unfocused, and something in his gaze goes molten. “Knox,” he manages. “Let her come. She’s earned it.”

“She hasn’t asked pretty enough yet.” Knox’s voice stays maddeningly even, but there’s a tremor in his hand.

“Please, Knoxie,” I gasp. “Please. I’ll say anything, just don’t stop, I need to come, I need—” The words spill out ragged and unpretty, but desperate and true. “Please. I’m asking. I’m begging you.”

“Good girl.” His fingers curl again, deep and sure, and this time he doesn’t stop. He builds the rhythm back, thumb finding my clit, and the pressure that’s been coiling low for what feels like hours finally has somewhere to go.

“That’s it,” he growls. “Let go for me. Come all over my hand.”

“Knox! Fuck!”

The orgasm tears through me with a violence that makes the ropes creak, my whole body tightening against the cross as a sound rips out of my throat that isn’t a word at all. Knox holds me through it, his palm flat against my stomach now, grounding me while his fingers keep working, drawing it out until I’m shaking and boneless and blind with it.

Across the room, Micah comes apart with a broken moan, spilling over Eli's fist, and the sight of it drags Eli right over the edge behind him, hips stuttering, forehead dropping to Micah's shoulder as he groans through it.

Milo chokes out something wordless and desperate, hips jerking forward once, twice, and then he's gone too, shaking against the equipment rack while Holden swallows around him.

For a moment the whole room is just breathing. Five wrecked men and me, strung up and spent and shaking against silk rope.

"Hey." Knox's hands are gentle now, all that ferocity from earlier folded back beneath something softer. "Fury, look at me."

I blink my eyes open.

"I'm here," I manage. "I'm good."

He works the rope free of my ankles first. Then he stands and frees my wrists, kissing the raw pink marks each time. When my arms come free, they fall heavy at my sides, and Knox catches me before I can slide down the cross, one arm under my knees and the other behind my back.

"Bed," he says. "The big one."

Nobody argues.

He carries me down the hall and up to the next level like I weigh less than his axe, the others trailing behind—bare feet, half naked, low laughter, Milo narrating something about group sex under the stars that none of us have the blood flow left to process. Knox lays me in the middle of the master bed, and for a moment, they just stand there, my glorious men, looking down at me like I'm the last meal before winter.

"Hi," I say, to everyone and their erections.

"Hi, kitten." Milo grins.

I reach for Knox first. He's earned it, after what he did to me on that cross. He settles over me, huge and trembling with everything he's been holding back, and pushes in so slowly I feel every inch of the wait in him.

"Fury," he growls as he bottoms out, and then there's nothing slow about it. I lock my legs around him while Micah's mouth finds my breast and Eli's fingers tangle in my hair, turning my head so he can kiss me through it. Through the moans. Through Knox's rhythm breaking apart. Through the moment he buries his face in my neck and comes with a growl I feel in my healing ribs and don't care even a little.

"Oh fuck," I moan. "Holden, please."

"On your knees, wildcat."

I shift into position, panting and desperate. He reaches forward and wraps his fist in my ponytail, entering me from behind, his rhythm exact and merciless. Milo slides beneath me and proves his mouth is good for more than commentary.

“Fuck, you two taste good together,” he gasps against me.

Then Holden yanks at my hair, and I come so hard my elbows give out and I almost suffocate Milo.

“It’s okay, kitten,” he gasps when he’s free. “I mean, if you don’t almost suffocate during oral—are you doing it right?”

Holden’s arm locks around my waist before my elbows can give way again, hauling me back against his chest as he drives into me twice more. His control finally breaks on the third, his mouth closing over my shoulder to contain the groan while he comes hard inside me.

“More, please,” I pant, stretching an arm out to Eli.

Eli sits on the bed, and I climb on his lap to straddle him. He takes me slow. Face to face, foreheads pressed together.

Micah moves behind me.

“You want both of us, baby girl?” he murmurs against my shoulder.

“Yes.” My voice is already wrecked. “Please.”

Eli stills inside me as Micah slicks me with lube from the nightstand. “Breathe,” he says. “We’ve got you.”

I nod, and Micah presses in behind me—slow, patient. The stretch pulls a moan out of me, my fingers digging into Eli’s shoulders while his eyes never leave mine.

“You’re doing so good, baby girl,” Micah breathes against the back of my neck.

“Our perfect girl,” Eli says.

Full. So full I feel it in my teeth, in my spine, in the parts of my soul I haven’t named yet. We move together in a slow, grinding rhythm, no space left anywhere, Micah’s mouth on the back of my neck, Eli’s hands cradling my face like I’m something sacred and ruined at the same time. It doesn’t take long. It couldn’t. I’m already so far gone that when Micah groans my name against my spine, and Eli whispers, “Come for us, little savage,” I shatter between them, and they follow me down, all three of us shaking apart in the same breath.

When the world comes back online, Milo is sprawled at the foot of the bed, chin propped on his hand, watching us like we’re the season finale of

his favorite show.

“Don’t mind me,” he says. “I’m just waiting for the Milo portion of the evening. I’ve brought snacks—well, I haven’t, but I’ve brought enthusiasm, which is calorie-free.”

I laugh, wrecked and breathless, and reach for him. “Get up here.”

He scrambles up the bed, all elbows and grin, and then he’s over me, and the grin softens into something that makes my chest ache. “You have been the best sexing partner, kitten.”

“Thank you, Milo.”

He kisses me slow—uncharacteristically—and when he pushes into me it’s gentle, his forehead pressed to mine.

“You are so beautiful right now,” he admits quietly, like it’s a confession. “I want to memorize this. Your face. Exactly like this. When our world is still safe and perfect. Tomorrow everything gets loud again.”

“Then look at me,” I whisper, wrapping my legs around him. “Just look at me.”

And he does. He moves in me slow and deep, eyes open, never once looking away while the others settle around us—Knox’s hand heavy on my ankle, Micah stroking the hair back from my face, Eli warm at my shoulder, Holden keeping quiet watch from the other side. Milo comes with my name barely a breath against my mouth, and I follow him over softly this time, a long low wave instead of a wrecking one.

For a while, nobody moves. All I can do is hold the emotion tight in my chest, fight the sting behind my eyes, and look at the five men sprawled around me. This is it. No more cabin. No more peace. Tomorrow we go back into the thick of it, and this might be the last moment any of us feels genuinely safe for a long time.

“Come on, wildcat,” Holden says after a while, holding out his hand. “It’s time to get you cleaned up.”

Twenty minutes later, I’m clean, wearing one of Micah’s T-shirts and back in the middle of the bed with all five men folding themselves around me. There are too many limbs to work out who belongs to what, but Knox’s hand covers my stomach, Micah’s breath warms my shoulder, and Eli’s fingers rest over Micah’s wrist. Somewhere near my knees, Milo whispers that Holden is already snoring.

“I’m awake,” Holden mutters.

“Your unconscious piglet impersonation says otherwise.”

Holden catches Milo by the back of the neck and drags him higher until his head lands against Holden’s chest. Milo makes one pleased little sound, then finally goes quiet.

The cabin can’t come home with us, and neither can the peace, but the five men breathing around me can. And until we have Stephen dead, I’m not going anywhere without them again.

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# TWENTY-FIVE
# HOLDEN



“Home sweet WiFi,” Milo says, dropping two bags in the hallway and making a beeline to his laptop on the kitchen counter. He holds it against his chest like a rescued infant. “I missed you, baby.”

“Is he seriously kissing it?” Micah says, carrying grocery bags past me toward the kitchen.

“Don’t judge me,” Milo says into the laptop. “We’ve been apart. This is a reunion.”

“I planned for feelings,” Micah says. “Just maybe not the kissing electronics kind.”

Knox brings up the rear with the duffel and the rolling suitcase and Sage’s pillow that she stole from the cabin because it “smelled right.”

I stand in the foyer and let them move around me. The house smells of disinfectant and plaster dust, with the faint metallic tang of fresh hardware from the security upgrade beneath it. Every surface has been wiped, every corner swept, until there’s nothing left of us in the air.

It doesn’t smell like home.

“Hey, you.” Sage’s arms wrap around my waist as she presses her face and body against my back, holding on like the house might decide to spit us back out if she lets go.

“It’s weird being here,” she says, voice muffled by my shirt.

“Yeah.” I rest my hands over hers. “But it’s secure.”

“You know the new system has both motion and thermal, right?” she says. “Even if he shows up in an invisibility poncho, the house will see him first.”

“Good,” I say. “Then I don’t have to kill the installer for missing a blind spot.”

She laughs, quick and real, and it zips through my chest in a way nothing else does.

I give her hands a gentle squeeze where they knot around my stomach, let them sit heavy against me while I breathe deep and false and try to convince my body that this is fine. That this is home. That the glare of the security panel mounted beside the front door is nothing more than reassurance and not a beacon constantly flashing with danger.

Micah and Eli breeze past with the last of the perishables.

“Okay,” Micah starts. “Ground rules for reentry. Nobody spirals in the first hour, nobody opens ominous mail without witnesses, and if anyone finds a hidden camera, please save the dramatic reveal for after we put the ice cream away.”

“There’s ice cream?” Sage asks, still attached to my back.

“There are three kinds,” Eli says. “Micah figured we’d want to eat our feelings later.”

“I want to eat my feelings now,” Sage says.

Milo, already booting up, points a finger in the air without turning around. “Important update. The WiFi password has been changed by Odin’s security people to something deeply offensive.”

“What is it?” Eli asks from somewhere behind me.

Milo squints at the screen. “F0rtr3ss#2291.”

Knox snorts.

“That’s not offensive,” Sage says.

“It is to me,” Milo replies. “It lacks whimsy.”

I turn in Sage’s arms, and she tucks herself into my chest instead, her cheek pressed against my sternum, body still like she’s scanning her surroundings.

“You want the tour of all the terrifying new safety features?” I ask her quietly.

She tips her face up. “Only if you promise to make it sexy.”

“I’m always sexy.”

“True.”

I put a hand at the back of her neck and kiss her forehead. Brief. Grounding. More for me than for her.

The house hums around us with the sound of unpacking. Cabinet doors. The fridge opening and shutting. Milo swearing softly at an update screen. Knox's heavy tread recedes toward the back of the house as he starts his own sweep, even though Odin's people already did one and so did I. None of us trusts another person's assessment when it comes to Sage, but I'm not about to say that out loud while she's warm against me. For one second, I want to pretend the walls aren't closing in.

Then Sage slides her hand under my shirt.

Her palm spreads over my stomach, fingers cool, and when she looks up at me there's that sharp silver spark in her eyes that always makes my pulse kick.

I catch her wrist under my shirt, slide my hand over hers, and then I'm kissing her.

Her mouth opens for me on the first press, like she knew this was coming. The foyer, the bags, the new locks, the sterile smell of the house—everything drops out. I cup her jaw and take the kiss deeper, slower than the heat in me wants, because if I let it go where it wants to go I'll end up shoving her against the nearest wall and drawing blood.

She makes that soft, wrecking sound into my mouth and tightens her grip on my shirt.

"Holden," she breathes.

"Need you, wildcat."

I hook my hands under her thighs and lift. She laughs, startled, and her legs lock around my waist on instinct while I take the stairs two at a time.

"Jesus," Milo calls from the kitchen. "No fair, we just got home."

"Claim jumpers," Micah adds, laughing.

"Don't break the banister," Eli says.

Knox huffs.

Sage's mouth is at my jaw, my throat, her breath warm and quick. "Now it's starting to feel more like home."

"Anywhere you are is home, wildcat."

I carry her down the hall and kick the bedroom door shut behind us, setting her on the ground. The room still smells faintly wrong too—fresh linen, dustless surfaces, the sterile touch of strangers—but the second I press her against the closed door, it starts to belong to us again.

She grips my shirt in both fists, yanking me closer like she's claiming territory, and I let her because right now, that's exactly what I need—to feel her reclaiming this space, reclaiming me.

Her nails scrape lightly over my skin as she pulls the shirt up and off, tossing it somewhere behind us without breaking eye contact. Those gray eyes of hers are all heat and challenge, the kind that always hits me like a direct order to my blood.

I brace one hand against the door beside her head and lean in, my mouth finding the curve of her neck where her pulse jumps under my lips. I bite. She arches into it, a soft gasp escaping her, and I taste the faint salt of her skin, the heat of it against my tongue. "You're going to kill me one of these days," I murmur against her throat, my free hand sliding under the hem of her sweater—Eli's sweater, I realize with a flicker of amusement that quickly turns possessive. It hangs loose on her frame, and I drag it up and off. She's not wearing a bra.

"Not if you kill me first," she whispers back, her fingers working at my belt with that deliberate focus she gets when she's done playing. The buckle gives way, and she doesn't hesitate, popping the button on my jeans and dragging the zipper down so slow, I grit my teeth. Her hand slips inside, wrapping around my cock with a confidence that sends a jolt straight through me. I'm already hard, and the way she strokes me—firm, unhurried—pulls a low groan from my throat that I can't quite swallow.

"Wildcat," I warn, but it comes out rough, more plea than command. I capture her mouth again, harder this time, my tongue sweeping in to taste her while I shove her leggings down her hips. She kicks them off without breaking the kiss, and then it's just her bare against me, all that warm skin and the press of her body like she's trying to merge us into one. I lift her again, easier this time, pinning her to the door with my hips as her legs wrap around my waist.

She rolls against me, deliberate friction that makes my vision haze at the edges, and I can feel how ready she is, slick and hot where we connect. "Now," she breathes into my mouth, her nails digging into my shoulders. "Holden, please."

I don't make her wait. I shift, line myself up, and push in slow. Her breath catches halfway. Her nails stop moving on my shoulders. I file both, the way I file everything about her, because one day I'll want the record. She moans, head falling back against the door, and I bury my face in her

neck, setting a rhythm that's deep and controlled at first, each stroke pulling another sound from her that goes straight to my gut.

The room fades—the sterile smell, the unfamiliar cleanness—replaced by us, by her scent and the salt of sweat and the way her breath hitches when I angle just right. I grip her thighs, holding her open, and pick up the pace, driving harder as her walls clench around me. She meets me each time, thrust for thrust.

"That's it," I mutter, voice gravel in my own ears. "Take what I give you."

She does, her hands in my hair, pulling me closer as the pressure builds in both of us. I can feel her getting close, the way her moans turn ragged, her legs trembling around me, and it pushes me right to the edge. One more deep thrust, and she shatters, crying out my name as her body pulses hard, dragging me over with her. I follow with a groan, spilling into her, the release hitting harder than expected.

We stay like that for a minute, panting against the door, her forehead pressed to my shoulder while I catch my breath. Slowly, I pull out and lower her to the floor, but I don't let go, keeping her steady as her legs wobble. She looks up at me with that post-orgasm haze in her eyes. "Welcome home," she says, voice husky.

I huff a laugh, brushing a strand of hair from her face. "Yeah. Something like that."

But even as the words leave me, the house settles back around us, still smelling like somebody else's hands.

She gives me another kiss, then pads into the bathroom. The shower starts. I pull my jeans back up and stand at the bedroom window, looking at the street through the gap in the blinds.

Same street. Same mailbox. Same view I've had for years.

Nothing out of place.

I should feel relieved. Odin's team swept the house. The cameras are live. The locks are new. The man who built a wall around my girlfriend is allegedly on a boat somewhere in the Atlantic.

*Allegedly.*

My years on the force have taught me not to believe in cold trails. Trails go cold when the person at the end of them wants you to stop looking. And Stephen—the man who sat in our girlfriend's diner for six months without

triggering a single alarm—is not the kind of man who disappears. He's the kind who repositions.

I said a version of it to his face. Odin said *possible but unlikely* and moved on to her birthday, and I let him.

Behind me she starts humming in the shower.

So I'm at a window building a case I have no intention of filing.

I am not okay. And I won't be until I watch the life drain from this asshole's eyes.

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# TWENTY-SIX
# SAGE



“No!”

My eyes burst open just as the last brick is placed, and instead of solid blackness and the chemical scent of foam, my nose is filled with the salty-sweet scent of Milo’s hair. I press up on my elbows, moving my tongue around my mouth and tasting blood where I’ve bitten the inside of my cheek again. Awesome.

I look around the room.

2:27 a.m. Post-nightmare, all six of us dog-piled in Milo’s fuck pit because none of us trusts the dark alone. Holden is stretched along the outer edge on the side closest to the door, because even asleep, he needs to put himself between us and a threat. Milo’s twitching beside me, little spasms that tell me his brain is probably hunting deer or chain-sawing trees named after dead men.

“You okay, Fury?” Knox is a wall at my back, and I turn and face him.

“Yeah,” I whisper, voice raw. “Just . . . the bricks again.” I press my cheek to his chest so he can’t see my face. “Dreamed the wall closed.”

His arm tightens, pulling me flush against his furnace-warm skin. “I’ve got you. You’re breathing. Here.” He shifts my palm to his ribcage, lets the slow thunder of his heart knock against my knuckles, steady as a war drum. I sync to it until the room stops spinning.

Across the mattress Milo jerks, a tiny chainsaw noise slipping out. I reach over Knox’s arm, pet Milo’s crazy hair until the twitching eases. He’s warm, alive. We all are. But I need the proof.

Eli’s voice drifts up from the foot of the bed, rough with sleep. “Bad one?”

“Same set list,” I say. “Encore performance.”

Micah shifts on my other side, fingers threading through mine without opening his eyes. “Want water? Company? Or want me to punch the dream guy?”

“Stabbing sounds more therapeutic,” I say as I squeeze his hand. “I’m gonna get up for a bit. Reset my brain.”

I wriggle out from under Knox’s arm, careful not to wake Milo, though he’s been taking his meds lately, which means once he’s out he could nap through dynamite. My bare feet hit the cool hardwood, and I stand still for a second, letting the night settle around me. The moon slices through the gap in the blinds and paints bars across everybody’s skin—Knox’s ribs rising slow and even, Micah’s curls spilled across his pillow like ink, Eli half off the mattress, one foot dangling toward the floor.

I pad to the kitchen, flipping on only the under-cabinet LEDs so the dark doesn’t feel like it’s swallowing me whole. The fridge light is a comfort, the hum of its motor a lullaby. I grab a cold water, drink half straight from the bottle, then keep it clutched against my chest, remembering the last bottle I drank out of. Then I just stare at it and wonder how many normal things Stephen is going to ruin. So far he’s taken bottled water, dogs, brick walls, and new friends.

I set the bottle on the counter a little too hard. The plastic cracks against granite, a tiny sound that still makes me jump. I hate that. Hate that Stephen’s ghost can make me flinch at a water bottle.

The floor creaks behind me, and I spin, heart already in my throat before my brain registers Eli in the doorway, hair wild, sweatpants slung low, eyes soft with worry.

“Need company or space?” he asks, voice still gravel-sleep.

“Company,” I whisper. “But no talking. Just . . . be furniture for a minute.”

He hums approval, folds around me, chin on my shoulder. We breathe together until the refrigerator cycles off and the silence feels safe instead of hungry.

Eli’s arms stay loose around me, warm palm flat between my shoulder blades like he’s willing my heartbeat back to normal. The countertop bites

into my hip where I lean, but I don’t move because the pain is something real to hold on to.

I watch water beads run down the side of the bottle and imagine them freezing into tiny knives. Feels fair. Stephen took simple things and made them sharp.

Eli strokes my spine in long, even passes. I like that he isn’t shushing me or trying to fix the unfixable. We both know the danger. Both know it isn’t going away until Stephen is in the ground. The only difference between us right now is that Eli’s stillness looks like peace, and mine just looks like exhaustion wearing a better mask.

I close my eyes and try to summon sawdust, cedar, and mountain air, but the cabin has been washed out of my senses. Eli’s arms are still here, though. Proof I didn’t leave everything safe behind.

Finally my lungs steady enough that I can speak without it sounding borrowed. “I need him dead, Eli.”

Eli’s thumb stills. “I know.”

“This thing—the monster you talk about—it’s like it’s scratching under my skin, demanding vengeance in blood.” He stays quiet while I suck in a breath, trying to organize my thoughts. “I could breathe at the cabin. But here . . . it’s like I’m a victim again. And the longer I feel like a victim, the more I want . . .”

I catch myself before I get the final words out. But Eli finishes them for me, anyway.

“To kill.”

“Yeah.”

Eli’s chest expands against me—one slow inhale, like he’s tasting the air for gunpowder.

I wait for him to tell me no, or say not yet, or we’ll get him.

Instead he shifts to look at me, hands bracketing my ribs, and rests his forehead on mine so our breaths braid.

“Then let’s feed the monster,” he whispers.

I pull back enough to see his face. In the under-cabinet light, his eyes are dark amber, the teacher nowhere in sight. This is the other Eli. The one behind the locked room door—except the door isn’t locked anymore, and he’s standing in the frame looking at me like I’m the only person who’s ever spoken his language.

“How?” I ask, even though I think I know exactly what he means.

He reaches past me and unplugs his phone from where it’s charging on the counter. Unlocks it. Opens an app that starts out as a calculator. After he puts in a code, the screen switches to an unnamed folder.

Inside are names. Dates. Locations. Short notes. Some have news article links. Some have court docket numbers. Some just have a legal term beside them—*acquitted*, or *dismissed*, or *insufficient evidence*.

“What is this?” I whisper.

“My list.” He scrolls slowly, letting me read. “We all keep one. Holden’s is every unsolved case inside those banker’s boxes of his. Knox’s is a notebook in his gun safe. Milo’s is a database with an algorithm that ranks them by recidivism probability.”

“Of course it is.”

“And Micah’s is a small address book he carries in his pocket. His list is shorter than the rest of ours, but the names on his are the worst.” He stops scrolling on a name. “Odin gives us assignments. You know that part. Those targets are vetted, confirmed, and funded before they reach us. But sometimes the job isn’t enough. Sometimes you read something in the news or you hear about a case that fell apart or a judge who threw out evidence on a technicality, and you know—you *know*—that the man who walked out of that courtroom is going to do it again. And again. And nobody with a badge or a gavel is going to stop him.”

“So you stop him.”

“We stop him.” He doesn’t look away. “Because the alternative is lying awake knowing a predator is out there and we did nothing.”

“So, what you’re saying is I should start a list.”

“Sure.” He bounces a shoulder.

“My uncle goes first.”

Eli’s eyes stay on mine. “Put him at the top. We’ll help you find him. In the meantime, you can share my list.”

I look at the phone. At the name his thumb is resting beside.

*Tobias Freely. 34. Dismissed.*

“Who is he?”

“Scoutmaster. Three accusers—all boys under fourteen. The case went to trial eight months ago. The defense attorney got the testimony excluded because of a procedural error, so the judge dismissed it. Freely walked out of the courthouse, moved two towns over, and signed on with another Scout troop.” Eli’s jaw tightens. “He’s starting this month.”

My chest goes tight.

“We got back just in time.”

Eli nods and doesn’t say anything, but I already know what he’s thinking—we just spent four weeks in seclusion while this man got himself a new troop, a new group of potential victims. It *never* stops.

“What happened to the boys?” I ask.

“One moved schools. One stopped talking entirely. The third—” Eli locks the phone. “He killed himself in October.”

My lungs seize as my stomach turns cold. I think about a thirteen-year-old boy deciding he was done. I think about how the system that’s supposed to protect us decided, on a technicality, that we weren’t worth the trouble.

“When?” I say.

Eli looks at me. “When what?”

“When do we go?”

Eli’s smile is slow and dangerous, like he sees himself inside me, the creature that lives behind *my* sternum. The one that woke up on a beach with a knife in its hand and has been pacing ever since.

“Not tonight,” he says. “You need sleep. Real sleep, not nightmare sleep.”

“I’m not going to get real sleep, Eli. Not here. Not yet.”

“We’ll do it tomorrow night.” He puts the phone down and takes my face in his hands. “But we need to do this right. We plan it. We don’t go in angry—we go in precise. That’s the rule.”

“Whose rule?”

“Mine. And Holden’s. And it exists because we’ve all killed angry.” His thumbs trace my cheekbones. “And we all know angry gets messy. Messy gets you caught.”

“Unless you have five amazing boyfriends who clean the murder scene for you,” I joke. Brock on the sand. Stine in his motel room. Two messes I made and never had to look at again.

“That can’t keep happening, little savage. You do it our way, the monster gets fed, but it eats on a schedule. It doesn’t gorge itself on a rampage.”

I almost smile. “You’re giving my murder impulse a meal plan.”

“I’m a teacher. Structure is what I do.”

“Which reminds me—are you going back to school this semester?”

“No. Not until after that asshole is burning inside Dean’s retort.”

I lean forward, placing my hands on his chest and pressing my fingers into his skin. “And what am I supposed to do with the monster while we plan Freely’s death?”

His eyes go dark as his fingers hook into the hem of the oversized T-shirt I’m wearing, brushing against my skin. “You let me take care of it,” he whispers, lips ghosting over mine before he lifts the shirt up and over my head, folding it back and pinning me so my arms are locked behind my back and the only part of my face that’s free is my mouth.

His kiss crashes into me, all heat and demand, his body crowding mine against the counter until the edge digs into my lower back. I arch into it, trapped arms straining against the fabric, but he doesn’t let up, his free hand sliding down my bare side, fingers splaying possessively over my hip. The monster inside me stirs, hungry for the distraction, the raw anchor to the present.

Eli breaks the kiss just enough to growl against my lips, “Let it out on me, Sage. Use me.” His hand dips lower, finding me already slick and ready, and he doesn’t tease—just slides three fingers inside me, stretching me so suddenly, my knees buckle. I gasp, head falling back, the shirt over my face blinding me as all I get is the sensation of him adding another finger. His thumb. I moan when his knuckles press against me. “That’s it. Feel this instead. You’re gonna take all of me.”

“Oh fuck.” I rock against his hand, the friction building fast and frantic, chasing the edge he promised to dull. “Eli!”

His hand pistons, wrist twisting, pushing for more. The heel of his palm grinds my clit, and with the next thrust, the burn crosses the threshold into a sick, greedy craving. I want it. I want all of him inside me.

My knees threaten to fold, and Eli spreads me wider, until the raw stretch of him makes my hips cant forward, begging for everything. He chuckles, low and almost mirthless, pure hunger in sound form.

“That’s it. Open up for me. Let the world disappear for a minute.”

His hand twists and pushes, circles, never relenting, while his fingers drive deeper. I’m close to coming already, and I whimper into the darkness of the bunched-up shirt, straining my wrists behind my back to try to hold on to something, but there’s no leverage, nothing to do except lean all my weight into Eli’s onslaught.

“You’re greedy tonight,” he rasps, “but that’s all right. You’ve got so much room for me, little savage. Messy or not, I’ll always clean it up.” He

jams his fingers deep, curling hard, his knuckles finally pushing past the rim with the wet pop of muscle. His entire hand fills me in a way that makes me sob his name into the hot, wet fabric. I can feel him all the way up inside, stretching me to a brutal, blissed-out hurt that I crave enough to chase with every wild flex of my hips. There's no air, no room, just Eli's fist buried inside me, locked in place as my body clamps and spasms and the monster uncoils, starved and greedy and finally fed.

"Fuck—Eli—it's—" My hips slam forward, greedy aftershock rolling, and he fills me till the stretch is a burn that wipes my brain clean.

"That's it," he coaxes. "You can take it. You want the pain, Sage?" His hand is a lock inside me, and every time I think I can't, I do, and it sends me further. "You love what hurts, don't you?"

I don't answer—not with words. My legs give, and he hauls me up onto the counter, half bare, legs splayed so wide they ache. The shirt stays tangled around my arms, roping me in. I can't see him, but I can feel his breath, hot and quick, his body crowding me until there's nothing left of the kitchen, just the force of him splitting me inside out.

"Eli, oh fuck, don't stop." I jerk on the counter, grinding down onto his fist like I'll die if I lose that connection.

He fucks me with it, relentless, bruising, the stretch twisting beyond pleasure and back again till it's both at once, till I shatter and soak his hand and scream through gritted teeth, "I hate you. I hate you. *I love you!*"

I come, wrecked and open, a scream that's only a scream because I can't make sense of anything else. Eli's mouth is everywhere—my cheek and my neck and my jaw, devouring, the words a blur as I shudder around him and come again, raw and spent and shaking.

After, he rocks me in place, legs braced to keep me from sliding off the counter. Slowly, his fist eases out, the stretch making me cry out again, a whimper that's half agony and half relief.

My thighs spasm, jerking against his body, and when my vision comes back, he's untangling the T-shirt, slipping my arms free with great care. He wipes the tears from my cheeks, holding my face, his own expression gone gorgeous and wild but utterly gentle underneath.

"You're here, Sage," Eli whispers, smoothing damp hair away from my face. "You're in your body, right now. That's all I want."

I nod. Breathless. The shaking is still in my hands, but my chest is calm. Wrung out. Empty. Nothing left in there to destroy.

He helps me off the counter, holding my waist while my knees decide if they'll work this time. The moment they hold, I look up at him and smile, and it feels like baring my teeth at a wolf.

"I'm gonna fuck you now, little savage."

He spins me around, bending me over the counter with one firm hand between my shoulder blades. The cool granite shocks my overheated skin, nipples pebbling against it as he shoves his sweatpants down. I hear the rustle, feel the heat of him pressing against my pussy, and then he's thrusting in deep, filling me in one brutal stroke that steals my breath.

"Yes," I moan, pushing back to meet him, the slap of skin on skin echoing in the quiet kitchen. He sets a punishing pace, one hand gripping my hip, the other tangling in my hair to pull my head back, arching me for him. "Harder, Eli—Fuck! Yes!"

He does, growling low as he angles deeper, hitting that spot that whites out my thoughts. Sweat slicks between us, his breaths ragged in my ear, and when another orgasm builds, it's different—slower, fuller, pulling from somewhere deeper than anger. I clench around him, crying out as it breaks, and he follows with a muffled curse, spilling hot inside me, his body shuddering over mine.

We stay like that for a moment, his weight a comforting press, both of us panting. Slowly, he pulls out, turning me gently to face him, his hands framing my face as he studies me.

"Better?" he murmurs, thumb brushing my swollen lips.

I nod. "I don't even know who I am anymore."

He grabs a fresh dish towel and runs it under warm water. I stay where I am, leaning against the counter, legs still unreliable, while he kneels in front of me and cleans me up with the same steady hands that just took me apart.

He wipes my thighs, my stomach, the mess of us. Wrings the towel. Comes back for a second pass. His thumb traces the fading scar on my thigh, and his jaw tightens, but he doesn't say anything. Just presses his lips to it once, quick, and stands.

He pulls the T-shirt back over my head. Tugs it down. Smooths my hair behind my ears.

"Bed," he says.

"Bossy."

"Always."

He picks me up because my legs have filed a formal resignation, and I don’t argue because I’m past the point of pretending I don’t love being carried by men who could also kill someone with the same hands. It’s a niche kink. I’ve accepted it.

The fuck pit is exactly as we left it—a tangle of limbs and warmth and the steady sound of people breathing. Holden hasn’t moved from the outer edge. Knox has rolled onto his back, one arm stretched across the empty space where I was. Micah has one arm flung over his eyes. Milo is now hugging a pillow and whispering something about encryption keys.

Eli lowers me into the gap beside Knox, who immediately reclaims me—arm around my waist, face in my hair, asleep before his brain even registers I was gone.

“Tomorrow night,” Eli whispers before climbing back into bed next to Micah.

“Tomorrow night,” I whisper back.

And this time, when I close my eyes, the bricks don’t come.

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# TWENTY-SEVEN
# ELI



"Happy hunting, little savage."

I say it against her mouth in the car, one hand on her throat, the other on the door handle. She's dressed in black, hair braided tight, pulse hammering under the skin of her neck where my thumb rests. She smells like the coffee Micah made her before we left and the adrenaline underneath it.

She bites my lip in response, then lets out a low, wicked sound that only I get to hear. In this moment she's not a survivor, or a target, or even a member of the Hangmen. She is just a savage little wolf in black cotton, barely contained by the seatbelt.

"We're ready for you, kitten." Milo's voice comes over the radio, a soft crackle.

Sage grins—hungry, unrepentant, the kind of beautiful you only get when you've already been to hell and decided the devil is boring.

"You feeling ready?" I ask.

Her eyes are gray and steady and completely awake. "I've been ready since last night in the kitchen."

*The kitchen.*

Fuck. My dick goes hard just thinking about her up to my wrist on that counter. I kiss her again.

"Then let's go."

We pull our skull masks down and walk up the driveway. Side door. Knox is already there—a shadow against the house that nods once when we

reach him. The lock is dealt with. The alarm is dealt with. Everything has been dealt with because when I told the others what Sage needed, they didn't ask questions. They just moved.

Inside, the house is dark except for the living room, and when we round the corner, Sage stops.

The room has been transformed.

Every surface—the floor, the furniture, and the walls all the way to the ceiling—is covered in thick, industrial-grade plastic sheeting, taped at the seams so clean, you can tell exactly who did it. Holden's edges are razor-straight, the plastic squared into the same military corners he uses when making his bed. Milo handled the creative engineering, running overlapping panels up the walls, tucking them behind the curtain rods, and sealing them at the baseboards with duct tape folded into tabs for easy removal afterward.

And in the center of the room, wearing nothing but his underwear and duct-taped to a dining chair, is Tobias Freely.

His mouth is gagged. His eyes are wild above the tape—darting between the skull masks surrounding him, the plastic-covered room, the woman in the doorway.

Holden stands to the left of the chair, arms folded, mask on. His posture is parade-rest. Operational. But the moment Sage enters, his head turns toward her and something in the set of his shoulders shifts. It isn't tactical. It's anticipation. Not for the kill—for her. For what this is going to give back to her.

Milo is perched on the arm of the plastic-wrapped couch, mask pushed up on his forehead, legs swinging. He was told to keep the mask on, but he's never been great at following directions. When Sage walks in, he slides it back down and tips an imaginary hat.

"Kitten," he says. "Welcome to the party. Dress code is murder chic, and we took the liberty of unwrapping your present and setting it up for you."

Micah is across the room with his back to the kitchen wall, mask on, hands loose at his sides. He nods at Sage.

Which reads, near enough, as *I'm here, baby girl. However you need me.*

Knox steps past us into the room. Crosses to the chair. Stands behind Freely like a wall that grew a pulse. He looks at Sage, and without a word,

he reaches into his jacket and pulls out her knife.

“Fury.”

Sage stares at it. The knife she pulled from Knox’s boot and used to murder Brock. The one he gave her for keeps after that night. The one she’s used in every murder since.

“Got it nice and sharp for you.”

“Thank you,” Sage murmurs, taking the blade from him and holding it against her chest like he just presented her with diamonds.

The room is charged and quiet except for the fast, nasal panic of Freely’s breathing. Sage wraps her fingers around the handle one at a time. Then she lifts the knife over her head.

Freely lets out a muffled scream at the same time as Milo yells, “Wait, kitten!”

He hops off the couch, waving a pair of white painting coveralls in front of him. “I almost forgot. Before we unleash the beast—wardrobe change.” He shakes them out and holds them up. “These are supposed to be fluid-resistant up to—well, I didn’t actually test the upper limits, but theoretically, a lot.” He unzips the front and holds them open for her. “Step in, kitten. We didn’t plastic-wrap this entire room so you could ruin your good leggings.”

Sage stares at the offering.

“You bought me murder coveralls,” she says.

“I bought you creative expression coveralls. What you do in them is between you and your glorious heart.”

She hands the knife back to Knox—who holds it without comment—and steps into the coveralls. Milo zips her up, rolls the sleeves twice so her hands are free, tucks the hood over her head, and steps back. Then he tilts his head and nods like a stylist who’s just dressed a client for the Met Gala.

“Perfect,” he says. “Go nuts.”

Knox hands the knife back.

“Tobias Freely.” Holden’s voice is flat and unhurried. “Do you know why we’re here?”

I watch the man’s eyes widen—first in surprise at Holden’s voice, then in animal panic as the reality of the situation crawls up his brainstem and sets everything on fire. The tape over his mouth flutters.

Holden waits two beats. “Knox.”

Knox peels the tape off in a single, unimpressed rip.

Freely gasps, immediately launching into a string of incoherent pleading. “Please. Please. If this is about money, I don’t have any—”

Milo snorts. “Buddy, if you had money, you’d have had a decent security system, right?”

“Please,” Freely blubbers. “I don’t know why you’re here. I haven’t done anything wrong.” He looks around the room, and his gaze skates right over Sage until she moves closer, knife at her hip.

“The boys,” she says.

That makes his eyes fix on her, lock, and betray him. They go cold and angry underneath all the noise. I’ve seen it before. The predator is always real, and it always lives in the eyes.

“You don’t know what you’re talking about. I’m innocent.”

Sage ignores his words. She takes two slow steps forward, murder coveralls rustling, and then plants her feet right in front of the chair. She crouches until she’s at eye level with him. He recoils enough to make his chair wobble.

“Do you remember any of their names?” she asks, calm and level.

Freely’s breath is a raw, wet sound. “I—I haven’t done anything—”

A fucking lie. Knox claps the tape back over his mouth.

Sage tilts her head. “I know what you did,” she says. It’s the voice of a woman who has been on the other side of a man’s violence. “I know what it feels like when someone takes your body and uses it for something you didn’t agree to. I know what it sounds like when you scream and nobody comes.”

Freely’s eyes are streaming. Snot runs over the tape.

“The difference between us,” Sage says, “is that I survived. And you’re not going to.”

She stands and looks around at the five of us in our skull masks. This is what love looks like for us: a clean room, a sharp blade, and a predator who deserves what comes next.

“Any requests before we let you loose, kitten?” Milo asks, voice light. “Musical accompaniment? Mood lighting? I can dim the overheads if you want ambiance.”

“Milo,” Holden says.

“Right. Shutting up. Go get him, kitten.”

Freely lets out a muffled shriek and pisses on the floor as Sage raises the knife above her head.

“Fuck,” Holden says. “I hate it when they do that.”

“I think it’s wonderful,” Sage says. “One last humiliation before they pay for their sins.” Then she plunges the knife in and twists.

The blade doesn’t slide easy like in the movies. It catches on something—cartilage, maybe bone—and Freely makes a sound that isn’t even human, more like air escaping a torn tire. Sage pulls back, and the knife comes free with a wet sucking noise that sounds like music to my black heart.

She doesn’t hesitate. She drives it in again, lower, where the ribs part, and this time she angles up, seeking the vengeance she’s been chasing since Brock, since before Brock, since the first time she learned that some men take what they want and call it teaching.

“That’s my girl,” I whisper, not loud enough to reach her.

Freely’s head drops forward. Blood runs down his chest in thin lines and drips onto the plastic beneath the chair, gathering there in a dark pool.

Sage steps back. Her chest rises and falls in controlled breaths, eyes moving over the damage. For a moment I think she’s done. Then Freely makes a gurgling sound, and she pounces, the knife going in again, and again, and again.

Like the little savage she is.



DEAN IS ready when we arrive at the crematorium. Amy is in the kitchen.

Sage walks in—black clothes, blood under her nails, and a look on her face that I’m learning means *fed*. Amy takes one look at her and crosses the kitchen in four steps.

The hug is fierce. Amy’s arms locked around Sage like she’s holding her together, and maybe she is, because Sage makes a sound against Amy’s shoulder that I’ve never heard from her. Something in between a sob and a laugh.

“You’re back,” Amy whispers. “Oh my God, you’re back. I’ve been so worried. Dean told me what happened with Jamie—I mean, Stephen—and I—”

“I’m okay,” Sage says. “I’m okay, Ames. I’m sorry I left and didn’t tell you.”

“Don’t you dare apologize for disappearing after what he did. Don’t you dare.”

They hold each other in the staff kitchen while Knox helps Dean get the body in the retort. The others are busy clearing the scene back at Freely’s place.

I stay by the door and watch the two women hug and cry and babble at each other until Knox appears beside me.

“She good?” he asks.

I watch Sage, teary but smiling in Amy’s arms, and I nod.

“Yeah,” I say. “She’s good.”

A Hangman. A monster. My little savage. Knox’s Fury. Holden’s wildcat, Milo’s murder kitten, and Micah’s baby girl.

Ours.

“I think she’s great, actually.”

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# TWENTY-EIGHT
# MILO



The hot water drums against my skull while I hum something that's either Vivaldi or the theme from Dexter—hard to tell, both are appropriate—and let this glorious night wash off me in slow, satisfying increments. Latex residue from the gloves. The faint chemical memory of industrial plastic sheeting. The last of the adrenaline that's been running under my skin since Sage raised that knife above her head and became the most terrifying thing I've ever loved.

*What a night!*

Eli took Sage and Knox to Dean's for the disposal. Holden, Micah, and I handled the cleanup at Freely's—plastic sheeting folded and bagged, duct tape residue wiped, surfaces bleached, the chair back in its original position at the dining table. Holden worked with his usual intense focus while I narrated the process like a home renovation show, which he tolerated for approximately seven minutes before saying, "Milo, if you say 'open concept living' one more time, I will tape your mouth shut."

Micah and I headed home while Holden detoured to our favorite back alley to burn all the evidence. I left Micah downstairs watching TV while I came upstairs because the shower was calling me with the urgency of a lover who's been neglected.

So that's where I am. Wet. Warm. Humming. Happy in that morally complicated way that follows a clean operation where justice was served and nobody got caught and our girlfriend stabbed a pedo while looking fabulous.

Life is strange and beautiful: I’m in love with five people, and the water pressure in this house is magnificent.

I tip my head back, letting the spray hit my chest, and close my eyes.

The shower door opens behind me.

Steam shifts. Cool air licks my back for half a second, and then Holden steps through it like he owns not just the bathroom but the molecules currently occupying it.

*Well.*

*Hello.*

His hands land on my hips first, firm and unapologetic, pulling me back against the solid heat of him as the shower door clicks shut. I don’t turn around—don’t need to—because I can feel it in the way his fingers dig in just enough to say he has something very specific in mind.

“Missed the cleanup glow?” I murmur, keeping my voice light even as my pulse kicks up, water streaming over us both now.

He doesn’t answer with words. Instead, his mouth finds the nape of my neck, teeth grazing the skin there in a bite that’s more claim than tease, and I suck in a breath, bracing one hand against the tile as his body presses flush to mine. He’s already hard, the length of him sliding against my ass, and fuck, the reality of it hits me harder than any fantasy I’ve spun in the quiet hours. We’ve done plenty together by now—hands, mouths, and several things that would get us removed from polite society—but he’s never fucked me. That’s the line we’re yet to cross. I’m finally going to lose my butthole virginity, and I’m not about to pull back.

“Turn around,” he growls, voice low and rough, the kind of command that vibrates through my chest.

I turn slowly. His ice-blue eyes lock on mine while water slicks his hair flat and runs down his chest. I follow one trail with my finger until he catches my wrist and pins it to the wall above my head.

“Been thinking about fucking you,” he admits, his free hand sliding down my side with slow, deliberate intent. “You. Here. Like this.”

“Yeah?” I manage, voice breathier than I intend, because his palm wraps around my shaft, stroking me in slow, deliberate passes that send sparks up my spine. “What took you so long, Detective?”

He doesn’t laugh, doesn’t quip back. Instead, he leans in, mouth crashing against mine in a kiss that’s all hunger and control, his tongue demanding entry while his hand works me over. I groan into it, free hand

clutching his shoulder as the heat builds between us. He breaks the kiss to bite along my jaw, down my throat, and when he reaches my collarbone, he sucks hard enough to leave a mark somewhere nobody will miss.

“Turn around and spread your legs,” he orders, and I do without hesitation. He cracks the shower door open just far enough to retrieve a bottle of lube I definitely didn’t leave on the vanity.

Of course the bastard came prepared. Apparently nothing says romance like premeditated anal.

He positions himself behind me again, one hand on my hip while the other slicks me thoroughly, then presses one finger inside me, careful but insistent. I push back against him, biting my lip against the sound trying to escape.

“Easy,” he murmurs, but there’s a tremor in his voice now, the iron control fraying at the edges as he adds another finger, curling them just right. “Tell me if it’s too much.”

“It’s not,” I gasp, forehead against the tile, water pounding my back. “More. Holden—fuck, just—”

He doesn’t make me beg. He lines up, pushes in slow at first, inch by torturous inch, and the burn of it is exquisite, making my knees weaken until his arm bands around my waist, holding me steady.

“Breathe,” he says, voice strained, and I do, inhaling sharply as he seats himself, the fullness overwhelming in the best way. We stay like that for a beat, his chest heaving against my back, before he starts to move—deep, controlled thrusts that build a rhythm I can’t help but match, rocking back to meet him.

“Fuck, Milo,” he groans, picking up speed, one hand braced on the wall beside mine, the other sliding down to stroke me in time with his hips. The friction, the heat, the way he fills me—it’s too much and not enough, pleasure coiling tight in my gut as his breaths turn ragged in my ear. “You feel—goddamn perfect.”

I laugh, breathless and wrecked, twisting just enough to catch his mouth in a messy kiss over my shoulder, the angle awkward but desperate, all teeth and tongue and the kind of raw need that makes everything sharper. He kisses me back like he’s starving for it, his thrusts never faltering, each one driving deeper, harder, until the world narrows to the slick slide of skin, the steam choking the air, and the building pressure that has me gasping his name against his lips.

I break away first, forehead back to the tile, because if I don’t, I’ll come too fast, and I want to drag this out—make him lose that ironclad control he’s always clinging to.

“You fuck so good,” I mutter, half-laughing, half-moaning as his hand speeds up, stroking me with a twist at the end that sends fireworks up my spine. “Fuck, Holden—right there, don’t you dare stop.”

“Wasn’t planning on it,” he rasps, and hearing the words with his cock buried inside me sends a fresh bolt of heat through my gut. His rhythm turns punishing, hips snapping forward, and I can feel him unraveling behind me—the way his breaths hitch, the low growl in his throat when I clench around him. It’s intoxicating, knowing I can do this to him, reduce the unflappable detective to something primal and undone.

The pressure snaps, and I come over his hand with his name breaking apart in my mouth, the way I clench pulling him with me. He buries himself deep, shuddering against my back as he comes, one arm locked around my waist beneath the cooling spray.

Finally, he pulls out slow, careful, and turns me around again, cupping my face with both hands under the spray. His eyes move over my face, that post-orgasm haze softening the sharp edges of him, making him look almost vulnerable.

“You okay?” he asks, voice rough but steady, thumb brushing my cheekbone.

I grin, even though my legs feel like they’ve been replaced with jelly. “Better than okay. You should’ve fucked me sooner.”

His mouth tips at one corner, not quite a smile but close enough that I’d frame it.

“Agreed.” He leans in, kisses me softer this time, lingering like he’s memorizing the taste, before reaching past me to shut off the water. The sudden silence is deafening, just the drip-drip from the showerhead and our slowing breaths.

We dry off in comfortable quiet—me sneaking looks at the mark he left on my collarbone, him wrapping a towel around my waist with the same focused care he gives everything. It’s painfully Holden: fuck me into the shower wall, then make sure I don’t slip getting out. Downstairs, the TV murmurs, and it all feels strangely ordinary, like this isn’t a new relationship or a new version of us, just one more thing we were always going to get around to.

Holden dresses first, pulling on sweatpants and a tee, then pauses at the door. “Come downstairs when you’re ready. I’ll make you tea, and we’ll wait for Sage and the others.”

I nod, watching him go, and for the first time in a while, the buzzing in my brain quiets to a hum. It isn’t gone, and I don’t expect it to stay quiet forever, but right now my body is loose, my thoughts have stopped trying to overtake one another, and Holden finally fucked me.

That feels like plenty.

I pull on sweats and pad downstairs to find Holden on the couch next to Micah, a fresh mug of tea already steaming on the coffee table for me. He’s watching TV like a man who absolutely did not just fuck me against the shower tiles ten minutes ago. His hair is still damp. So is mine. We look like two people who showered at the same time, which is exactly what happened, and I’m choosing to believe nobody will notice.

I sit in the armchair and reach for my tea. Holden doesn’t look at me. I don’t look at Holden. The TV plays something nobody is watching.

Micah looks at Holden. Looks at me.

“You two know I have ears, right?”

“Don’t,” Holden says.

Micah just smirks and leans back against the couch.

The front door opens, and Sage, Eli, and Knox file in. Sage kicks her shoes off and collapses onto the couch, putting her feet up on my knee. Eli drops onto the arm of the couch. Knox locks the door behind them.

“How’d it go?” I ask, setting my tea aside and digging a thumb into her arch.

“Clean,” Knox says. “Dean’s handling the rest.”

“Good. Great. Wonderful. Anyone else want tea?”

Micah looks at me with an expression of pure, delighted torture. Then he looks at Sage.

“Holden fucked Milo,” he says.

Sage’s head snaps toward me. “Fucked you as in finally *fucked* you?” She makes a circle with the thumb and index finger of one hand, then thrusts a finger through it with the other.

My face burns.

“The shower has excellent acoustics,” Micah says. “I heard enough to establish probable cause. Milo even has a hickey as a souvenir.”

“It’s not a hickey. It’s a skin irritation from the hot water. Possibly a welt left over from the fucking knife debacle.”

“It’s a hickey,” Knox confirms from the door.

Sage grabs my arm and pulls me toward her, practically vibrating. “Okay. Positions. We need to talk about positions, because this opens up an entirely new wing of the building that I very much want to see.”

“We are not talking about positions,” Holden says.

“We’re absolutely talking about positions. Milo, was he—”

“My attorney has advised me to remain silent if I ever want his dick in my ass again.”

Sage squeals while Holden drops his face into one hand.

Knox settles into an armchair, looking more relaxed than he has all night. Eli catches it first.

“You look pleased,” Eli says.

“Means Milo might shut up for five minutes.”

“I heard that.”

“He’s calculating how much more Fury time he gets whenever two of us pair off,” Micah says.

Knox’s mouth quirks into a barely there grin—which on Knox is a seismic event.

“Strategic advantage,” he says.

Sage laughs. “Oh my God. This is going to be so much fun.”

Holden drops his head back against the couch and stares at the ceiling like he’s praying for an extraction team. Micah pats his knee.

“Congratulations, Detective,” Micah says. “Big night.”

“Fuck off.”

Sage shifts across the couch and curls into Holden’s side, grinning at both of us. “I’m so happy right now.”

Holden’s gaze finds mine across the room and stays there.

“Yeah,” he says. “Me too.”

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# TWENTY-NINE
# SAGE



“Welcome back, Sage!”

A little over a week after coming home from the cabin, I’m back at the diner with an apron in my hands.

Rosa pulls me into a hug before I’ve even got it on, her perfume and the smell of diner grease hitting me at the same time. Behind her, the kitchen radio is playing something country through the pass window, and I can hear Danny, one of the line cooks, already banging around the grill.

“Hey, Rosa. Good to be back.”

“Back here?” She scoffs, holding me at arm’s length and studying my face with the concern of a woman who considers herself everyone’s mother. “You’re looking good. Refreshed. How was the vacation? You’ve got some color in your cheeks. And oh! That’s a pretty neck piece.”

“Oh, this.” I touch the collar I put on this morning to cover my throat scar. “I lost my choker while I was away. It feels weird not wearing something now.”

Rosa smiles. “Looks badass.”

“Thanks,” I say, while my mind remembers how badass wearing this felt the night Eli put it on me and led me through the club on a leash.

And now I’m turned on at work.

“Hey, Sage.” Danny leans through the pass window, spatula raised in greeting. “Heard you were coming back today. Good to see you.”

“Thanks, Danny. You too.”

And it is. Or it should be. The counter, the stools, the specials board in Rosa's handwriting. The coffee machine hissing. The smell of bacon grease and pies. It all looks the same. Sounds the same.

My body hates it.

The last time I stood behind this counter, a man I called my best friend was sitting in that booth tapping away at his laptop, drinking coffee, and planning to seal me inside a wall.

"You okay, hon?" Rosa asks, catching something in my face I didn't mean to show.

"Yeah. Just getting my bearings." I tie the apron. Pin the name tag. Hair up. "The boss around?"

"Left early. Said to tell you the Tuesday–Saturday roster is yours, if you want it." She shrugs like this is normal. "He's been weirdly chill lately. Hasn't even been pressuring us to upsell the way he usually does. Danny and I have been speculating."

"Oh yeah?" I say, looking between her and Danny.

Danny nods. "Rosa thinks maybe he won the lottery or inherited some money. I think he had a stroke. Either way, the man is acting weird."

Weird is right. I'd come in to talk to him last week, expecting the conversation to be painful—more than a month gone without notice, no doctor's note that makes sense. But Gary just leaned back in his office chair, asked when I wanted to start back, and that was that. No questions. No probation. No write-up.

I'm not in a position to question easy when everything else in my life has been the opposite. And in a way, I'm happy to be back to structure, to routine, to the predictable logic of breakfast rush and endless coffee refills. Even if my palms are sweating, even if every time the door chimes I have to pretend I'm not expecting Jamie—*Stephen*—to walk in. I guess that's trauma for you.

Or maybe it's just Hunter Harbor.

Rosa gently nudges me out onto the floor. "I've got the counter and section one. You take two and three, okay?"

"Got it."

I pick up the coffee pot and get to work.

The first hour is muscle memory. Wipe the counter. Refill the sugars. Take orders, pour coffee, clear plates. My body knows the rhythm, and I let it carry me while my brain does what it's been doing since the moment we

left the cabin—scanning. Every face. Every voice. Every man who walks through that door gets a three-second assessment before I can stop myself.

*Not him. Not him. Not him.*

The bell jingles. A man in a baseball cap over floppy brown hair walks in.

My hand tightens on the coffee pot. He's the right height. Right build. The cap is pulled low and I can't see his face and for one horrible moment my entire body goes rigid and the air turns to glass around me. *No, no, no, no—*

He pushes the cap up.

Wrong face. A little heavy around the jaw. Nothing like Jamie. Nothing like Stephen. Just a guy who wants breakfast and doesn't know the woman holding his coffee almost dropped it because his hat was too low on his face.

"Morning," he says. "Can I get the number three?"

"Coming right up." My voice is steady. My hands are not. I set the coffee pot down before anyone notices the tremor and write his order on the pad with handwriting that looks like a seismograph.

*In for four. Hold for four. Out for four.*

*Don't punish yourself for the reflex.*

By ten a.m., the rush is in full swing, and my body takes over. Pouring, plating, smiling, clearing. The rhythm of diner work is the same as breathing. You don't think about it, you just do it, and the doing keeps you upright. A table of college kids orders milkshakes. An elderly couple splits a Reuben. A delivery driver eats a grilled cheese standing at the counter because he's double-parked and doesn't care.

Normal. All of it, aggressively, stubbornly normal.

Then someone laughs.

It comes from the booth near the back, the sound rolling out warm and easy and so specifically *Jamie* that my vision narrows to a pinpoint. I have to look. My body is a hunting dog and the sound is its whistle—spine up, skin prickling, every instinct gone cold and predatory.

I release a slow breath.

Just a college kid, maybe twenty or twenty-two. Two buddies with him, both laughing, but he—he laughs the way Jamie did, tipping his head back so you get the shape of his jaw, the tendon in his neck, that moment of perfect, boyish surprise at something genuinely funny.

It almost gets me. The sound, the flash of teeth, the echo of everything I used to love about Jamie—until I remember what's real. I go still. My hands steady. My heart does not. I collect the empty plates from the counter and carry them to the back, ignoring Rosa's worried eyes. The kitchen is the only place with walls thick enough to muffle memory, so I linger there, breathing in fry oil and bleach until the laugh fades back into background noise. Jamie is not here. Jamie doesn't even exist, really. He's Stephen. But the ghost of him is now installed in my auditory cortex, and I am never going to be unhaunted.

My phone buzzes in my apron pocket.

KNOX:

How's it going?

ME:

Fine. Normal. Nobody's tried to murder me yet.

Three dots.

KNOX:

Day's still young. Don't get cocky.

I snort. Put the phone away. Get back to work.

By eleven, I've stopped flinching at the bell. By noon, I've served forty-three people without incident. By one, my feet hurt and my back aches and I've remembered why I liked this job in the first place. It's not the tips or the free food—it's the noise. The constant, churning, reliable noise of people eating and talking and existing as though none of the evil shit I've seen and endured, or the vengeance I've taken part in, has even happened.

They don't know. They don't need to. And there's a freedom in being nobody's victim, nobody's vigilante, nobody's girlfriend. Just a waitress with a coffee pot and sore feet.

The bell jingles and I look up and it's Amy.

She's in jeans and a cropped sweater and sneakers that are too white to have walked far. Her hair is different—shorter, layered. She looks good. Brighter than the other day when I saw her at Dean's.

"New haircut?" I ask as she slides onto a stool at the counter.

"Yeah." She ruffles her fingers through the layers. "I literally just got done at the salon. Thought I could use a change."

"Looks gorgeous," I say. "Coffee?"

“Obviously. And one of those disgusting cream cheese Danishes that I’m pretending are a health food since it’s dairy.”

I pour her cup and plate the Danish. Then I lean my elbows on the counter because Amy is the one person in my life who existed before any of this. Before the beach, before the Hangmen, before the wall. She knew me when I was just a waitress with bad luck, starting fresh in a new town. She gave me a home. She gave me friendship. And even after all of it went to shit and she ended up having to murder her ex-boyfriend to save my life—she’s still here.

“So,” she says, biting into the Danish and getting cream cheese on her chin. “How’s the first day back?”

“Weird. Fine. Weird and fine.”

“Scale of one to ten, how many times have you thought you saw Jamie?”

I look at her. “How did you—”

“Because I did the same thing. After you went missing. I was a mess until Dean told me you’d been found. But once I knew who Jamie really was—what he was *capable* of—I kept seeing him *everywhere*. The coffee shop, on the bus, in the grocery store, outside the school. Every tall guy with brown hair and a friendly face was him. It took about three weeks before it started easing.”

“Three weeks?”

“Give or take. And even now, sometimes.” She shrugs. “You learn to live with the echo.”

Neither of us mentions the other ghost in the room—Tyler. The one who went down on our living room carpet with a knife from our own kitchen drawer in him, and Amy standing over him looking at her hands.

I top off her coffee. “I’m not sure I’ll ever learn.”

She gives me a half smile. “Did you ever think about just . . . not coming back?”

I meet her eyes. “To town?”

“Yeah. Or at least here.” She looks around the diner, licking cream cheese off her thumb. “To one of the places you used to see him most.”

“All the time,” I admit with a sigh.

“So what made you decide to stay? You testing whether you can do it?”

“Something like that.”

“Sage.” She sets the Danish down. “You know you could do literally anything else, right? You’ve got five guys who’d buy you a business or build you a studio or whatever. You don’t have to stand behind the same counter where he sat and pretend it doesn’t hurt.”

“It’s not about pretending it doesn’t hurt.” I wipe a nonexistent spot from the counter. “It’s about this place still being mine. He already took so much from me. I’m not letting Stephen have my job, my routines, and half the fucking town too. He wanted to erase me. I’m not helping him finish it.”

Amy picks the Danish back up and takes a bite, chewing slowly.

“That’s either the bravest thing I’ve ever heard,” she says, “or the most stubborn.”

“Can’t it be both?”

“With you? It’s always both.”

Amy is still there when my shift ends, sitting on the customer side of the counter grading a stack of papers, tapping her pen every time she finds an error. She looks up when I untie my apron and stretch, cracking my neck. “You made it,” she says, a little proud, a little surprised.

I did. Two false alarms, one hide in the kitchen, nine hundred coffee refills. Nobody died. Nobody even noticed I was holding my breath.

“Let me take you home,” Amy says.

“I’m good,” I say, “but thanks. I’ve got a ride.”

She cocks her head, skepticism written all over her. “Does this ride have a pulse and a name, or is it a ride-share situation?”

“Definitely a pulse,” I say, lips twitching. “Knox has been on watch, but Micah should be here any—”

The bell over the door chimes and Micah’s there, holding a bouquet of tulips. He sees us, grins, and makes a mock bow in my direction.

“Your chariot arrives, milady,” he says, and hands me the flowers, and I immediately press my lips to his.

“Thank you. They’re beautiful.”

Micah kisses me back like he’s been waiting all day to do exactly that, one hand sliding warm around my waist, the other still holding on to his keys. The tulips get crushed slightly between us, and I don’t even care.

When I pull back, Amy’s eyebrows have climbed so high they’ve almost disappeared into her hairline.

Micah, because he is the most naturally graceful person alive and apparently immune to awkwardness, just smiles at her and offers his hand

across the counter like we are in a Jane Austen adaptation instead of a diner that smells like burned oil and maple syrup.

“Hey, Amy. Long time, no see.”

She blinks at him once, then takes his hand. “Setting the standard pretty high for the rest of your harem by bringing flowers, huh?”

“I believe in continuous improvement,” Micah says, and he says it with such a straight face that Amy actually claps once, delighted.

“Sage is lucky to have you.”

“I won’t argue there,” I say, pocketing my tip cash and locker key.

Micah and I head outside. Amy waves us off with a wide smile and a promise that we’ll see each other again soon. Micah opens the passenger door of his hatchback, waits for me to get in, then circles to the driver’s side. We sit for a second in the sun-warmed air of the little car.

“You did it,” he says.

“Yeah.”

“How are you?”

“Still upright.”

He starts the car, but doesn’t pull away just yet. “You want me to tell you that you never have to go back if you don’t want to?”

“Yes.”

“You never have to go back if you don’t want to, Sage.”

I nod and take a deep breath.

“Thank you. I will go back. I think I *need* to go back, you know? But it feels good hearing it.”

He grins at me, one hand still resting on the gearshift. “You got enough left in the tank for me to steal you for a while?”

I blink at him. The flowers are in my lap, my body is heavy with the kind of exhaustion that comes from holding yourself together all day, and somehow that question still gets a yes out of me before I’ve thought about it.

I angle toward him. “Did you plan something?”

His mouth curves, secretive and pleased, and instead of answering, he puts the car in gear.

“Oh my God,” I say, already smiling. “You absolutely did.”

“Maybe.”

“Micah.”

He pulls out of the lot, sunlight flashing over the windshield. “You’ve had a hard first day back. I thought we might mark your successful reentry into society with something other than collapse.”

“Okay then. I’m all yours, Micah,” I murmur, leaning back in the seat. “What *are* you going to do with me?”

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# THIRTY
# MICAH



"You brought me to a honky-tonk," Sage says, staring at the antlers above the bar.

"Gastropub."

"Those antlers disagree."

"Those antlers are ironic."

"Micah." She turns to me, a smirk tugging at her lips. "Those antlers have never been ironic a day in their life."

She's right. The antlers are deeply, aggressively sincere. But the bar is good.

*The Porch* is tucked into a converted warehouse on the edge of the arts district, with a live three-piece band in the back corner playing bluesy music and a bass line you feel in your molars. An old work friend of mine owns it. Val spent a couple of years tending bar at Unholy Desires, where the pay is good and the clientele tips even better, before she saved enough to branch out on her own.

We move through the crowd. It's young and loud and civilian, and not a single person in this building has ever disposed of a body—at least as far as I'm aware. The normalcy is almost a drug.

Val spots me from behind the taps. Her face lights up. "Micah! Holy shit. It's been too long."

Sage goes a little still beside me in that way she does when she's taking in new variables fast. New woman. Familiar with me. Pretty enough that it might matter if you were in the mood to be territorial.

Honestly? It’s a little adorable.

“Val.” I grin and lean over the bar for a quick hug. “Yeah, sorry. I’ve been off-grid.”

“No kidding.” She pulls back and looks me over. Dark braid over one shoulder, black tank, tattoo of a swallow on her collarbone. “You look disgustingly healthy.”

“I’ve been eating vegetables against my will.”

“Tragic.” Her gaze slides to Sage and brightens further. “And who is this stunning woman?”

I turn, already enjoying this. “This is my Sage.”

Val sticks a hand out immediately. “Hi, Micah’s Sage. Anyone he brings here gets the VIP treatment and at least one free drink. Unless you’re a cop.”

Sage shakes her hand, expression easing into dry amusement. “Not a cop. Just emotionally suspicious.”

Val barks out a laugh. “Beautiful *and* funny, I like you.” She leans her forearms on the bar. “What are you both drinking?”

I scan the menu above the bar. “How about you quit hitting on my girlfriend and give us two of whatever you’re currently proud of.”

“Wounded. Deeply wounded.” Val clutches her chest, but she’s grinning. “Fine. Two of my fanciest drinks. On the house for your ego’s recovery.”

She turns to build the drinks, and Sage shifts closer to me, her shoulder pressing against my arm. I feel the question in her body before she speaks it.

“Old work friend,” I murmur against her hair. “Years ago. She’s harmless.”

“She’s pretty.”

“She’s also married to the woman who runs a pottery studio in the warehouse next door. Very talented. Very intimidating.”

Sage relaxes against me, barely, just enough that I know I’ve given her the right information at the right time. She’s still scanning the room—I can feel her attention moving across faces, exits, shadows—but she’s letting herself be here with me too.

Val sets two drinks in front of us. One is amber and smoked, garnished with what looks like a dehydrated orange wheel and a sprig of rosemary

that’s definitely trying too hard. The other is pale and fizzy with cucumber and mint.

“This one,” Val says, tapping the smoked one, “is for Micah, because he likes to act delicate and then order something that tastes like a campfire punched a tree. And this one’s for Sage because she gives the vibe of a woman who wants to be told it’s light and refreshing while secretly hoping it could strip paint.”

Sage picks up the glass. Sniffs it. “I feel alarmingly seen.”

“I worked service for ten years,” Val says. “I can read a woman’s damage profile in under thirty seconds.”

“That is either a superpower or a cry for help.”

“Both,” Val says brightly.

Sage takes a sip. Her brows lift a fraction. “Okay. Annoying. This is really good.”

Val beams like she personally invented alcohol. “I’ll bring you fries if you promise not to leave before the second round.”

“Bribery through potatoes,” I say. “Still the strongest economy.”

“You know me.”

Val winks at us, snags a ticket from the rail, and disappears down the bar in a blur of braid and black ink and practiced charm.

The second she’s gone, the noise of the place settles around us. More intimate. The band in the corner slides into something slow and gritty. Someone laughs too loudly by the pool tables. Glass clinks. Ice shifts. Sage turns her drink in her hand and takes a sip.

And I watch her.

I always do. But sometimes it hits with enough force that it feels new.

She’s tired. I can see it in the slight heaviness around her eyes, the way her shoulders are only mostly dropped, like some part of her still expects impact. But she came anyway. She stood through her first day back in that diner, in that haunted little pocket of her life, and then she got in my car and let me bring her somewhere loud and ordinary and stupidly antlered.

Nothing with Sage is small.

From the first moment I held her under the jetty, shaking and filled with adrenaline after her first kill, I knew my life was changed. I’m not sure what it was I expected—or even what I thought would happen that night I snuck into her room and we ended up sleeping together. But I do know I wasn’t expecting what we’ve become.

I wasn’t expecting her to fit into us like she was always there, some missing element the whole group rebuilt itself around without knowing it.

And I definitely wasn’t expecting to fall this hard.

“You’re staring,” she says, halfway through her drink.

“I’m admiring.”

“Mm.” She takes another sip, eyes on the stage. “Dangerous habit.”

“I save it for special occasions and you.”

“That doesn’t make it sound less dangerous.”

“It wasn’t meant to.”

That gets me a sideways look over the rim of her glass. Dry. Warm. Tired in a way that makes me want to put her somewhere soft and keep the world back with both hands. But there’s color in her cheeks now, and some of the brittle edge that clung to her after work has eased. That was the point. Not distraction exactly. Something gentler. A better night laid down on top of a bad one, until the bad one has to share.

I lift my drink and taste smoke, citrus, bourbon. “So,” I say, “first impressions?”

She scans the room again. “The taxidermy remains unforgivable. But the music’s good, your bartender friend is cool, and nobody in here appears to be stalking me.”

“That you can see.”

“Don’t ruin this for me.”

I smile into my glass. “You did really well today.”

She doesn’t answer immediately. Instead, she traces the wet edge of her glass with one finger. The band’s guitarist slides into a mournful little run that makes the whole room seem to lean toward it.

“I felt insane for about the first two hours,” she says finally. “Then I felt normal. Then I felt weird for feeling normal.” She huffs a soft laugh. “Trauma is so elegant.”

“It sure is.”

I shift closer until our knees touch under the bar, and she leans into the contact.

“I’m so proud of you for refusing to shrink,” I tell her.

Sage can take brutality better than gentleness. Or maybe not *better*—just with fewer visible aftershocks.

“I poured coffee and cleaned up after people who can’t be bothered putting their dirty cutlery on their empty plates.”

“You returned to the place he used to gain access to you. And you did it like a badass.”

She rolls her eyes. “Says you.” She reaches over and steals the orange slice from my glass. Eats it without apology. I let her because I’d let her steal anything—my drink, my heart, every slice of fruit for the rest of my life.

“Dance with me.”

She quirks her brow. “Seriously?”

“Yeah, baby girl. Dance with me.”

She finishes her drink. Sets the glass down with a click. “Okay.”

The floor is small and dark and the band is playing a song slow enough to live in. I pull her in and we move. One hand at her waist. The other holding hers against my chest where she can feel my heartbeat if she wants to.

She fits there like she was built for slow songs and low light, one hand in mine, the other sliding up to rest against my shoulder. The room keeps moving around us—boots on wood, laughter, the clink of glasses—but the center narrows fast.

Sage looks up at me with that familiar, guarded amusement, like she still can’t believe this is a real thing she’s allowed to have. A man bringing her somewhere ordinary. A dance floor that doesn’t lead anywhere ugly. Music without threat in it.

“So this is how you schmoozed all your girls before me, huh?” she asks.

My brow furrows. “All?”

Her hands slide up to loop behind my neck as she bounces her shoulders. “I don’t know. I guess I was just noticing how smooth you are with women. I mean, it makes sense—look at you, you’re stunning and so damn kind and—”

“Wait. Is this about Val?”

“What? No. Even I can tell Val was more interested in me than she was in you. It’s more . . .” She looks over my shoulder. “The women here openly stare at you—like I’m not even standing right here. And I don’t know, I guess I was wondering how many you’ve brought here. How many you’ve danced with like this.”

She asks like it’s a simple curiosity. It isn’t. The fear underneath is that she’s one in a line, that this is a performance I’ve perfected, that the gentleness she gets from me is something I hand out like business cards.

I slow us to almost stillness, my hand tightening at her waist. “Hey.” I wait until she meets my eyes. “You’re the first woman I’ve ever brought to this place. And I wish I could tell you there was never another woman before, but I can’t do that. I can tell you that no woman has *ever* seen me like this.”

“Like what?”

“Like someone hoping he’s enough.”

Her breath catches, and I know I’ve found the real thing underneath the deflection. She looks away first, toward the band, but her fingers curl tighter at my neck.

“That’s not fair,” she murmurs. “You can’t say things like that.”

“I can. I did.” I draw her back into motion, slow, swaying. “Sage, I spent years learning how to be what people need and leave before they needed too much. You’re the first woman I wanted to stay for. The only one.”

She’s quiet for a long moment, her cheek pressed near my shoulder, and I feel her breathing slow, feel her let something go. When she speaks again, her voice is smaller than I’ve heard it in weeks.

“I keep waiting for you to realize I’m too much work.”

I pull back enough to see her face. “Baby girl.” The words come out rough, almost broken. “You could never be too much. You could be nothing but work, and I’d still want every exhausting, complicated, beautiful piece of you.”

Her eyes shine, wet and silver in the low light, and she blinks fast like she’s fighting it. I don’t tell her not to cry. I just hold her closer, one hand at the small of her back, and keep us moving through the song.

“You’re not smooth,” she whispers finally, a faint smile breaking through. “You’re devastating. The whole world leans into you.”

“I’ll take devastating.”

She tries to roll her eyes, but she can’t quite pull it off with my hands holding her. “I feel selfish sometimes. I get five men and you get one-fifth of me. And I know you have Eli, but even though we’ve all agreed to this and moved in because we want to be a family, I still worry I’m not enough. Or that I’m too much trouble. I mean, look at the mess all our lives have become. I feel like you give so much and get so little.”

I lean down until my forehead rests against hers. “You aren’t a pie we divide into fifths. I get Eli. I get you. I get to come home and find both of

you there, along with three assholes I'd trust with my life. Tell me which part of that is supposed to feel like less."

Her hands tighten behind my neck.

"I don't want an easier version of you, and I don't want less. I want the woman who steals fruit from my drink, gets jealous when other women look at me, and went back to the diner today even though it scared the shit out of her."

Her eyes turn bright, but her mouth curves. "You had to make it a feelings party."

"Just a little one." The song ends. There's half-hearted applause, then the band picks up a faster tune, and the dance floor thins out. Sage pulls me toward the edge of the room, weaving us through the crowd until we find a shadowed corner near the end of the bar, away from the main lights and the blur of bodies. Her back hits the wall gently, and she pulls me in close, her fingers curling into my shirt as she rises on her toes. I don't wait—I lean down and kiss her, deep and immediate, tasting the mint and gin on her tongue, the heat of her mouth opening under mine like she's been holding back all night.

It's not soft. Not a gentle dance-floor version. This is hunger, her hands sliding up my chest, nails scraping lightly over my skin through the fabric, and I press in harder, one hand bracing the wall beside her head, the other gripping her hip. She makes this low sound against my lips, half moan, half gasp, and it sends fire straight through me. I deepen the kiss, my body pinning hers to the wall, feeling her arch into me, the way her breath hitches when I nip at her bottom lip.

"God, Micah," she whispers when I break away enough to trail my mouth down her neck, sucking at the pulse point where her heartbeat kicks against my tongue. Her hands tangle in my hair, pulling me closer, and I can feel her leg hooking around mine, grinding against me in a way that makes my control fray at every edge.

The bar noise fades. The band, the glasses, the laughter—all of it drops to a distant hum. My hand slides up her thigh, bunching her skirt, and the heat of her skin under my palm makes my breath catch. She's warm everywhere. Alive everywhere. The woman who stood behind a counter all day and didn't flinch is now pressing herself against me in a dark corner of a bar, her fingers slipping under my shirt, tracing my stomach, lower, teasing the waistband of my jeans without giving a shit about subtlety.

“Need you,” I mutter into her skin, voice rough. “Right now.”

She nods, fast and breathless, her hands already at my belt. The buckle gives under her fingers, and I have to physically stop myself from taking her right here against this wall in front of a bar full of strangers and a band that’s still playing like the world hasn’t narrowed to a single point of contact.

“Not here,” I manage, though every part of me protests the decision. I grab her hand and pull her toward the side exit, weaving through bodies and noise, and she follows with that half-laugh, half-gasp that tells me she’s as far gone as I am.

The door slams behind us, muting the music to a bass thump through the wall. The alley is narrow, lit by a single bulb above the exit, and the dumpster is far enough away that I can pretend this is romantic.

Sage doesn’t wait. She grabs my shirt and backs herself against the brick, eyes dark, mouth swollen from kissing.

“Here good?” she asks, breathless and grinning.

“Yeah.” I brace one hand beside her head. Her shoulder blades are flat against brick, and she doesn’t flinch. She picked the spot. Six weeks ago a man sealed her into a wall, and tonight she put her own back against one because she wanted to. I kiss her again, slower, as her hands slide beneath my shirt.

“You’re so fucking beautiful,” she murmurs.

I pull her hips flush against mine, and she rolls against me.

“Micah.” My name comes out low and breathless. “I want you inside me.”

That’s all I need.

I push her skirt to her waist and slide her underwear down her thighs. She kicks them off, and I pocket them.

“Did you seriously pocket my underwear?”

“Of course. They’re mine now.”

“You’re a menace.”

“And yet.” I drop to my knees.

Her breath catches. “Micah—”

“Baby girl.” I look up at her, my hands sliding along her thighs. “Let me taste you.”

Her fingers curl into my hair as she lifts one thigh over my shoulder, opening herself to me. I kiss the inside of it, then higher, until my mouth

finds her and her soft gasp echoes off the brick.

I circle her clit with the steady pressure she likes, giving her more when her hips roll toward my tongue. Her grip tightens, her thighs begin to shake, and when her breathing breaks, I slide two fingers inside her and curl them.

“Fuck—Micah—you’re so fucking good at—”

I hold the rhythm until she comes against my mouth, her thigh clamping around my shoulder as my name tears out of her. Only when her grip loosens do I ease the pressure, kiss the inside of her thigh, and stand.

“Micah,” she says, reaching for my belt.

“That’s for me to do.” I catch her wrists and pin them gently against the brick above her head. She has been making decisions since six this morning—every table, every face, every man through that door. She doesn’t get to make another one for ten minutes. That’s the whole gift. Her eyes widen with recognition. She knows this version of me.

I undo my jeans with my free hand, watching the hunger sharpen in her expression. When I release her wrists, she leaves them where I put them.

“Good girl,” I murmur.

Her pupils blow wide.

I grip her hips and lift. Her legs wrap around my waist as I settle her against the wall, the tip of me pressing against her pussy.

“Please,” she whispers.

I push in slowly, watching her face as her mouth falls open and her legs tighten around me.

“Move,” she breathes. “Micah, move.”

I do, keeping the first strokes deep and measured until her hands leave the wall and grip my shoulders.

“Harder.”

The command breaks the last of my control. I tighten my hold on her hips and drive into her harder, swallowing every gasp with my mouth as she meets each thrust.

She comes with her lips against mine, clenching around me until I follow her over the edge, burying myself deep with her name caught in my throat.

We stay tangled against the wall, breathing hard while the bass pulses through the brick behind us.

She laughs first, soft and breathless. “I’m starting to think I have a thing for alleys.”

“Should I be jealous of the one behind the diner?”

“Maybe.”

“Okay. But did any of those times also involve flowers?”

“Milo brought me flowers once.”

“Didn’t he buy you a funeral wreath that got stolen while you two were getting busy?”

She grins. “Still counts.”

“Maybe. But our alley fuck had drinks and dancing.”

She pulls back enough to look at me, her eyes bright, her cheeks flushed, her hair a disaster. “Definitely the most romantic of them.”

I kiss her gently, then lower her to the ground, keeping a hand on her hip when her legs wobble. The grateful, amused, and utterly wrecked look she gives me is one I’d happily replay for the rest of my life.

I fix her skirt. Tuck myself away. And while she’s running her fingers through her hair, the door to the alley opens and a burst of laughter tumbles out.

I spin, already stepping in front of Sage, my hand finding her waist to steady her as my eyes track the threat. Three figures stumble through—two women and a man, all laughing, clearly drunk, clearly harmless. They pass us and disappear onto the street. My pulse doesn’t slow. Half that bar knows my name, and I didn’t think about that once tonight—not when Val said it out loud across a crowded room, not when I walked her down an alley I hadn’t looked into first.

“That was close,” I say, shifting back a little.

Sage laughs. “Do I look like I was just fucked in an alley?”

“You look like you were very thoroughly appreciated in an outdoor venue.”

“That’s the same thing.”

“It sounds better my way.”

“I think Milo’s rubbing off on you.” She grabs my shirt and pulls me in for one last kiss—slow, unhurried, the kind that says *thank you* and *I love you* and *take me home* all at once.

“I like it when you take me on dates and then fuck me in public,” she murmurs against my mouth.

“I’ll take you on as many as you want.” I brush a strand of hair from her face, tucking it behind her ear. “Every week. Every day. As long as you’ll let me.”

She studies me in the low light. The bar hums behind us. The city murmurs beyond the alley. Her hand rests on my chest, right over my heart, and she leaves it there like she’s counting the beats.

“Take me home, Micah.”

I take her hand. We walk back to the car.

The drive home is quiet in the best way—her hand on my thigh, the radio low, the streetlights painting her face in stripes of gold and shadow. She falls asleep before we hit the highway, her head tipped against the window, and I drive slow because there’s nowhere I need to be that isn’t wherever she is.

This moment. This woman. This life.

I’d choose it every time.

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# THIRTY-ONE
# MILO



The packet trace is garbage.

I've been running it for three hours and the only thing it's confirmed is that Stephen Mercer-Davis knows how to disappear like a man who studied disappearing. Cash withdrawals in Ohio, a burner phone pinged once outside Pittsburgh, a gas station camera in Maryland that caught the back of a baseball cap. After that—nothing. The Annapolis marina. The boat. And a data trail that drops off the edge of the earth like the planet ran out of road.

Everything exactly as Odin said.

Fuck.

I lean back in my chair and stare at the server racks. They hum at me. Loyal, constant, doing their best.

"We'll find him," I tell them. "We always find them."

The servers don't respond, which is rude but expected.

My phone has a bunch of unread messages from Odin's secure channel —new assignments, target profiles, the machinery of the Hangmen resuming operations like we didn't just spend a month in a cabin, carving wood and having orgasms in hot tubs. I scroll through the briefs. Two possibles in the metro area. One in Portland that Holden's already flagged to put forward as our next target during Tuesday's in-person meeting.

I set the phone back down and sigh.

The wheels turn. The list refreshes. There's always another predator.

But the one I want is on a boat somewhere, and my servers can't find what the ocean swallowed.

A knock on the door.

"Go away, Mom."

I barely spoke to Gloria when I arrived. The moment I told her I knew about the pills, she zipped her lips tight, like she'd rather swallow glass than explain herself. I'd moved straight past her and headed for the server room, because the alternative was standing there demanding answers from a stone. I love my mother. But sometimes I also want to put her in a time-out that lasts until the heat death of the universe.

"Not Gloria."

I spin the chair. That's Holden's voice. Muffled by a metal door, nine deadbolts, and a biometric pad, but unmistakable—nobody else sounds that grouchy and that sexy at the same time.

I cross the room and open the door, finding Holden, wearing his brown leather jacket and holding two takeout coffees in one hand. He looks like he just got off work.

"Busy day fighting crime?" I ask, my eyes raking over him. He's been back at the station for barely a week, and he already has a tic in his jaw.

"You could say that," he says.

"How'd you get past the dads?"

"Dennis let me in. He offered me lemonade and instigated a conversation about lawn care." Holden steps inside, scanning the room before his gaze lands on the screens. "Anything?"

"A whole lot of nothing wrapped in encrypted nothing served on a bed of frustrating nothing." I drop back into my chair and gesture at the monitors. "Trail's dead after Annapolis. Odin's maritime contacts came back empty. If he's on that boat, he's either in the Caribbean or at the bottom of the Atlantic, and I honestly can't decide which I'd prefer."

"Caribbean means he's alive."

"Atlantic means we'll never know where he is."

He presses his mouth into a thin line. "I checked Sage's file. Figured if she's back at the diner, we needed to make sure she isn't still suspected dead."

"Oh, fuck. I can't believe we didn't think about that *before* she went back. We suck. What was in the file?"

“Odin’s people already cleaned it up. She’s listed as located safe, and the Coast Guard report was amended once they examined the car. No evidence anyone was inside when it went over. Local police have it down as a vehicle deliberately dumped off the bluff.”

“That’s reassuringly vague.”

“It gets better. There’s an active warrant for Stephen Mercer-Davis, with Jamie Mercer listed as an alias. Kidnapping and attempted murder. The BOLO says detain immediately.”

“And if some helpful little patrol officer finds him before we do?”

Holden takes a drink. “Odin has someone in the transfer chain.”

I smile. “I love interagency cooperation.”

Holden doesn’t smile back. “It means she isn’t legally dead. It doesn’t mean she’s safe. She’s still behind a counter on a published schedule, in a town he knows.”

“Cool. Great. I’d almost gone a full minute without the creeping dread.”

Holden hands me a coffee and takes the other chair. “I stopped by the hardware store on my way here.”

“Okay?” I take a mouthful of lukewarm coffee and grimace.

“They said you left early.”

“I leave early most days. It’s a hardware store, Holden, not NASA.”

“You know, in all the years I’ve known you, I think I’ve only seen you at the hardware store once—and that was when you used the store as a cover to get into the country club. How do you even still have that job?”

“Oh. That’s easy. My stepdad owns it.”

Holden pauses with the cup at his mouth and doesn’t drink.

“Stepdad?” he says. “As in one of the dads upstairs with the shock collars and the turtlenecks?”

“No. Different category.” I set the terrible coffee down and face him. “The dads upstairs—Dennis, Gene, Ray—are the current dads. Active roster. The stepdads are the ones who used to be dads but got rotated out.”

“Rotated out.”

“Gloria’s term, not mine. Some dads leave and we never see them again—”

“You mean the ones she ‘promoted to gardener’?” Holden says, using air quotes like what he’s saying makes any sense.

“Uh. Sure,” I say, taking another mouthful of coffee and instantly regretting it. “Use whatever metaphor you want.” I drop the coffee in the

trash this time. “But, anyway, sometimes a dad will get demoted to stepdad. Which I always like, because it means I still get to see them. Like Hank from Hank’s Meats.”

“The guy who runs the meat processing plant?”

I nod. “Yeah. He and Mom dated, but they didn’t work out. Stepdad.”

Holden’s coffee stops halfway to his mouth. “So your stepdads are men your mother dated, broke up with, but she keeps them around because they serve some kind of purpose? Like this guy who lets you work at his hardware store?”

“I guess.” I shrug. “But I don’t know what my mom would want with a meat processing plant and a hardware store.”

Holden looks at me like I’m building IKEA furniture with my teeth. “Your mom took over from your father, didn’t she?”

A chill runs up my spine. “We don’t talk about my father, Holden.”

Holden’s mouth falls open. “But . . . But we *did* talk about your father—at the cabin. You told me—”

I shove my fingers into my ears and hum. “La la la, I can’t hear you, la la la—”

“Milo.” Holden’s voice cuts through my humming. He catches my wrists, pulling my hands away from my ears with surprising gentleness. “Stop.”

I stop. The server room hums around us, indifferent to my internal drama.

“We talked about your father at the cabin,” Holden repeats, slower this time, like he’s navigating a minefield he didn’t know existed. “Do you remember that? It was after you found your pills.”

“I’m taking my pills.”

“I know.” He takes both of my hands in his. “But I need you to answer me. Do you remember what you told me?”

“We don’t talk about my father,” I repeat, my mind throwing up a wall every time he asks. It hurts the back of my eyes, and I pull my hands free.

Holden sits back and scrubs a hand over his face. “Your brain revoked access.”

“What?” Now he’s just speaking in riddles.

He shakes his head. “Nothing. I just . . .” He lets out a slow sigh, and whatever process was running behind his eyes exits without saving. “Okay.

So if talking about your father is off the table—what do *you* think your mom wants with a hardware store and a meat processing plant?"

I want to laugh, but he's dead serious, and that's a combination I don't see often. "She runs a mid-sized pyramid scheme, manages a stable of polyamorous dads, and does MLMs so efficiently the whole neighborhood is terrified of her. I love her, but she's basically a Disney villain repurposed for the suburb economy. Why?"

He doesn't blink. "You've never questioned the way she does things?"

"I—" I stop. "Okay, yeah, there's the time she forced me to help bury that crate of expired synthetic hormone supplements, but the FDA fines are stupid, and who hasn't buried hormones in their backyard."

He pinches the bridge of his nose. I've seen him do that countless times, often when talking to me. "God. You ever think she's not running an MLM, but running something bigger?"

I snort. "Like what, a suburban mafia but with more essential oils? Don't be ridiculous." I turn back to the screens. "Listen, I know the relationship between my mom and all my dads and stepdads is unconventional. But so is ours. And you know what, Holden? You break up with spouses. Not kids. Just because one of the dads stops sleeping with my mom, doesn't mean they stop being my dad. So maybe my mom just wanted to make sure that I had options when it was time to join the family business."

He stares at me again. Occasionally, staring is how you can tell Holden is running diagnostics so complex he's about to blue screen. "You think being a Hangman fits into the family business?"

I scoff. "Holden, I know people say you aren't funny. But my God, you come up with some great ones."

I'm back to the keyboard, tapping away while Holden sits quietly, drinking that terrible coffee he bought. For a long moment, the only sound in the room is the faint whine of the cooling fans and the rasp of Holden slowly, methodically tearing the heat shield off his coffee cup.

"I'm sorry," he says, eventually. "That was out of line. Your mom—whatever it is she does—is none of my business. Blame it on the cop brain."

"Sure," I say, because that's easier than asking why the hell his cop brain is suddenly sniffing around my mother like she's hiding a cartel under the hydrangeas.

Holden nods once, but he doesn't look convinced by his own apology.

Which is impressive, honestly. Usually, Holden delivers apologies gift-wrapped in a grunt, then immediately starts kissing me. This one feels . . . unfinished. Like he backed away from a thought because he realized if he said it out loud, I might either laugh in his face or have a nervous breakdown in my own server room, and he wasn't sure which outcome would be less annoying.

I swivel back toward the monitors and drag one of the packet windows wider.

"Anyway," I say, because avoidance is an art form and I'm a patron of the arts, "unless you think Gloria has secretly trained Stephen in maritime evasion, we're still stuck with the same problem."

Holden sets his coffee on the floor beside his boot. "Walk me through it again."

I side-eye him. "You just want to hear me say nerdy things."

"I want to make sure you didn't miss anything."

"You flirt horribly. And honestly, you're wasting your time. No sex in the server room. It's a rule that must not be broken for the longevity of the equipment."

Holden's eyes go flat and bright in the way that usually means someone is about to get arrested, shot, or thoroughly ruined.

Then he stands.

I blink at him. "Oh no. No, no, no. That wasn't an invitation."

"It wasn't?" He steps between my knees and pushes my chair back enough to give himself room.

"No. It was a very serious boundary. This is a clean room. Do you have any idea how—"

He drops to his knees.

"Keep working."

*Oh.*

*Oh, that smug, terrifying motherfucker.*

"Holden," I say, voice going thin at the edges as his hands slide up my thighs, thumbs pressing them wider apart. "Absolutely not. You are not turning my server room into—"

He looks up at me from between my legs, ice-blue eyes sharpened to a blade. "You said no sex in the server room, right?"

"Right. Because there is no sex in the server room."

"Good," he says. "Then this doesn't violate policy."

I stare at him. And then he drags my zipper down and pulls out my dick, and all the oxygen in the room immediately files a formal complaint.

My hands hit the desk on instinct. “You cannot just—”

“Keep working, Milo.”

He takes me in his hand, strokes once, firm and measured, and I lose my ability to do anything but watch what he’s doing to me.

“Packet trace,” he says, as if we are absolutely continuing the conversation we were having and not about to commit several acts of desecration against workplace professionalism. “Walk me through the marina again.”

Then his mouth closes over me.

My brain shorts out like a server hit with a power surge, every coherent thought vaporizing the second Holden’s tongue slides along the underside of me. I grip the desk edge, my knuckles going white, and try to remember how words work. Packet trace. Marina. *Right*. He’s serious about this multitasking bullshit, isn’t he?

“The, uh—” I swallow a groan as he takes me deeper, heat and suction pulling a curse from my throat. “The marina footage shows a private yacht departing at oh-two-hundred. No manifest, like Odin said. Owner’s a shell corp out of the Caymans. I traced it back to—fuck, Holden, slower or I’m not gonna last—a holding company with ties to some low-level smuggling ops, but nothing that screams ‘asshole killer on board.’”

He hums around me, the vibration shooting straight up my spine, and I buck involuntarily, one hand dropping to his hair before I remember I need it to type, even though he’s the one breaking all the rules here, on his knees in my sanctum, looking up with those heated eyes like he’s daring me to keep talking.

I do, because apparently my mouth runs on autopilot even when the rest of me is melting. “Trail goes cold after that. Satellite imaging from the Coast Guard shows the boat heading southeast, but it vanishes in open water. Could’ve rendezvoused with another vessel, or—” His hand joins in, stroking what his mouth can’t reach, and I choke on the next word. “Or maybe it’s a decoy. Stephen’s smart enough to plant false flags.”

Holden pulls back just enough to speak, his breath hot against my skin. “Keep going.” Then he’s right back at it, relentless, like he’s interrogating me with pleasure instead of questions.

I laugh, breathless and wrecked, my head falling back against the chair. “You’re a sadist. Fine. I cross-referenced port logs in the Caribbean—Bermuda, Bahamas—*come on, pretty mama.*” Holden’s eyes flash as my voice pitches, and I quickly clear my throat. *Focus. Focus.* “Uh, I even went as far as Curaçao. No matches on the yacht’s profile. If he’s there, he’s gone dark. No financial hits, no digital fingerprints. Man’s a ghost.”

The words come out staggered, punctuated by gasps as he works me over, building that tight coil in my gut faster than I can process. My hips twitch forward, chasing the heat, and he lets me, one hand pinning my thigh to keep me spread. God, the sight of him—Detective Hardass on his knees, focused and filthy—it’s going to ruin me for every future server room crisis.

“Almost there,” he murmurs against me, and I don’t know if he means the trace or the orgasm, but both feel inevitable. I grip his shoulder, fingers digging in, and force out the last bit. “Odin’s team is still saying the immediate threat’s dissolved. But they’ve been wrong before.” I hiss through my teeth. “I agree with your summation. Men like that don’t vanish—they reposition.”

Holden takes me deep one last time, sucking hard, and that’s it. I shatter with a string of curses, the whole room dropping to static as I spill into his mouth. He swallows everything, methodical as ever, and only pulls back when I’m spent, trembling in the chair like I’ve been rebooted.

He stands, wipes his mouth with the back of his hand, and adjusts himself like this was a casual detour. “Good work,” he says, voice rough but steady. “Now run it again.”

I stare at him, chest heaving, brain still offline. “You absolute bastard.”

His mouth quirks, not quite a smile. “You love it.”

Tragically, I do. But before I can formulate a retort, something snags.

“What the—”

It’s small. A packet echo in the traffic log from twelve days ago. An external ping hitting my network at 3:47 a.m., bouncing off the firewall, and disappearing. No payload. No follow-up. Just a knock on the door that nobody answered.

Could be a bot. Could be a crawler. Could be absolutely nothing—the internet is full of automated noise, scripts probing random IPs like salesmen trying door handles in a parking lot.

But the timestamp nags at me. Twelve days ago. That’s three days after we got back from the cabin.

I flag the entry. Tag it for monitoring. Set up an alert if the same signature appears again.

Probably nothing.

Except my gut doesn't think it's nothing. The routing has the same shape as the Kennel traffic I've seen—the careful, patient probing, the knock-and-walk-away. Testing whether anyone's home before you try the window.

"Find something?" Holden asks, standing in front of me, his hard-on tenting his jeans.

"Maybe." I minimize the log and reach for his belt, my mouth watering. "Right now, it's just a weird ping. I'll keep an eye on it."

I don't mention my concern to Holden. The man is a certified Knight of the Stressed Round Table. I don't want to worry him until I have to.

He reaches out and brushes his fingers along my jaw, tilting my face to look at him. "You'll tell me if it turns into something."

"Of course."

He nods. His thumb lingers on my chin, and he uses his other hand to yank down his fly and pull his cock out. "Open for me."

"If you insist."

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# THIRTY-TWO
# SAGE



I check the time on my phone while I wait outside the door leading to Amy's apartment above the funeral home. 12:34 p.m. I knock again. I've got the day off work, and we agreed to have lunch. I'm certain we also agreed I'd bring it to her—I even have her favorite burger and a cookie dough milkshake from that place just off Main. "Amy?"

I'm about to call her when the door jerks open and an out-of-breath Dean answers, looking like he just ran a marathon in his own hallway.

"Oh. Hey," I say, taking in this version of him—shirtless. Sweating. Breathing hard. Holding the door at a very deliberate angle that hides everything below his waist. *Oh. Oh shit. Did I interrupt something?*

"Can I help you?" he says.

"Uh." I look at him. Look at the house number. Look at Knox who's waiting for me in the truck. Then look back at Dean. "I'm here to see Amy? She's expecting me."

"Oh." He blinks. "Give me a sec."

He closes the door. In my face.

I stand on the porch. Fast food in hand. Staring at the wood grain.

"Well, that was fucking weird," I mutter, looking up at the upstairs window. Dean knows who I am. Dean has disposed of bodies for me. Dean once handed me a cup of coffee over a corpse and asked if I wanted cream. But he looked at me like I was selling Girl Scout cookies. What. The. Hell.

My phone buzzes.

KNOX:

Everything ok?

I immediately turn and look at him, giving him a thumbs up.

Shadows cross the upstairs window, and a curtain twitches. I lean closer to the door and hear the unmistakable sound of thumping feet. Voices—low, urgent, overlapping. Something that sounds like a drawer slamming. More thumping.

ME:

I think Amy and Dean lost track of time.

I watch Knox look at his phone and nod once when he reads the message.

KNOX:

They fucking?

Shaking my head, I can't help but smile.

The door opens again.

Dean is back, fully dressed now. T-shirt, jeans, boots. Hair combed. But he still looks right through me.

"Sorry about that. Amy's upstairs."

"Are you . . . okay?"

"Yeah. Fine." He steps out onto the porch and gives me a cordial nod, heading toward the crematorium entrance like a man with very important furnace business at twelve thirty on a Saturday.

I watch him go. Whatever he and Amy were doing must have been so utterly mind-blowing that he's lost his ability to human.

*Go, Ames.*

I step inside.

The house smells like coffee and laundry detergent and the faint, industrial undertone that never fully leaves a building connected to a crematorium. I've been here enough times now that it doesn't register as sinister anymore. It smells like Dean's place. Which is its own kind of unsettling, but whatever.

I take the stairs. Amy's apartment door is open. When I step inside, she's leaning against the kitchen counter in her robe, face flushed, hair a

mess, tea in hand, looking like a woman who's been doing something athletic that does not involve exercise equipment.

"Hey!" she says, way too brightly. "You're early."

"I'm five minutes late."

"Are you? Wow. Time flies."

I open my mouth to comment on the robe and the flush and the fact that she had Dean so flustered he didn't recognize me at the door when Dean walks out of the bedroom buttoning his shirt.

"Oh, hi, Sage," he says, like we just bumped into each other at the grocery store.

My brain stalls.

Dean is downstairs.

Dean walked out the front door.

Dean was wearing jeans and boots and heading into the crematorium.

*How is Dean right here?*

"Uh . . ." It's the only sound that leaves my body as I watch Dean cross the living space, tucking his shirt into his slacks before stopping beside Amy and pressing a kiss to her temple. The other Dean left in jeans and boots. The clothes are different, but the face is exactly the same.

"I've got some work to do downstairs." He glances at me with one of those pleasant smiles. "I'll leave you to it."

Then he grabs his lace-up shoes and pads toward the stairs in his socks.

I'm not a detective. I'm not even the kind of person who notices plot holes in movies unless someone else points them out. But when I watch Dean leave the apartment—for the second time in under a minute—I know without a doubt that I'm witnessing a major glitch in the matrix.

Two Deans.

Amy sips her tea. "You okay, Sage?"

I set the burger bag on the counter and double-blink at the bedroom door, willing some kind of answer to materialize in the rectangle of white paint.

Two of them.

There are *two* of *them*.

I turn to Amy. She's still sipping her tea, but she's watching me far too closely for that nonchalance she's going for to land.

"Sage?"

“Dean has a twin,” I say, because if that isn’t the answer, then the world isn’t real anymore.

Amy sips. “Yeah. Drake.”

“That’s who answered the door? Drake?”

Amy attempts to hide her face in her mug. “Uh-huh.”

“They were both up here? With you?”

This time she just nods. But I see her eyes wide over the rim of the cup.

A slow smile creeps across my face. “Oh my God, Amy. Did I interrupt you having a *threesome with twins*?”

Her eyes go wide, and she grabs my arm and drags me into the bedroom, slamming the door behind us. “Oh my God, keep your voice down!”

“Amy.”

“It just happened, okay?” She’s pacing, the robe swishing around her knees, her face the color of a tomato. “Drake came to visit two weeks ago and he’s—he’s like Dean but he smiles more and he makes these terrible jokes and one night we were all watching a movie and I fell asleep between them and when I woke up—”

“You were the middle of a Double Dean sandwich.”

“Don’t call it that.”

“A Drake cake?”

“Sage!”

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry.” I hold up my hands. “I’m not judging. Look at my life, Amy. I’m the last person on earth who gets to judge anyone’s sexual arrangements.”

Case in point: Christmas came and went this week, and I nearly missed it. I’ve never been a holiday person—there was never much in my life worth putting a bow on—and this year I had zero patience for pretending. So the deal was a tree the height of a toddler that Milo smuggled in anyway, and one day where none of us got out of bed. That was the whole festive program. Best Christmas I’ve ever had, which is a very low bar with a lot of clearance.

She stops pacing. “You’re not weirded out?”

I grin. For a second I’m so happy for her it actually hurts, this clean jolt of pride and relief that maybe the world hasn’t wrung all the fun out of us yet. “Amy, the only thing I’m weirded out by is that you managed to keep this from me for two whole weeks.”

She slumps onto the bed and puts her face in her hands, letting out a muffled screech. “It wasn’t supposed to be a thing! Drake lives in fucking Toronto or wherever. He’s only here for a little while. But then he kept coming up and—” She peeks through her fingers, eyes enormous and pleading. “I like them, Sage. I like both of them so much. Is that fucked up? Is it fucked up that I want both twins?”

I flop beside her and lean in, conspiratorial. “Amy, I have literally five men in rotation and a giant custom bed that Milo dubbed fuck pit 2.0. I think you having two men with the same face is the least weird thing happening in this room.”

Her hands drop and she lets out a shuddery laugh. “You sure?”

“I’m jealous,” I admit. “Twins? Oh my God. I bet they hold you down at the same time, don’t they? I bet they do things that—”

“Stop!” But she grins, bright red again, and buries her face in the pillow to scream.

“You’re happy, though, right?” I ask, softer. “Because that’s all I care about.”

She sits up, smoothing her hair so she looks less like a sex gremlin. “I am. But, God, I’m a disaster.”

“You’re not a disaster. You’re just . . . exploring.”

“Exploring. With brothers. At the same time.” She moves the pillow enough to look at me with one eye. “It’s so good, Sage. Like, I’ve never come so hard in my life. But . . .”

“But?”

She sighs. “I feel like I’m only falling into something intense because it’s easier than dealing with the actual stuff.”

“What actual stuff?”

She pulls her knees up and wraps her arms around them.

“Everything. I’m overwhelmed, Sage.” She says it quietly. Like she’s been holding it in and the words are heavier than they should be. “Not by the twins—that’s actually the only part that makes sense right now. But everything else. Dean’s work. What that work actually means. The fact that I wake up some nights and he’s out there, accepting a . . . ‘special delivery.’ And it’s not slowing down, Sage. It’s getting bigger. Dean got a call last week from someone he’d never spoken to before—someone with a codename. They wanted to know if Dean could handle ‘increased volume’ and whether his facility had the capacity for ‘regional processing.’ Those

were the actual words. Regional processing. Like he’s running a fucking Amazon warehouse for corpses.”

My blood goes cold. Regional processing. That sounds like the network Odin described. The franchise model. If they’re reaching out to Dean directly, that means the organization isn’t tracking the Hangmen from a distance anymore. It’s recruiting. Absorbing. Using infrastructure that already exists.

“What did Dean say?” I ask.

“He said he’d think about it. But honestly, I don’t know if he has a choice.” She hugs the pillow to her chest. “That’s the part that scares me, Sage. This . . . *underworld* we’ve found ourselves in keeps getting bigger and more organized and more *normal*. I’m worried I’m going to wake up one day and this will be what life is and I won’t even remember when it wasn’t.”

I don’t say anything because I get it. There isn’t a sentence in the world that makes this smaller.

“I’m not like you,” she says. “I know that sounds like an insult and it’s not. It’s just—you chose this world. You’ve walked into it with your eyes open and you made a place for yourself in it. I sort of . . . fell into it with a knife in my hand. Then I dropped that knife and grabbed straight onto Dean, but the floor was already made of bones before I realized I was standing on it.”

She’s wrong about how cleanly I chose it—I fell into this world too. The difference is that somewhere along the way, I stopped looking for the exit.

“Amy—”

“And I love him. I love him so much. And Drake is—Drake is this wonderful, ridiculous surprise that I wasn’t expecting. But I keep thinking . . .” She picks at a thread on the pillowcase. “What if I’m using all of this—the sex, the intensity, the drama—to avoid dealing with the fact that I killed Tyler? What if this is a trauma response? I just . . . I don’t know if I can live like this forever.”

The room is quiet. Through the window, I can hear birds in the yard, distant traffic, and chatter from the street.

“You don’t have to decide forever right now,” I say.

“That’s what Dean says.”

“Dean’s right.”

“Dean also runs a crematorium and his twin brother is currently downstairs wearing my underwear since he couldn’t find his. So his judgment is not unimpeachable.”

I laugh—can’t help it. She laughs too, and it lets a little air in.

“Can I say something honest?” I ask.

“Since when do you ask permission?”

“Since you’re sitting in a robe with hickeys on your chest looking like you might cry.”

She pulls the robe tighter. “Go ahead.”

“You’re allowed to not be okay with this. All of it—the crematorium, the world we all exist in now, the things you know that you can’t unknow. You’re allowed to love one twin and want the other and still wonder if this is the life you want.” I take her hand. “And you’re allowed to figure that out on your own timeline. Not Dean’s. Not mine. Not anyone’s.”

Her eyes are glassy. She blinks and a single tear tracks down her cheek and she wipes it away with the back of her hand like it personally offended her.

“When did you get wise?” she asks.

“I have a boyfriend who’s a bartender. Wisdom by osmosis.”

She sniffles. Laughs. Wipes her face again. “I don’t want to leave him. But I don’t know if I can process everything while I’m still here.”

“Then tell him that. Dean’s a lot of things, but he’s not the kind of man who’d want you to stay if it’s breaking you.”

She nods. Slowly. Like the idea is landing somewhere she hasn’t let it sit before.

“Can we talk about something else?” she says. “Literally anything. Tell me about the diner. Tell me why Milo named the bed fuck pit 2.0—because what happened to version one? Oh! I know—tell me Knox did something hot and silent. I feel like we don’t know enough about him.”

“Oh God. Knox. When we were at the cabin, my favorite thing in the world was watching that man chop wood with his shirt off. He does it with, like, one hand. Just grabs the wood and brings the axe down—*ka-chong*. My ovaries explode just thinking about it. I’m thinking of asking Holden to renovate so we can have a fireplace.”

“See? That’s what I need. Give me that energy.”

“Food first. Your burger is probably getting cold,” I say, jumping off the bed and heading back out into the living area.

Amy follows, and I grab the sack of food and start setting out the fries, burgers, and the most melted milkshakes known to man.

“This is pretty much just lukewarm milk now,” I say, handing one to Amy.

She grins, takes it, and makes an obscene slurping sound. “God, that’s good,” she says, tears officially banished by the power of sugar and grease. “You know, there’s a parallel universe where you and I only have boring jobs and cheat days and never have to have intense feelings about crematoriums.”

I take a fry and chew thoughtfully. “In that universe, we could have a podcast. *Girls Who Lunch*.”

“Or *Waitress versus Teacher*,” Amy says. “We could tell all our most unhinged stories about entitled customers and parents.”

“I like that version of us,” I say.

We eat in silence for a while. Amy flops back against the couch, eyes closed, half-eaten burger in hand.

“I’m glad you came,” she says. “Even though you literally interrupted the coming.”

I look at her. We both burst out laughing.

For the next while, we’re just two girls in a tiny apartment, eating junk and making each other laugh, just like we were when it all started.

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# THIRTY-THREE
# ELI



"Hey," Sage says, tossing her house keys into the bowl on the shelf.

I'm halfway through a court report, the kind of thing that usually makes my brain itch, but the sound of her voice blows all the words off the page at once.

She walks over, leans down, and gives me a quick, soft kiss—too quick. I put a hand on her jaw and slow her exit, deepening it enough to make her moan into my mouth.

"How was lunch with Amy?"

"Good. She's doing . . . well." She smiles, eyes crinkling at the edges.

I set the file down and tap the cushion next to me. "Come here."

She drops onto the couch, flopping sideways with her head in my lap. I run a hand through her hair, and she closes her eyes, melting further into the cushions.

"Where's Knox?"

"He went straight into the garage when we got home," she says, opening her eyes. "What's all this? Schoolwork? I thought you weren't going back."

"I'm not. Not until after Stephen is found. I need to be available for you, and I'm not risking bringing whatever follows us into a school full of kids."

Her expression softens. "I'm sorry you're stuck in the house because of me."

"Don't," I say, sliding my hand from her hair to her cheek, thumb tracing the line of her jaw. "You're not keeping me from my life, Sage. You

are my life.”

She blinks up at me, gray eyes catching the afternoon light from the window. “Eli—”

I lean in and kiss her again, slower this time, letting my mouth linger against hers until I feel her tension ease.

“That’s not how you win an argument.”

I grin. “I didn’t even realize it was one. I just thought we were trying to blame ourselves for things outside our control.”

She gives me a slow smile. “It’s possible something like that was happening.”

I press another light kiss against her lips. “Why don’t you help me with something we actually can control?”

I gesture to the coffee table, where the file sits open. Her eyes scan as she leans over and flips the pages. Photos. Case summaries. Odin’s coded headers across the top of each one.

“New assignments?” she asks, twisting her body so she’s back to facing me.

“Odin wants two targets selected before Tuesday’s meeting. We need to run two teams now.” I turn one of the files toward her. “Three and three. You’ll be with Knox and me. Then Holden leads Milo and Micah.”

She picks up the file. Reads. Her face goes still.

“Swim coach?” she asks.

“Yep.”

“Seven girls.”

“That we know of.”

She sets the file down. “He’s one. Who’s the other?”

“That’s what I need help with.” I fan the remaining files across the table. “Six possibles. Holden flagged three. Milo flagged two. Knox dropped one in front of me this morning with no note, which is very Knox.”

“He flagged a target with no explanation?”

“He circled the man’s photo and wrote ‘yes’ on the back. That’s a Knox brief.”

She almost smiles and picks up the first file. “Okay. Let’s choose.”

“That’s why I waited for you. You’re a Hangman now.”

We work. Side by side, reading through case summaries, cross-referencing Milo’s background data with Holden’s jurisdictional notes. She’s good at this—better than she thinks. She catches smaller, more subtle

details the rest of us might miss because we're male and haven't been conditioned by society to view everything through the lens of risk.

"This one," she says after twenty minutes, sliding a file toward me. Raymond Ayre. Fifty-three. Former youth pastor. Multiple allegations spanning a decade, all in different congregations—he'd get accused, resign quietly, move to the next church, start again. The pattern is textbook. The system that enabled it is the same system that enabled every man on every list we have.

"Ayre's solid," I say. "Holden had him flagged too."

"So we've got Waldock and Ayre." She lines the two files up side by side. "Two teams. Two targets. We present these to Odin during the meeting on Tuesday morning, right?"

"Right."

Sage stretches and does a double take at the vase on the kitchen counter. It isn't anything fancy, just plain glass holding sunflowers now instead of the tulips Micah had given her.

"Where'd the flowers come from?"

I follow her gaze. "No idea. They were there when I came down after my shower. I figured they were yours. From one of the others."

"You didn't think to ask?"

"Ah. No. Knox was with you. Milo would've made it a press conference. Holden was already at work, and Micah left before I got up." I shrug. "Maybe Micah grabbed them from the farmers' market earlier this morning and we just missed them."

"So nobody's claimed them?"

"Not yet."

"Is there a card?"

"There's no card." That much I know. I may have snooped while I was making myself a coffee. "But my money is on Micah. The tulips were starting to wilt, and he notices those things."

She looks at the sunflowers, her brow furrowing for a moment. "You're probably right," she says. "I'll send a text to thank him." She taps out the message. "There." She smiles and sets her phone on the coffee table.

"Feel better now?"

"I do. But there's something else I've been wondering about."

"What's that?"

“Why are the meetings with Odin always a Tuesday? And at an ungodly hour too?”

I grin. “The place is called Unholy Desires, and you expect something there to be godly?”

She laughs. “Touché.”

She leans back into the cushions and tilts her head in thought.

“So, am I on Knox’s team because his size makes up for the lack of mine?”

I bite the inside of my cheek. “That may have been a factor in the decision.”

“So basically, Knox is my bodyguard and I’m his . . . what? Pocket-sized murder accessory?”

“You’re a Hangman, Sage. Same as the rest of us. You just happen to be a Hangman who fits behind Knox in a doorway.”

“Tactical concealment. He could literally strap me to his back like a backpack and no one would even know I was there.”

“Exactly.” The mental image of a Sage backpack forces a laugh out of me.

She grins.

“I like it when you laugh,” she says.

“I like it too.” It’s the kind of sentence that used to get stuck behind my teeth and rot there.

She leans forward. Cups my jaw with one hand and kisses me again, slow, deliberate.

When she pulls back, her thumb traces my cheekbone. “We’re going to be good at this.”

“The killing or the kissing?”

“Both. Obviously.”

I catch her hand. Press my lips to her palm.

We turn back to the files. She pulls Ayre’s case notes closer and starts reading the witness statements while I draft the operational framework for Waldock—location, schedule, vulnerabilities, the logistics that turn a name on a page into a body dangling from the end of a rope.

“Did you know Dean has a twin?” Sage asks, not looking up from the file.

“I did. Drake, I think. Haven’t met him, though.”

“Well, I met him today.”

“Oh yeah? How’d that go?”

“I thought it was Dean and he’d had a stroke.”

A laugh bubbles out of me. “He didn’t introduce himself?”

“No!” She fills me in on the strange encounter. How she thought Dean was acting weird until she went upstairs and saw him again. “That’s when I thought *I* was the one having a stroke,” she finishes. “But then it clicked—twins.”

“Identical twins.”

She narrows her eyes. “You’re enjoying this.”

“A little.”

“Amy’s sleeping with both of them.”

“Good for Amy.”

“That’s what I said.” She goes back to the file, but there’s a smile tucked into the corner of her mouth that she’s not trying very hard to hide.

I tap the folders into a crisp little stack and release a dramatic sigh. “Sorry I can’t provide you with a twin for your own amusement. You’ll just have to make do with one of me.”

She tips her chin toward me, all sly delight. “I think four other boyfriends is a pretty decent trade-up. I don’t need twins.”

“You sure? They make some pretty compelling arguments. Dean and Drake are now the gold standard.”

She makes a face. “Twins would be a logistical nightmare. I mean, sure I could have sex with them at the same time. But twins aren’t as good as boyfriends who are boyfriends.”

I quirk my brow. “Explain.”

“Well, twins aren’t going to go down on me, then kiss each other over the top of me while they fill both my holes. I really get off when you and Micah do that—sharing my taste and my body at the same time.”

I don’t mean to get turned on, but the flare of memory tangles around my brainstem and sticks. Sage’s mouth open and greedy, the way she comes apart when Micah’s tongue is wrecking her while I’m knuckle-deep in her ass, stretching her before I press inside—yeah, that’s the end of any hope I had of finishing this report. My jeans get tight, fast. She sees my jaw flex, reads the shift in my eyes, and slouches farther down the couch until her foot grazes my leg, teasing.

“You thinking about it now?” she purrs.

“As if I ever stopped.”

She grins, feline, and stretches her arms above her head, running her shirt up just enough to show a flash of skin. I'm on her before I have a plan—just a surge forward, one hand sliding up under her tee, the other bracing beside her head. She laughs, delighted, and lets me crawl up her body, her fingers playing with the hair at the nape of my neck.

"You're insatiable," she says, voice full of challenge.

"You started it," I say, and bite at her jaw, trailing heat from her throat to her ear.

She gasps and arches beneath me. It never gets old, the way she responds to touch, always one degree hungrier than even she expects.

I'm about to take her right there, file folders be damned, when there's a crash from the garage. The unmistakable clang of something large and iron being set down on concrete.

Sage's head comes up like a dog that heard a treat bag.

"What is he doing in there?"

"Knox?" I say, lifting her shirt and peppering kisses along her ribs. "He's finally brought all the stuff from his apartment. He's expanding the home gym in the garage."

She shoves at my shoulder. "Wait, what?"

I lift my head from her stomach and blink down at her. "What do you mean—what?"

She twists out from under me with alarming speed. One second I'm over her, hard and halfway to forgetting my own name, and the next I'm grabbing at air while she hops off the couch and heads for the hall.

"Sage."

She looks back at me, entirely unrepentant. "I need to see."

"I was about to fuck you."

"I know," she says, smiling like a menace. "And now I need to go watch Knox move large objects with his arms."

I stare at her.

She grins wider. "You can come too."

"Lucky me."

She laughs and jogs down the hall barefoot, and because I love her and apparently have accepted humiliation as part of my domestic life, I get up and follow.

The door from the kitchen into the garage swings open.

Knox is shirtless, of course. Because if you are moving hundreds of pounds of steel into a garage, apparently the law requires you to do it shirtless if you're built like the final boss in a fighting game. Sweat already sheens his chest and shoulders, catching the overhead light. One side of the garage has been cleared out entirely. Rubber mats cover the concrete. A squat rack is half assembled beside a bench, plates stacked in neat black towers against the wall. A heavy bag leans in the corner. Dumbbells run the wall in order of weight, smallest to largest, because of course they do.

Sage stands there, transfixed, her gaze locked on Knox as he hefts another massive plate onto the rack with a grunt that echoes through the space. I watch her watching him, the way her breath catches, her cheeks flushing pink, her thighs pressing together like she's trying to hide how turned on she is—but failing miserably.

"Damn," she murmurs, almost to herself.

Knox glances up, wiping sweat from his brow, and catches her staring. His eyes darken, and he sets the plate down with a controlled thud. He doesn't say anything, just straightens and flexes his arms, knowing exactly what he's doing to her.

I step closer behind her, my hand sliding around her waist, pulling her back against me. "You like watching him work, little savage?"

She nods, biting her lip, her body already leaning into mine.

I lean down, my voice low in her ear but loud enough for Knox to hear. "Hey, Knox—want to know if she's wet for you?"

He pauses mid-lift, another weight plate in his grip, and meets my eyes over her shoulder. A slow, feral grin tugs at his mouth. "Yeah. I do."

That's all the invitation I need. I slide my hand down the front of her pants, dipping beneath her panties, and find her soaked, slick heat that makes her gasp and arch against my fingers. She's dripping down my knuckles before I've even moved them.

"She's fucking drenched," I report, my voice rough as I circle her clit, feeling her tremble. "All from watching you sweat."

Knox's jaw tightens, but he doesn't stop—he carries the plate to the rack and reaches for another, muscles rippling as he resumes the setup. "Take care of her for me, Eli. Make her come hard."

I don't hesitate. I work her with deliberate strokes, two fingers sliding inside while my thumb works her clit, fast, because slow would be a kindness and she didn't ask for one. She moans, gripping my arm for

balance, her hips rocking into my hand as Knox keeps going, assembling the rack with focused power, his eyes flicking to us every few seconds like he's fueling himself on her sounds.

"Fuck, Eli—yes," she whimpers, her walls clenching around me, and I curl my fingers deeper, hitting that spot that makes her shatter. She comes with a sharp cry, her body shuddering against mine, soaking my hand as the orgasm rips through her. "Knox! Please!"

The moment he hears her beg for him, Knox lets the next plate hit the rubber mat with a thud and strides over, his sweat-slicked chest heaving. He yanks open his fly, freeing his thick cock, already rock-hard and straining. "Open, Fury."

She drops to her knees instantly, mouth parting eagerly, and takes him in deep, her tongue swirling as she sucks him off with that fierce hunger she reserves for him. I kneel behind her, shifting her position and shoving her pants and panties down over her hips. Then I free myself and thrust into her slick heat from behind in one smooth motion.

She grips Knox's thighs and moans around him, the vibration making him groan and grip her hair, guiding her rhythm while I pound into her, matching his pace.

We claim her like this, Knox fucking her mouth while I drive into her pussy, the garage echoing with our grunts and her muffled cries. She comes again first, clenching around me so tight it pulls my release, and I spill inside her with a curse. Knox follows seconds later, thrusting deep and coming down her throat, his hand fisting her hair as he growls, "Fury."

We pull out slowly, helping her up, and she stands between us, flushed and sated, a wicked smile on her lips. "I can just tell this is about to become my favorite room in the house," she says, voice hoarse.

"Second to Milo's fuck pit," I tease, and she laughs.

"Second to the fuck pit."

Knox chuckles, low and satisfied, tucking himself away before pulling her into a kiss. I watch them, already planning how we'll break in that heavy bag next—maybe with her bent over it while we take turns.

Later, after we've cleaned up and Knox has gone back to the setup, Sage curls against me on the couch again, her head in my lap. The files are still scattered across the coffee table. Waldock on top.

"You think we'll get Waldock clean?" she asks, tracing patterns on my thigh.

I nod, combing my fingers through her hair. “With you on the team? Absolutely.”

She hums, satisfied, and her eyes drift shut. Within five minutes her breathing changes. Slower. Deeper. The fight leaves her body in stages, her hand going slack against my leg, her mouth softening.

I let her sleep for a while. The house settles around us. Knox finishes in the garage and comes through to the kitchen. I hear him wash his hands, open the fridge, close it. His footsteps pause near the living room door, and I know without looking that he’s watching her sleep in my lap.

“I’ll take her up,” he says.

“I’ve got her.”

Knox doesn’t argue. He goes upstairs. I hear the shower start.

I gather the files one-handed, stacking Ayre and Waldock into one pile with the rest in another. Sage doesn’t stir. Not even when I ease her off my lap and scoop her up, her head lolling against my shoulder, one hand curling into my shirt.

I carry her upstairs. The bedroom is warm from the late afternoon light that’s been pooling in it all day. Knox’s thermal is draped over the foot of the bed. Milo’s laptop is on the nightstand, screen dark. Micah’s book lies spine-up on the dresser, half-read. Evidence of all of us in one room.

I set her on the giant bed. Pull the covers up. She turns onto her side and reaches for her favorite pillow, dragging it against her chest.

“Stay,” she murmurs, half-asleep.

“I’m here.”

“No. Stay *in* the bed.”

I chuckle, pull off my jeans, and slide in behind her. My arm goes around her waist. She shifts back into me, aligning our bodies with that instinct she has, the one that finds the closest warm thing and claims it.

Her breathing evens out again. I press my mouth to the back of her neck and close my eyes.

The bedroom is quiet. The house is quiet.

For ten minutes, I let myself have this.

Then Sage’s phone goes off downstairs.

She doesn’t wake. I slide off the bed, heading downstairs to silence it before the next buzz. But when I reach for it, the screen lights up. I read the exchange once. Then read it again.

SAGE:

Thank you for the flowers, baby! They're beautiful 💕

MICAH:

Hey baby girl. What flowers? I didn't send any. Did one of the others? x

The sunflowers. On the kitchen counter. Fresh, bright, sitting in the vase like they'd been there forever. I'd assumed they were from Micah. Sage assumed. Nobody questioned it because nobody questions flowers. They're the most harmless thing in the world.

I pick up my phone and text the guys' group chat.

ME:

Who sent the sunflowers?

HOLDEN:

What flowers?

MILO:

Oh cute! Who got flowers? Take a photo. I wanna see.

MICAH:

I already texted Sage that it wasn't me.

Knox comes down the stairs, phone in hand. His attention goes straight to the flowers before he looks at me.

I stare down at my phone.

"I think we have a fucking problem."

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# THIRTY-FOUR
# MILO



ELI:

No one sent them. Get home.

There isn’t even a courtesy *please*, which is how I know this is serious.

I’m halfway through reorganizing one of my server indexes when the message appears. I don’t waste any time, just grab my laptop and keys, then make it through nine deadbolts and halfway up the basement stairs before my brain starts fully processing.

Someone sent Sage sunflowers.

And it wasn’t us.

I take the stairs two at a time, shouting something vaguely reassuring when Mom calls after me, although it could’ve been *family emergency* or *flower emergency* or just a noise with the right number of syllables. Either way, nobody follows me outside.

The drive home isn’t long, but I spend every minute trying to build an explanation that doesn’t involve Stephen.

Maybe Rosa sent them because kitten is back at the diner. Maybe Amy sent them because she knows Sage has been having a shit time. Maybe some confused florist delivered them to the wrong house and six deeply suspicious people collectively failed to question it because flowers are pretty and nobody expects a bouquet to be part of a murder plot.

Unfortunately, probability has become a vindictive bitch who enjoys watching me suffer.

Knox opens the door before I reach it. His hair is damp, and his thermal is sticking to his chest in dark patches. His expression is set in a way that says he's already completed a full sweep of the house and he's angry the walls haven't confessed.

"Anything on the cameras?" I ask immediately.

He shakes his head.

"Fuck. Where's Sage?"

Knox's jaw tightens, a muscle jumping there like Morse code for *bad news*. "Bedroom. With Micah."

I don't ask if she's okay. The answer is in the set of his shoulders. Sage is never just okay when things go sideways—she's either "fine" or she's white-knuckling through a panic she won't name out loud.

I step past him into the living room. Eli is there in a T-shirt and sweats, and he's staring at his phone like it owes him answers.

"Anyone claim them?" I ask.

"Rosa swears she didn't send them. Amy didn't either, and she was with Sage the whole time." He looks up, and his eyes are already rimmed with dark shadows. "They were in the house, Milo."

The words feel like a boot in the center of my chest.

"What do you mean, *in the house*?"

"On the kitchen counter. Already in the vase." Eli drags a hand through his hair. "No card or wrapping. Nothing to say where they came from."

"Who put them in the vase?"

"Nobody here."

I look past him toward the kitchen, where the sunflowers sit in the same plain glass vase that held Micah's tulips. Bright yellow faces turned toward the room, all of them cheerful enough to be deeply fucking sinister.

"Who saw them first?"

"I did," Eli says. "They were there when I came downstairs after my shower."

"What time?"

"A little after one."

"And before you went upstairs?"

"The tulips were still there. I remember looking at them when I rinsed my coffee cup."

My stomach drops. "How long were you in the shower?"

"Twenty minutes. Maybe twenty-five."

That isn’t a delivery window. It’s a fucking appointment.

Knox was sitting outside Amy’s place while Sage visited her. Holden was at work. I was at Mom’s, and Micah was out running errands. Eli was the only person inside the house, alone upstairs with enough water pounding around him that he wouldn’t hear someone moving below.

Whoever did this didn’t simply find an empty house.

They knew *exactly* when it was safe to enter.

“So someone walked into a heavily monitored house, removed Micah’s flowers, replaced them with sunflowers, and left without anyone noticing.”

“That’s about the shape of it.”

“Wonderful. That’s much worse than porch flowers.”

I set my laptop on the coffee table and head into the kitchen. Holden has already turned the counter into a crime scene, complete with black gloves and several clear evidence bags he must keep in his car for emergencies. Most people carry jumper cables and a first-aid kit. My boyfriend carries a mobile homicide laboratory.

“Don’t touch anything,” he says from the doorway.

I glance over my shoulder. Sage has come downstairs, swallowed by one of our T-shirts, her face pale and her arms folded tightly across her middle.

I hate the flowers for making her look like that.

“Hey, kitten.”

Her expression crumples before she charges straight toward me and buries her face against my chest.

I wrap my arms around her automatically, feeling the slight tremor running through her frame. She’s breathing too fast, the shallow panic breaths I recognize from the nights she wakes up gasping and pretends she was just thirsty.

“Hey,” I murmur against her hair. “I’ve got you.”

She doesn’t answer, just presses closer. Her fingers dig into my back through my shirt, then her shoulders set, and she starts hauling her own breathing back down by hand.

“How did they get in the house, Milo?” Her voice comes out muffled by my chest.

I let out a heavy breath and hold her a little tighter. “I have no idea, kitten. But I’m going to find out.”

She nods against me, and I release her as she steps back, wiping her nose on the back of her hand. Micah appears beside her and catches her by the shoulders. “Let’s go sit down, baby girl. Give these guys some space.”

“I don’t want to sit,” Sage responds. “I want to stay right here.”

“Okay. I’ll stay with you then.”

Sage lets out a breath and leans against him.

“What have you learned so far?” I ask Holden, who just clenches his jaw.

“Zilch. I’m dusting the vase for prints.”

“It’s our vase. It’s going to have all our prints on it.”

“Then I’ll eliminate all of yours.”

“Do you have my fingerprints on file?”

Holden gives me a flat look.

I smile despite everything. “Aw. You do collect sentimental keepsakes.”

He goes back to dusting.

Knox has already searched every room, cupboard, and cavity large enough to hold a person. He’s now moving around the perimeter outside, checking locks and windows with the kind of concentration that suggests he intends to intimidate the house into telling him what happened.

I pull the security tablet from its mount and open the logs.

The new system has six exterior cameras, thermal detection, motion sensors, and enough redundancies to monitor a small military installation. Odin’s people installed the whole thing while we were at the cabin, and I checked every line of code when we got home because trusting someone else’s security work feels like letting a stranger choose my porn password.

Everything is working.

That’s the problem.

I pull the footage from six thirty, when Holden left, and run all six cameras side by side. His car backs out of the driveway. The garage closes. The house sits in the soft morning light with nothing moving except the trees and one determined bird attempting to murder its reflection in the front window.

At seven fourteen, Micah leaves through the garage. Eleven eleven, Knox walks Sage out, and they leave in his truck.

Then nothing.

No delivery van. No person walking up the drive. No movement beside the house. Nobody approaches the front door, the back door, or the garage.

I increase the playback speed.

The house remains stubbornly empty.

“What do the door sensors say?” Holden asks.

“Nothing opened while Eli was in the shower. Front door, back door, and garage all stayed sealed.”

“Windows?”

“Same. No movement.”

“How is that possible?” Sage asks.

“It isn’t.”

Her mouth tightens. “Very comforting.”

“I’m working on my bedside manner.”

“Work faster.”

I glance at her, and she gives me a little smirk. If it’s even possible, I love her even more for it.

Going back to the tablet, I scrub through the footage again, this time watching the raw file information instead of the pictures. No missing frames. No obvious loops. No timestamp jumps. The files are intact and irritatingly pristine.

It looks like nobody came near the house.

But someone still changed the flowers.

Holden lifts a print from the rim of the vase and studies it beneath the kitchen light.

“Partial,” he says. “Too small to run cleanly, and it could belong to any of us.”

“Bag it anyway.”

He gives me a pointed look. “I know how evidence works.”

“Yeah. And I know how cop buddy dramas work. It’s all about the banter.”

He glares at me, then slides the vase across now that he’s finished with it. I lift one of the flowers by the stem. The cut is sharp and diagonal, every stalk trimmed to the same length. There are no ragged edges, leaves, or dirt. Whoever handled these knew how to prepare an arrangement.

“Professional,” I say.

“You can tell that from the stems?” Eli asks.

“And the composition. Twelve sunflowers, three sprigs of eucalyptus, all cut to sit at exactly the right height in this particular vase. Unless

Stephen has recently developed an interest in floral design, somebody bought these from a shop.”

“Can you trace them?” Sage asks.

“Sunflowers don’t have serial numbers, kitten.”

“Cars weren’t born with serial numbers either. Men added them because it made finding things easier—maybe they came in packaging that has a barcode?”

“I’ll go check the trash cans,” Micah says, heading for the front door.

I turn and stare at Sage.

“What?” she asks.

“That was strangely hot.”

“Milo.”

“Right. Murder flowers.”

I photograph the arrangement from several angles, then start searching florists within twenty miles. Eleven businesses advertise sunflower arrangements. Three belong to chains with centralized stock and transaction systems. The rest are independent shops, which means phone calls, personal visits, or committing digital crimes against small-business owners who probably spend their evenings making inspirational posts about supporting the community.

I start with the chains.

While the searches run, I pull the security system’s network traffic. The cameras may not show anyone, but every device leaves something behind when it communicates—a request, an acknowledgment, a timestamp, or the digital equivalent of breathing too loudly while hiding in a closet.

Most of it is routine.

Then I find a packet hitting the central controller at 12:57 p.m.

It doesn’t access anything. It barely touches the perimeter before disappearing, but the routing pattern hooks into the back of my brain and pulls.

Three jumps. Virginia. Amsterdam. Then a dead node in São Paulo.

Fuck.

I open the capture I saved twelve days ago and place the two side by side.

Same bounce pattern. Same packet size. Same careful knock against the door without attempting to walk through it.

Holden moves closer. “Is that the weird ping you found at Gloria’s?”

“Yeah.”

“What weird ping?” Sage asks.

Nobody says anything.

She looks at Holden first, then at me. “What fucking ping?”

“Twelve days ago, something tested my firewall,” I say. “There wasn’t a payload or follow-up, so it could’ve been an automated crawler, except the routing looked a little too deliberate.”

“You said it was probably nothing,” Holden says.

“I said it might be nothing.”

“You promised you’d tell me if it turned into something.”

“It just did. And I’m immediately telling you.”

Micah comes back inside, the door clicking shut behind him. His blue-gray eyes find mine across the room, and he shakes his head slowly.

“Nothing in the trash,” he says. “No packaging, tags, or ribbon scraps. The tulips aren’t there either. Whoever did this took everything with them.”

“There goes that idea,” Sage says, and Micah pulls her in without waiting to be asked.

I open Odin’s secure relay and select Fenrir’s channel.

We haven’t communicated since he locked me out of my own server and cost us the catch on Sage’s phone—I’ve been too pissed to want anything from the guy. But when something disappears inside a system that should’ve caught it, Fenrir is the person you ask to find the hole. So I swallow my anger and attach the first network probe, this afternoon’s packet, the security logs, and photographs of the flowers.

ME:

I need external eyes around our house between twelve forty-five and one thirty this afternoon. Six cameras show no approach. Door and window sensors show no entry. Flowers appeared inside during that window. Images attached. Second packet has the same routing pattern as the probe from twelve days ago.

The response comes less than a minute later.

FENRIR:

Received. Expanding search radius. Preserve all original files.

I look at Holden. “Fenrir’s searching traffic cameras and private feeds beyond our system.”

“How long will that take?”

“Could be minutes. Could be hours.”

Knox comes in through the back door. “Nothing on the roof. Attic’s clean too.”

“You checked the roof?”

His expression tells me that was a stupid question.

“Of course you checked the roof.”

Holden’s phone rings. He looks at the screen and answers immediately.

“Odin.”

He moves into the living room, giving Odin a sharp summary while I turn back to the florist databases. One chain has sold twenty-three sunflower arrangements in the last three days. Another has sold nine. The third has only one transaction matching twelve sunflowers and eucalyptus.

Cash purchase. This morning. 8 a.m.

The store is eleven miles from our house.

“Got one.”

Everyone moves closer.

“Twelve sunflowers, three eucalyptus stems, paid for in cash at eight this morning. No customer account and no delivery address. Whoever bought them walked out carrying the bouquet.”

“Store cameras?” Holden asks.

“Local system. I can’t access it from here.”

My laptop chimes before I finish the sentence.

FENRIR:

Confirmed florist. Footage incoming.

A video file appears beneath the message.

I open it.

The angle looks down over a florist counter. The timestamp reads 8:01 a.m. A man walks into frame wearing jeans, a dark jacket, and a baseball cap pulled low over short brown hair. He isn’t Stephen. He’s taller, broader, and at least ten years older. The camera catches enough of his face when he turns toward the cashier for me to know I’ve never seen him before.

He pays cash.

The florist passes him the bouquet.

He leaves carrying the sunflowers.

A second file arrives.

This one comes from a pharmacy camera two streets from our house. The man crosses the top-right corner of the frame at 8:34 with the bouquet tucked beneath one arm.

At 1:24 p.m., he walks back in the opposite direction.

Nothing in his hands.

Nobody speaks.

The back of my eyes starts to ache, the same way it did in the server room. Not now. Take a number and get in line behind the man with the sunflowers.

I take a still of his face and run it through every database I can reach—police records, licenses, public profiles, and the archive of known Kennel members Fenrir has shared with me. Fenrir is doing the same thing from the other end.

Nothing comes back.

ME:

Do you know him?

FENRIR:

No match.

ME:

Kennel?

There’s a longer pause this time.

FENRIR:

Unknown. Routing architecture remains consistent. Do not assume identity or affiliation.

“I don’t know who he is,” I say. “Fenrir doesn’t either.”

Sage steps closer to the screen. Holden stays behind her, one hand resting against her hip.

“That isn’t Stephen.”

“No.”

“Then maybe Stephen didn’t send them.”

“Maybe.” I enlarge the stranger’s face. “But a man we don’t know bought these eleven miles away, carried them to within two streets of our house, waited for hours until the coast was clear, and then somehow got them onto our kitchen counter without appearing on our cameras or

touching a monitored entrance. At the exact time someone using the same routing pattern as the first probe knocked against our security controller.”

“So either Stephen sent him,” Eli says, “or this is connected to the Kennel.”

“Those aren’t necessarily different options anymore.”

Holden ends his call and returns to the kitchen. “Odin’s sending a team to the florist and another to pull every camera between there and here. We hold the house tonight. Full physical watch until we know how he got inside.”

Sage doesn’t argue. She keeps staring at the stranger on my screen.

“What was he doing in our house?” she asks.

I look at the flowers, then at the empty space where Micah’s tulips used to be.

“Whoever did this wanted us to know they could get inside.”

“Then why hide from the cameras?”

“Because knowing someone got inside is frightening.” I meet her eyes. “Not knowing how is worse.”

I send everything we have to Fenrir and watch the files disappear into Odin’s network.

The man on the screen isn’t Stephen.

That should be good news.

It isn’t.

Because the flowers don’t prove Stephen came back from the Atlantic.

They prove he doesn’t have to.

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# THIRTY-FIVE
# HOLDEN



"And you still have no idea how he got into your house?" Odin's wearing his eye patch this morning, legs crossed as he lounges elegantly in his three-piece suit, espresso cup in hand.

"Not even a footprint telling us which entrance he used," I say, hating the answer. But Odin doesn't waste time making us explain everything we failed to find. His attention shifts to Milo.

"Do you believe the security system can be upgraded to stop him from doing it again?"

"Not if we don't know how he did it the first time," Milo says. "Fenrir's above my pay grade, and he's as stumped as I am. These people are good. And I hate them even more for it."

Odin leans forward and places his untouched espresso on the table. "Then we stop relying on a system he's already proved he can beat." He turns to Thor, whose massive bulk takes up the far end of the couch. "I want rotating teams on the house twenty-four-seven. Front, rear, and every viable approach covered, with no gaps during handover. If anyone walks onto that property again, human eyes see them."

Thor nods. "How many?"

"Enough that nobody watches alone or remains in one position long enough to become predictable. Change the people, vehicles, and vantage points regularly, and keep them off the home network."

Milo shifts beside me. With Thor and Loki joining Odin for this morning's meeting, all six of us are squished together on the couch across

from them. I stretch my arm behind Milo’s head to give him a little more room. Loki notices.

“I’m still going to find out how he did it,” Milo says, knee bouncing.

“I expect you to,” Odin says. “But we’re dealing with someone whose technical skills may be better than ours, and waging a digital war against him isn’t going to be enough.” Odin’s gaze travels around the room. “From now on, we put feet on the ground and eyes on every active subject—Stephen’s known contacts and any Kennel connection that enters our territory. Milo and Fenrir keep working the data, but the data supports the people watching. It doesn’t replace them.”

“Understood,” Eli says.

It requires more personnel, more money, and more opportunities for something to go wrong, but it also gives us something Stephen can’t alter from behind a screen.

Witnesses.

Odin fixes his attention on the still Milo has projected onto the wall. The man from the florist is caught mid-turn, baseball cap shadowing part of his face, one hand wrapped around the bouquet that later appeared in our kitchen.

Sage sits beside me with the Waldock and Ayre files stacked beneath one palm. Knox is on her other side, half hanging off the couch, but positioned close enough that his thigh touches hers. Eli has a notebook open beside Milo, and Micah sits next to him.

Across from us, Thor studies the image with his massive arms folded over his chest. Loki leans back in his seat, turning a silver pen through his fingers while Odin waits for someone to give him an answer worth using.

I continue walking the Norse gods through what we know—the cash purchase, the unidentified buyer, the near-five hours he spent inside a two-street radius without appearing on any camera near our house, and the network probe carrying the same Kennel-linked routing signature as the earlier knock. Milo supplies the technical details and one unnecessary comparison involving someone tapping Frank’s tank, which earns him the first hint of a smile Sage has managed since we sat down.

Loki taps his pen against the table. “The flowers already told us what they were meant to. Someone can enter your home whenever they choose, and they wanted all of you to know it. What they haven’t told us is who wanted that message delivered.”

“Stephen,” Eli says.

“Possibly. Or someone he hired. Or someone else within the Kennel’s architecture reminding us that Stephen isn’t the only one watching.” Loki points his pen toward the florist’s image. “Until we know which, that man is the only visible link between the message and whoever ordered it.”

I study the still again. “Then we pick him up and make him tell us.”

“Too soon.”

“He was inside my house.”

“And if he’s a contractor, he may not know who hired him.” Loki lowers the pen. “Take him now and you learn whatever little he currently knows. Leave him on the board and he may lead us to the person who paid him, the account they used, or the next job they want him to perform.”

Knox shifts beside Sage, the couch giving a low complaint beneath his weight. “No. We followed that advice last time. Leave him and he gets another chance at Fury.”

“This isn’t another Tyler situation. He won’t get near her or the house again,” Odin says. “That’s what the additional surveillance is for.”

Thor leans forward. “We identify him, establish his routine, and determine whether he’s a courier, a hired professional, or part of the Kennel itself. Once we understand his role, we’ll know whether to follow him, turn him or take him.”

“And which questions he’s capable of answering,” I add.

“Exactly.” Odin turns toward Milo. “Fenrir continues the identification work. Holden, use your departmental access where it won’t create a visible inquiry. We want him to stay useful.”

I don’t like leaving a man who entered my home free to breathe, but dragging him into a back room now could buy us nothing except one frightened operative and a warning sent straight to whoever stands above him. Or even worse, a kidnapping charge from an innocent civilian.

So we watch him until he gives us someone better to hurt. I’d honestly rather kill the guy.

“Speaking of being useful,” Odin says. “Which targets did you select for your next operation?” Finished with the security-breach discussion, he gestures to the two folders in front of Sage.

“Waldock and Ayre.” She slides them across the table and presents Waldock first. Swim coach. Seven girls whose accounts we can substantiate, although the gaps in his employment suggest more. He lives

alone, has a predictable routine, and the kind of confidence men acquire when every adult around them has spent years protecting the institution instead of the children inside it.

Then she presents Raymond Ayre. Former youth pastor. Multiple accusations across several congregations, each followed by a quiet resignation and a move. He didn't escape the pattern. The pattern carried him somewhere new and handed him another room full of children.

She speaks clearly, without looking to Eli or me for confirmation. The first time Sage sat in this room, she had to fight for the right to hear what happened behind the door. Now she's choosing targets and laying out evidence while Odin listens.

"The teams?" Thor asks when she finishes.

"Knox, Eli, and me on Waldock," Sage says. "Holden, Milo, and Micah take Ayre."

"Both operations at the same time?"

"Ayre's window opens earlier," I say. "Our team should be clear before Waldock is secured. We keep scheduled communication points between teams and use the same emergency channel."

Thor's attention shifts to me. "You're protecting the house, but that isn't the only vulnerability. If whoever is watching follows you tomorrow night, both operations could be compromised before they begin."

"You're right," I say. "And we can't sweep for a tail we've never once managed to see."

"Or wait until you divide into two teams and strike whichever one appears weaker," Thor adds.

Knox leans forward. "Then we make it look like we're doing something else."

Loki's pen begins turning between his fingers again. "You make it look like you're spending the night here."

I look at him.

"All six of you arrive at Unholy Desires tomorrow night through the main entrance in your usual vehicles. Make yourselves visible, get dressed up. Stay long enough for anyone watching to believe you're settled in for the evening, then leave through the private level."

Unholy Desires survives by protecting the identities of people who can't afford to be photographed entering a sex club. A private elevator connects the secured lower floor to a sealed vehicle bay with its own street access

and no line of sight to the public entrance. There are no cameras within a three-block radius—and that's purposeful.

Odin nods. "My people will stage two vehicles there before you arrive, with secondary vehicles waiting at both extraction points. The teams leave separately and take different routes to their operation zones. Anyone watching the house or club sees exactly what we want them to see."

Thor looks at all of us in turn. "If either team detects a tail, you abort immediately and report in."

I want to argue. Every instinct I have says to find the unknown man, put him in a room, close the door, and keep asking questions until he gives me Stephen's location. But this isn't my call.

"Both targets are approved," Odin says. "Wednesday night. Keep your eyes open. We want these men disposed of, but the safety of the team comes first."

"Understood."

The meeting breaks apart in stages. Eli collects the target files. Thor speaks quietly to Knox about vehicle placement while Micah gathers the abandoned coffee cups. Sage leans over Milo's shoulder to study something on his screen, and Milo immediately begins explaining it at a speed no living person can follow.

I'm closing my notebook when Loki clears his throat.

"Before you all leave, there is one final matter requiring restitution."

Milo looks up. "That sounds financial. I don't like it."

"The mattress at the cabin."

The room stills.

Sage's eyes widen. Knox looks at Milo, and Milo looks at the ceiling.

Loki folds his hands over the table. "I'm never one to judge bedroom preferences, but I will be billing you for the damage. The mattress was obscenely expensive, those sheets were imported, and you had an entire playroom at your disposal."

"First of all, that was a torture room," Milo says, offended. "Kitten was injured for most of the trip, so we only got two medically modified sessions before Odin made us come home, which is nowhere near enough time to work through the equipment inventory in your filthy leather-covered kink room."

"You put a knife through my mattress."

“It was a *fucking* knife. The distinction is important. I was trying to blend fiction with reality but in a much safer way.”

Loki pinches the bridge of his nose. “I suppose that explains why the caretaker described the charred remains of the knife he found in the fireplace as phallic.”

“You sound judgmental. Don’t shame my kink, Loki. We’re all about sex positivity here.”

Loki’s gaze travels slowly around the table. “You’re all together outside of Miss Adams, right? Why didn’t you use the room with each other?”

For the first time all morning, nobody answers immediately.

It isn’t because we don’t fuck when Sage isn’t there. Eli and Micah are together more often than not. Milo has become a partner to me. Knox does his own thing. But the room at the cabin had been waiting for Sage. For all of us. Using it without her would have felt like opening a gift with the person it belonged to locked outside.

“There is no us without her,” I say simply. “Why would we take enjoyment from something when we knew she’d be missing out?”

“That’s like leaving a ten-year-old in the hotel room at Disneyland,” Milo says, nodding. “You just don’t do that kind of shit.”

Loki’s brows lift, and he exchanges a glance with both Thor and Odin. “I suppose I never thought about it like that,” he murmurs, his gaze returning to us. “She isn’t an addition to what you have. She’s the center of it.”

“Well, yeah,” Milo says. “She’s our reason.”

Loki looks at Sage between us, and something I’ve never seen before crosses his face—a flash of longing so raw it almost feels private.

“Still, none of this made it okay to stab my mattress,” Odin says as he stands. “Loki will invoice Milo directly. You may go.” His gaze moves to me. “Holden, I’ll need you to hang back.”

I watch the others file out—Sage gathering her files with Knox shadowing her like he always does, Eli and Micah already talking logistics for Wednesday, Milo trailing behind with his laptop open and his mouth still running about mattress depreciation rates. The door closes behind them, and the room goes quiet.

Odin turns to me. “Sit.”

I do. Thor shifts his bulk to give me more space on the couch.

“The report,” Odin says.

I take the folder from my bag and set it on the table, my fingers pinning it in place.

*Rosaline Gable* is printed across the tab.

Odin's gaze moves over it. "How long have you had the completed version?"

"Long enough."

"That wasn't what I asked."

"Since we got back from the cabin."

Loki exhales through his nose. Thor says nothing.

"Promise me you aren't going to ruin her," I say, dragging it a little closer to me.

"I think you'll find it's a little too late for that," Odin says.

"Yeah, I had a feeling after everything I found." I sigh as I push the folder toward him. "Rosaline Marie Gable. Twenty-seven. She was completing her final nursing placement at Bayside General when you met her. She still works there. Included all her bank details, rentals, a few photos I found from driver's licenses and socials, and a detailed breakdown of her extended family—of which there's only a father in her life as far as I can see."

Loki takes the folder from Odin and opens it, scanning the photo on the front page. "Her height and build match, as does the beauty mark on her right cheek."

*Match? Match what?*

Loki hands it back, and Odin reads.

"She recognized you at the hospital, didn't she?" I say slowly. "I didn't realize it at the time, but when you read her name tag, she reacted before she could hide it. Left pretty fast after that."

"Smart girl," Loki murmurs.

"Frightened girl," Thor corrects.

Odin reads without looking up. "Her bank account is empty?"

"Yep. She's carrying high five figures in student debt, working hospital shifts, waitressing, tutoring, and walking dogs on Sundays. Her bank balance drops into single digits most months, but her rent is always paid."

Thor's mouth tightens. "Four jobs?"

"Yes."

Odin's visible eye lifts to mine. "There's still not a lot here. You stopped digging," he says.

“I established who she is. That’s the answer you wanted, right? You don’t need the name of every person she buys coffee from or a photograph of her walking home.”

“You decided what I needed?”

“Rosaline is good people, Odin. She’s barely got anything available because she lives like a fucking nun. She works, studies, and that’s it.” I shake my head. “She’s vulnerable, exhausted, and right now, she’s on the outside of this world. I know you’re not going to listen to me, but I want you to think long and hard before you drag her into it.”

“Like you did to Sage?” Loki’s fingers curl against Thor’s shoulder. “Don’t worry, Detective. We’re not planning to drag Rosaline anywhere.”

I look at him. “You told me you wanted her.”

His face wipes clean. “We do.”

I point at him. “That’s exactly my concern.”

Odin snaps the folder closed. “Your concern is noted. Again. Now get out.”

I look at the three of them. Thor holds Loki’s hand while Loki stands close enough that his hip rests against Thor’s arm. Odin sits across from them, separate in distance but connected to them through body language and shared tension.

*Who the fuck is she to them? What do they want with her?*

There’s nothing left to say that will change their minds, so I stand and leave the three of them alone with their fucked-up consciences.

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# THIRTY-SIX
# KNOX



We arrive at Unholy Desires in our usual vehicles, dressed for a night at the club, and walk through the main entrance together.

The black leather collar at Fury's throat looks like part of the outfit—a skin-tight dress with so much of each side cut away that there's no way she's wearing underwear—but it also carries the replacement tracker she agreed to let Milo install after the cameo was destroyed.

We stay on the main floor for forty minutes, long enough for anyone watching to believe we've settled in for the night. Before we go belowground, Milo loops the tracker's signal inside the club, leaving anyone who has found a way into our system convinced Fury is still here with the rest of us.

Fury, Eli, and I take the private elevator belowground, change into black, and leave through the secured vehicle bay in an SUV that has never been near our house. Holden, Milo, and Micah follow in the second.

The vehicles separate two blocks from the club. Odin's people stay on both routes until they confirm neither team has picked up a tail, then Eli turns toward Waldock's neighborhood.

Waldock's house reeks of old takeout and neglect, strong enough to penetrate the mask and make me ration every breath.

I lead the way through the shadowed living room, rope coiled loose in my grip, the noose already knotted and ready. Eli's right behind me, silent as ever, and Fury slips along in our wake, her steps light, her eyes sharp. My Fury, and the knife she never has to think about.

We've timed this perfectly. Waldock's alone, slumped in his recliner with the TV flickering blue light across his face, some late-night game show droning on low. It's always easier when the guy doesn't have a family. The only things we need to worry about are him and the justice we've come to deliver.

I signal with a glance—Eli nods, Fury tenses—and we close in, my boots soft on the carpet. The noose feels right in my hand, custom-weighted for a clean drop, the fibers whispering against my palm as I ready the loop. One quick move, and it'll be over his head before he even registers the shadow. His breathing's steady, oblivious, the remote loose in his lap.

Almost there.

"*Movement at the rear,*" the spotter says through my earpiece. "*One woman crossing from the adjoining yard. Looks like the neighbor.*"

The warning gives us seconds, not options. A gate hidden behind the dividing hedge clicks shut, then the back door creaks open, carrying a slice of night air through the stale warmth.

We freeze.

"Hey, you home, Jerry?" a woman calls from the kitchen. "Just popping in for a second. I ran out of bread, and the kids need sandwiches for school tomorrow. You got any to spare?"

*Fuck.*

I pivot fast, motioning the others back. Eli's already moving, grabbing Fury's elbow to guide her retreat. We slip into the narrow hall and listen.

"Yeah, yeah, in the pantry. Help yourself, Marla."

Footsteps again, cabinets banging.

"I can't see it."

"Here. Let me."

As he shoves out of the recliner, we retreat even further. I scan for cover—there's a closet door, half-open, crammed with coats and boxes. It's tight, but it'll do. I yank it wider, bundle us all inside, pulling Fury against my chest and Eli crowding in behind her, the three of us pressed like sardines in the dark. I ease the door shut as footsteps shuffle from the living room through to the kitchen.

My arm wraps around Fury instinctively, holding her steady, her breath hot and quick against my neck. Eli's shoulder digs into mine, his hand finding the small of her back to keep us all stable. The space is a furnace already, bodies too close, the scent of her shampoo mixing with the faint

must of old wool. We all shift our masks to the top of our heads so we can breathe, staying as quiet as we can.

“How hard is it to find a loaf of bread and leave?” Fury whispers, and I hold a finger to my lips to shush her.

She leans in closer, and I can feel her pulse racing where her chest presses to mine—fear, adrenaline, that edge she thrives on. We stay frozen, breathing shallow. Fury shifts minutely, her body molding to me, and I tighten my grip on her waist—part warning, part reassurance. No moving. No sound. Eli’s eyes meet mine over her head in the dim crack of light from around the door.

“Do we abort?” he whispers.

I mouth back, *Wait*.

The neighbor chats idly—something about the weather, school pickups—while Waldock mumbles responses. Minutes drag. My muscles coil tighter, the noose still clutched in my free hand, dangling useless for now.

Fury’s fingers find my belt loop, clinging, and I drop my head to murmur against her ear, voice barely a whisper. “Breathe slow. We’ve got this.”

She nods, lips brushing my collarbone, and the contact sends a low hum through me despite the tension. Eli adjusts his stance, his arm sliding around her from behind, sandwiching her between us in this coffin of a closet. It’s not the time. But she’s trapped and trusting and pressed against every inch of me, and my body has stopped taking orders.

Fury lifts her face just enough that her mouth finds mine in the dark.

It’s not graceful. There’s no room for graceful in here. It’s a press of lips and heat and nerves, her breath catching into my mouth like she’s trying to steal calm from me and give me some of her fire in return. I take it, kissing her back, hard and brief, one hand tightening at her waist while the other still grips the rope.

Behind her, Eli’s hand slides up her spine and settles at the nape of her neck. His mouth brushes the corner of her jaw, then her cheek, then catches her lips when she turns half toward him, split between us in the dark. She makes the smallest sound—swallowed fast, more exhale than moan—and I feel it in my chest.

*Jesus.*

The kitchen cabinet shuts.

All three of us go still.

Marla keeps talking. Something about lunch boxes. Something about a field trip. My pulse is a war drum in my throat. Fury's fingers are fisted in my shirt now, and I can feel Eli crowding closer behind her, all heat and tension, his breath feathering against her ear.

She tips her head back against his shoulder and he kisses her again, softer this time, like he's sealing the panic in. I drag my mouth down the side of her throat before I can stop myself, a rough touch of lips to skin. Her body shivers between us.

The old law beneath every plan is simple: if something goes wrong, I get Fury out. It settled into me the night she wrapped both hands around my knife on the beach, and every threat since has driven it deeper.

But she isn't panicking. Her pulse is fast and her body alert between Eli and me, yet the hand fisted in my shirt is steady. When her eyes meet mine, she isn't asking me to carry her out. She's waiting for my signal to continue.

So I hold her, watch the light around the door, and wait with her. If this gets worse, I move. Until then, she stays because she chooses to.

*Fuck. She wants this.*

"Touch me," she whispers.

I tighten my grip on Fury's waist and slide my hand up her ribs, slow, giving Eli time to adjust to whatever this is becoming. She arches into the touch, her breath catching, and Eli's hand at her nape tightens.

"Quiet or this stops," I whisper against her ear, barely a sound at all.

She nods, pressing closer, and I find the edge of her pants, working my way beneath her shirt until my thumb finds skin. I trace the line of her hip, then higher, until I'm cupping her breast, feeling her nipple harden against my palm. She bites her lip to keep silent, her eyes closing, her body swaying between us.

Eli's hand moves from her neck down her spine, slow and deliberate, until he's gripping her ass, pulling her back against him. I feel the shift in her posture, the way she opens for it, for us, for this insane thing we're doing while a woman hunts for sandwich bread with our target fifteen feet away.

I roll her nipple between my fingers, and she makes a sound—cut off fast, choked back—and Eli's mouth finds her throat, sucking. My cock is hard against her stomach, trapped in my jeans, and I grind forward because I can't not, because she's asked for this and I'm going to give her everything she wants.

Eli’s hand slips lower, sliding beneath the waistband of her pants, and I feel her breath hitch against my mouth. I swallow the sound with another kiss, deeper this time, my thumb still working her nipple beneath her shirt. She arches into both of us, trapped between my chest and Eli’s, and I can feel every tremor running through her frame.

“Quiet,” I remind her, the word barely a vibration against her lips.

She nods, biting down on her bottom lip, her eyes glassy and dark as Eli’s hand slides down the front of her pants, his fingers finding her, sliding through the heat I can feel radiating off her even without touching it myself. I keep my hand at her breast, rolling and pinching, matching his pace with small cruel twists that make her thighs press together, seeking friction.

The neighbor laughs at something Waldock says, and the sound carries through the walls like background static. None of it matters. What matters is Fury’s mouth opening under mine, her body going pliant and tight at once, the way she rocks between Eli’s hand and my chest like she’s forgotten where we are entirely.

I break the kiss to watch her face. Her eyes are squeezed shut, her lip caught between her teeth, white with pressure. Eli’s mouth is at her ear, whispering something I can’t hear, and whatever it is makes her shudder hard enough that I have to tighten my grip on her waist to keep her upright. My cock throbs against her stomach, demanding attention I can’t give it, but I grind forward anyway because she needs to feel what she’s doing to me, what we’re doing together.

“Close,” she breathes, so faint I almost miss it.

I pinch her nipple harder, twisting just to the edge of pain, and she chokes back a moan that vibrates through her whole body. Eli’s hand moves faster, more deliberate, and I feel the moment she breaks—her spine arching, her head falling back against his shoulder, her body seizing up as the orgasm rips through her in silence. I cover her mouth with mine again, swallowing the desperate sounds she can’t fully suppress, feeling her shudder and clench.

She goes limp between us, breathing hard through her nose, her forehead pressed to my chest. Eli eases his hand free slowly, then shifts behind her with a soft hiss of discomfort. He and I are still wound tight, carrying arousal we can’t finish while the mission waits outside the door.

Footsteps. The kitchen faucet runs. Marla’s voice again, telling Waldock she’ll bring him a fresh loaf tomorrow.

I hold Fury steady until her breathing evens out, until her fingers unclench from my shirt. Her eyes find mine, bright and wild and absolutely feral, and she mouths two words: *Worth it.*

“Thanks again, Jerry. You’re a lifesaver.”

He gives a fake modest chuckle that makes the hair on the back of my neck stand up.

A beat later, footsteps head for the back door. The hinges whine, then the door clicks shut.

Nobody in the closet moves.

We listen.

Waldock grunts to himself, shuffles back through the kitchen. The springs of the recliner complain when his weight hits them. The TV swells a little louder—bright canned applause, some idiot host yelling about prizes, the wet crinkle of a snack bag opening.

I count in my head.

*Ten. Twenty. Thirty.*

Fury stays fused to me, every line of her body alert. Eli’s hand is still spread over her middle from behind, his breath measured now, controlled. Mine isn’t much better, but I keep it steady for her.

Another minute.

Waldock coughs. The remote clicks. The recliner creaks again, the lazy little movements of a man who thinks the night still belongs to him.

I tip my mouth to Fury’s ear. “We’re good.”

She nods once.

I ease the closet door open by inches. Hallway empty. Kitchen dim. No shadow that doesn’t belong. I slip out first, rope ready, then turn and take Fury’s hand to bring her with me. Eli follows, silent as smoke, and pulls his skull mask back down over his face. I do the same. Fury’s goes on last, her blade already in her hand when the white grin settles over her features.

Back to work.

We move down the hall in a line, slower now, no wasted motion. The near miss has sharpened everything. My pulse goes cold. Clean. Useful.

The living room opens in front of us.

Waldock is exactly where we expect—head back, one hand in a bag of Cheetos now, orange dust on his fingers. A contestant on the TV is screaming about a new car while his audience whoops on command.

I cover the distance in three strides.

The rope drops over his head before the first confused sound fully leaves his throat. I yank back hard, planting a boot behind the recliner and hauling the noose tight under his jaw. He comes up out of the chair in a violent jerk, chips flying, remote clattering across the floor. The game show host keeps screaming. Waldock does too, but it's wet and strangled now, panic chewing his voice into pieces.

Eli is on him a second later, one hand clamping Waldock's forehead back against the chair, the other pinning his arm before he can swing. Fury moves to the front, knife low at her side, mask grinning white while his eyes bulge over the rope digging into his throat.

He bucks. He claws at the line. Too late.

I brace and pull.

His heels drum against the carpet. Orange chip dust smears over his shirt as his hands scramble for purchase and find nothing. His face goes from pink to red to something darker, ugly veins standing in his neck under the pressure. I keep the tension exact. No slop. No mercy. Just enough for him to know what's happening and why the air is leaving him.

"Jerry Waldock," Eli says, voice flat through the mask. "You have been found guilty of the rape and assault of seven girls."

Waldock makes a choking, frantic noise that might be denial. Might be prayer. Doesn't matter. I've never cared for these assholes' responses. I tug the rope tighter.

He gurgles, and Fury crouches in front of him, calm. "Do you remember their names?"

He thrashes harder.

I pull tighter.

Fury holds up her phone and shows him their faces.

The glow from the screen paints him corpse-blue.

I watch his gaze move over the photographs one by one. Recognition flares—not guilt, because men like him don't do guilt, but the ugly calculation of a rat realizing the trap has closed.

He shakes his head.

*Liar*.

Fury tilts the phone slightly, making sure he sees every face. "You sure?" she says. "They remember you."

He jerks his head, trying to look away. Eli slaps a hand over his forehead and keeps him facing forward.

Waldock’s fingers hook under the rope. Futile. My forearms lock. Biceps burn. I pull until his nails bend backward and his eyes water. He kicks once, twice, the recliner sliding an inch over carpet.

Fury rises from her crouch, slides the phone into her pocket, and looks at him like she’s deciding where to start cutting.

“Knox,” Eli says.

I know what he means. Enough air for the lesson. Not enough hope to make him brave.

I ease the tension by a fraction.

Waldock sucks in a ragged, screaming breath that shreds his throat. It’s the loudest thing in the room except the TV crowd losing its mind over some prize wheel. He coughs, spits, tries to speak. Fails. Tries again.

“Y-you’ve got the wrong—”

Eli tightens his grip on the bastard’s arm so hard Waldock whines. “Lie again and I let her open you up and tear out your intestines while you’re awake.”

Waldock looks at Fury.

Bad move.

She steps closer, blade still low. She doesn’t rush it. That’s what gets him.

Fury is never sloppy when it matters. People mistake her size for softness, her face for mercy, but I’ve seen what lives under her skin. It knows patience. It knows exactly where fear blooms fastest.

She plants one boot on the edge of the recliner between Waldock’s spread knees and leans in until the tip of her blade kisses the inside of his thigh through his sweatpants.

He stills.

The total-body lock of prey that finally understands the thing in front of it is real.

“You coached girls,” she says, voice almost conversational. “You told their parents you were keeping them safe.”

Waldock’s breath comes in wet rasps around the rope. “Please—”

The knife presses a little harder. Not enough to break skin. Enough to promise it can.

I hold him and watch his pupils blow wide.

“You touched children,” she says. “You cornered them in locker rooms and storage closets and on away trips. You used authority and walls and

timing.” Her head tilts, skull mask grinning while her eyes stay flat and human and far more frightening. “So here’s what happens next. You tell the truth, or I start removing parts.”

His whole body jerks against the line. Eli doesn’t let him go anywhere.

“I didn’t—”

Fury drives the blade straight into his dick.

Eli claps his hand over his mouth before he can scream.

I haul on the rope.

He convulses so hard the recliner nearly tips.

The sound he makes behind Eli’s palm is animal. High, wet, disbelieving. Blood pours black in the TV light, soaking gray sweatpants darker and darker while Fury rips the knife free with a savage little twist that makes his whole body bow.

“Fuck, yes,” Eli breathes.

I don’t let up. Can’t. Waldock bucks under the rope, hands flying from his ruined crotch back to the noose, strength turning stupid and desperate now that pain has joined panic. He’s all instinct. No thought. Just survival.

Doesn’t matter.

I plant harder and drag the line back until the nylon bites so deep his chin jerks toward the ceiling. Eli keeps him pinned. Fury steps back fast, out of kicking range, blood speckled across the grin of her mask.

Waldock’s heels hammer the floor. Once. Twice. Then less.

I hold until Waldock’s hands stop clawing.

Hold longer.

Long enough that there’s no argument left in him. No twitch that means maybe.

When it’s done, we clean up and stage the scene. A note on the coffee table saying he can’t live with himself anymore. The rope tied high so his body dangles. A kitchen knife covered in his blood to sell his bleeding crotch as an act of self-hatred before the final deed. Then we leave the way we came in, crossing the yard and disappearing into the night.

When we get back to the car, the radio is popping off. “*Team Kitten. Come in, Team Kitten*.”

“*Team Kitten?*” Milo says again, but the humor’s gone out of his voice this time, scraped raw by static. “*Please tell me you’re all dramatically making out in the getaway car and not dead?*”

I grab the radio off the console. “Alive.”

The response detonates instantly.

"*Oh thank fuck,*" Milo blurts. In the background I hear movement, something metallic clattering, and Micah saying, "*Give me that,*" at the same time Holden's voice cuts through.

"*What happened?*" Holden demands. "*You missed two call windows.*"

Eli slides into the driver's seat and starts the engine. Fury is in the back with me, mask off now, gray eyes bright in the dark. She braces one hand on the center console and leans toward the radio like she can climb through it.

"Neighbor complication," Eli says. "Unexpected civilian entry. We had to freeze in place."

There's a beat of absolute silence on the line.

Then Milo, "*A civilian entry as in someone came into the house?*"

"Yes," I say.

"*Oh my God.*" That's Micah, breath rushing out hard. "*Everyone okay*?"

I look at Fury. Her eyes are bright. Her hands are steady. The look on her face, satisfied. Sated.

"We're good," she says.

She's not lying.

We drive back to Unholy Desires.

The secured bay opens before Eli reaches the gate, then closes behind us the second we're inside. Holden, Milo, and Micah are waiting beyond it, still in their operational clothes. Holden's arms are folded, and his jaw is tight enough to crack a tooth. Milo is pacing. Micah looks calmer, but only because he's better at containing panic than Milo.

Holden comes toward us before Eli kills the engine. "Tell me you weren't seen."

"We weren't," Eli says as he climbs out. "It's handled. Odin's lookout warned us, and we fell back."

"Ayre?" I ask.

"Done," Holden says. "Clean."

"Did you do the dick mutilation thing?" Milo asks, appearing beside Fury the moment she opens her door. "Because I wrote about it in his note, so if you ran out of time—"

"His dick won't be bothering anyone again," Fury says.

Micah reads her face—the flush, the brightness, the post-kill energy she hasn't burned through yet. "Good night, then?"

“Great night.”

We change back into our club clothes in the bay, although the process slows when Fury strips out of black beside the SUV and steps naked into that dress. By the time she slides her heels on, every man in the room is watching the cutouts frame bare skin beneath the collar at her throat.

She hefts her go-bag onto the hood and digs inside.

“One more thing,” she says, pulling out a slim chain leash.

Milo stops mid-button.

Fury clips the hook to the ring at the front of her collar. The click carries through the concrete bay, small and sharp enough to pull every set of eyes toward her.

Then she holds the loose end out to Eli.

“We still have a cover to sell,” she says. “Playroom. Now.”

Eli closes his fist around the chain. The moment it draws taut, he leads Fury toward the private corridor, and the rest of us follow without wasting another second.

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# THIRTY-SEVEN
# SAGE



“Pick your playroom, little savage,” Eli says when we step out of the private corridor and the thrum of music and bodies closes around us.

I don’t answer right away, too busy swaying my hips to the beat, letting the energy of the place flow through me. The black dress clings to my hips, the cut of it making me feel like something a person would ruin their life over. My silver club mask hides my face, and the leather collar feels like a hand about my throat with the chain hanging down between my breasts. The men crowd around me, wearing black—tailored shirts, fitted pants, and matching masks that make them look like five exquisitely dressed reasons to be me.

“Sage.” Eli winds the end of my leash around his fist. “I asked you a question.”

I let the silence stretch, tasting his patience like a wine I haven’t decided on yet. The leash pulls taut—enough to remind me who’s holding the other end.

Laughter bubbles out of me. I could answer him. Should answer him. But there’s something delicious in making Eli wait, in watching those warm hazel eyes behind his mask go sharp with authority while his mouth stays perfectly controlled.

“The voyeur room,” I say finally, letting my voice drop into something throaty and careless.

Eli’s fingers tighten on the leash, and I feel the pull all the way down my spine. He doesn’t jerk it—he’s too controlled for that—but there’s enough pressure to make my breath hitch, to remind me exactly what game we’re playing.

He looks at each of the others, getting their okay one by one. Then he tugs me against him and presses his mouth close to my ear.

“Good girl,” he murmurs.

Micah appears at my left, his eyes catching the club lights as he offers his hand. I take it, let him guide me through the press of bodies while Eli keeps the chain taut between us. Knox shadows my right, massive and silent, his presence a wall I could lean against if the floor tilted. Holden and Milo flank behind like bookends—one all sharp observation, the other already grinning.

The voyeur room sits closest to the main floor, giving those who enjoy watching easy access to the view. Nothing has changed since the first time we were in here. Dark walls. A chaise on a raised platform. Restraints arranged in neat rows. A mirrored wall reflecting everything inside while concealing the viewing gallery on the other side.

The last time I stood in here, I stripped for Eli and refused to let him hide from what he wanted. The others watched until Knox shut the glass because I hadn’t invited them into the moment.

Tonight, every invitation is mine to give.

Knox crosses to the control panel and stops with his hand above it. “Once I clear the glass, anyone standing behind it sees everything.”

“I know.”

His eyes stay on me, hungry. “You say the word. It closes.”

“I want them to watch, Knoxie. I want the whole world to see how good we are together.”

He lets out a low growl. His pants make his opinion obvious. Then he hits the control panel.

Nothing seems to happen at first. The wall remains a perfect black mirror, returning the image of one woman surrounded by five men. Then a small indicator appears on the panel.

GALLERY OPEN.

The number beneath it changes from zero to three.

Someone was waiting.

A shiver races over me.

Milo moves toward another section of the panel, but I get there first. My finger hovers above the internal audio control.

“That broadcasts to the club,” Knox warns. “It’ll mix with the music.”

“I remember.”

Milo leans against the wall beside me. “To clarify, kitten, there are people at the bar who came here for a quiet drink and some light genital torture. Once you hit that button, they’re going to hear everything.”

“Then we should give them something worth listening to.”

I press it.

A green light ignites overhead.

AUDIO LIVE.

My breathing spills through the concealed speakers, amplified just enough to come back to me from somewhere beyond the room.

The gallery counter rises to five.

Then seven.

Holden comes up behind me and closes his hand around the front of my collar, knuckles pressing lightly into my throat. “Tell us what you want.”

“Marks.”

His eyes darken.

“From each of you,” I continue. “Enough that I can see your hands on me tomorrow.”

“That all?” Milo asks hopefully.

“Then I want everything.”

Eli steps closer, the leash sliding through his fist. “Safe word?”

“Hangmen.”

“If you can’t speak?”

“Two taps.”

Micah catches my chin and turns my face toward him. “You sure?”

“Positive.”

He kisses me, slow and warm, and when he draws away, his thumb brushes the corner of my mouth.

“Keep telling us.”

“I will.”

“Good girl.”

Holden finds the zipper of my dress and draws it down my back. The fabric loosens slowly, exposing skin one inch at a time while all six of us watch through the mirror.

I push the dress from my shoulders. It pools at my feet.

I'm not wearing underwear.

Milo makes a strangled sound. "Sometimes I worry I don't contribute enough to this relationship, and then the universe gives me moments like this."

"You haven't contributed anything yet," Holden says.

"I'm building atmosphere."

"You're building a headache."

I step out of the dress, leaving myself in the silver mask, collar, and heels.

The gallery counter jumps to nine.

That tiny number hits low in my belly. Nine strangers stand beyond the glass, watching me bare myself for five men. I can't see their faces or hear them shifting closer, but I feel their attention as surely as I feel the chain between my breasts.

I turn toward the mirror.

This is what they see.

My body, my scars, and my throat encircled in black leather. Five masked men closing around me while the leash runs from my collar into Eli's hand.

For most of my life, being watched meant assessment. A man deciding what he could take. A room deciding whether I belonged. Someone measuring my weakness and waiting for the chance to use it.

This is different.

They can look because I opened the glass.

They can listen because I turned on the sound.

And when I'm finished with them, I can shut it all down.

"Hands on the chaise," Eli orders.

I obey.

The velvet is cool beneath my palms. I bend at the waist, keeping my eyes on the mirror as Eli draws the leash forward over my shoulder. The chain tightens, positioning my head exactly where he wants it while Holden lifts my hair away from my back.

Micah runs his palm over my ass. The touch is soothing, almost gentle, warming my skin before anything lands.

"I want five," I tell them.

Eli's eyebrows lift above his mask.

“Five from each of you,” I explain.

“Twenty-five?” Milo asks. “I love it when sex involves math.”

Micah’s palm stops moving. “That’s a lot when one of the hands belongs to Knox.”

“I can take it.”

Knox comes to stand beside me, his size swallowing half my reflection. “No proving anything, Fury.”

“I’m not.” I meet his gaze. “I want every one.”

He rests his hand against the small of my back.

“Then you’ll have them.”

Micah goes first.

I know it’s him because his touch lingers, sweeping over the curve before his palm comes down. The crack rolls through the room and out across the speakers, but the sting is measured, heat spreading beneath his hand when he immediately rubs over the same place.

My breath leaves me slowly.

“Good, baby girl?” he asks.

“More.”

He completes his final four, each strike a little firmer than the last. My ass burns.

Milo takes his place next.

There’s no warning. One second I’m watching his bright eyes in the mirror and the next his palm connects hard enough to make my hips jerk into the chaise.

“Fuck!”

“That was for doubting my commitment to slap games.”

“I never—”

*Slap!*

I bite my lip to stop from laughing after each strike, but it escapes anyway—a sharp, breathless sound that carries through the speakers overhead. The gallery counter flickers. Twelve now. Twelve strangers watching me laugh while I get spanked by a man who made a joke about it.

“Focus, Fury,” Knox growls beside me, his hand still warm against my back.

“I am focused,” I say. “I’m focused on how Milo’s going to pay for that.”

Milo appears in my peripheral vision as soon as he's finished his five, already unbuttoning his shirt. "Do you accept payment in sexual favors? I hear I do a great Cookie Monster impression."

"You'll get your turn," Eli says, and there's a warning in it that makes Milo's hands still. "Holden."

Holden steps forward, and I feel the shift in the room before his palm even connects. He's precise. Measured. Each time he strikes, it's exactly where he wants, exactly how hard, and the sound of it—crisp and clean—sends a jolt of heat through me. I gasp, fingers curling against the velvet.

"Count," he says.

"Three," I manage.

"Good." His hand settles over the mark, pressing heat into it. "Again?"

"Yes."

His palm comes down, and I make a sound I don't recognize, something between a moan and a whimper. Fourteen in the gallery now. They're leaning closer. I can feel it.

Eli's fingers tighten on the leash, pulling my head back just enough to arch my throat as the final slap lands. "You're beautiful like this," he murmurs. "All of them watching what you let us do to you."

I want to answer, but Knox takes his position, and I forget how words work.

His hands are massive. I've seen them haul a full-grown man at the end of a rope, and I've seen them be gentle. When his palm falls, the impact travels through my whole body, rocking me forward into the chaise. I cry out—can't help it—and the sound broadcasts through the club, raw and unmistakable.

"Easy," Micah says, steadying my hip.

"More," I gasp.

Knox's second strike lands lower, where my thigh meets my ass, and I feel tears prick my eyes—not from pain alone, but from the overwhelming rightness of it. This body. These marks. My choice.

"Keep going," I whisper, and he lands the last slaps in quick succession. I'm left gasping, sweat and tears dripping from my face.

"Five," he confirms, his palm spreading over both cheeks, holding the heat in.

Eli tugs the leash, turning my face toward him. "Almost there, little savage. Still with us?"

I nod, breath coming fast. “Still here.”

The gallery shows eighteen now. Eighteen people watching me tremble and burn.

Holden takes the leash from Eli and pulls it taut across my shoulder, using it to steady me as Eli moves into position. I watch them in the mirror—the transfer seamless, practiced, like men who have run the drill before.

Eli’s first strike surprises me. He’s been so controlled all night, so careful with the leash and the orders, that I expected the same measured approach. Instead, his palm comes down with something close to ferocity, as if he’s been holding back everything until this moment.

I scream. The sound tears out of me, and somewhere beyond this room I know heads are turning, drinks are pausing, conversations are stopping.

My fingers claw into the velvet. Knox’s arm comes around my waist before I can stumble, holding me securely against the chaise while the sting radiates through my hip.

“Fury.”

“I’m good.”

His hand remains on me until I look up and meet his eyes.

“I’m good.”

Only then does he step away.

The gallery counter changes to twenty-four.

“Keep going,” I gasp.

“Count,” Eli says.

“One.”

The second strike lands across the other cheek, and I choke on my own breath, thighs shaking against the velvet. “Two.”

Eli doesn’t pause. The third comes harder, snapping against already tender skin. Knox’s hands return to my hips, holding me steady. “Three.”

My voice is breaking. I don’t care. The fourth makes me sob, a raw sound that fills the room and spills out across the club floor. “Four.”

“Last one,” Eli warns, and I brace for it, every muscle coiling tight.

It crashes down like a promise kept, and I scream again—“Five!”—my whole body jerking forward into Knox’s waiting arms. Tears are streaming now, hot and uncontrolled, mixing with sweat as I gasp against the chaise.

Eli’s hand finds my jaw, tilting my face up toward the mirror. “Look at yourself.”

I force my eyes open. My reflection stares back—mask still in place, collar gleaming, ass striped with twenty-five red marks already beginning to bruise. The men around me are hard shadows and hungry eyes, their masks hiding everything but their need.

“Tell me what you see,” Eli demands.

“Proof.” My voice cracks.

“Of what?”

“That I’m still here. That every handprint burning across my ass is one I asked for.” A wet laugh catches in my throat. “And that I still want more.”

Twenty-four strangers are watching, but the answer is for the five men around me.

“Everything,” I remind them. “I said I wanted everything.”

Micah slides two fingers between my thighs. “Jesus, baby girl. You’re dripping.”

“Show them,” Eli instructs.

Micah’s gaze meets mine in the mirror, and I nod.

“Show everyone watching what you all do to me.”

Micah turns his wrist, spreading my slick over my swollen flesh before lifting his shining fingers toward the glass.

Eli appears beside him and catches Micah’s wrist. His mouth closes around the offered fingers, sucking them clean while his eyes stay locked on mine.

Every wet pull of his mouth goes out through the speakers.

“Good?” Micah asks him.

“Amazing.” Eli releases his fingers with a soft pop. “I think it’s time to get the vibrator.”

“Oh! Me! Me! I’ll get it!” Milo moves so quickly he almost trips over my dress.

Knox lifts me from the chaise and turns me around. My ass protests when it meets the velvet, the sting making me hiss, but he doesn’t leave me there. He sits, drags me over him, and settles my back against his chest so we’re both facing the mirror.

His mouth finds the place where the collar meets my neck.

“Watch,” he murmurs.

Holden unfastens Knox’s pants while I’m sitting on him.

The casual intimacy of it catches me somewhere tender. Holden’s hand disappears between my legs and wraps around Knox, guiding him through

my slick until the broad head presses against me.

Knox grips my hips.

“Ready, Fury?”

“Yes.”

He lowers me slowly.

The stretch burns after everything they’ve done, my body opening inch by inch until I’m seated completely over him. His groan vibrates through my back, and my reflection shivers inside the dark glass.

I look obscene.

Silver mask. Black collar. Breasts bare. Ass bright red and welted while Knox’s huge hands hold my thighs open and his cock disappears inside me.

The gallery counter hits twenty-five.

“Full house,” Milo announces as he returns with a small black vibrator. “We have officially become tonight’s premium entertainment.”

Milo drops to his knees beside the chaise, the vibrator already buzzing to life in his hand. “Permission to assist with penetration-adjacent activities?”

“Granted,” I breathe, my voice hoarse from screaming.

He presses the toy against my clit, and my hips buck involuntarily, Knox’s grip tightening to keep me still. The sensation is immediate and overwhelming—Knox filling me from behind, the vibrator humming against my most sensitive nerves, and twenty-five pairs of eyes watching every reaction.

“Too much?” Knox asks against my ear.

“Never.”

Milo circles the vibrator in slow, teasing patterns while Knox moves beneath me, lifting his hips in shallow thrusts that rock me forward. The friction is perfect, the fullness almost too much after the spanking, but I want it—I want all of it, every sensation they’ve promised.

Holden steps closer, his mask catching the low light. “Eyes on the mirror, Sage.”

I obey, watching myself get taken while strangers watch in turn. My mask hides my identity but nothing else—my spread thighs, my welted ass, my breasts bouncing with every movement. Knox’s hands bracket my hips, dark against my pale skin, and I can see the moment his control slips, his jaw going slack behind his mask.

Eli moves into view, standing beside Holden. He doesn’t touch me yet—just watches, tracking every tremor that runs through my body. The leash still hangs from my collar, swinging between my breasts with each motion, a reminder of who holds the other end even now.

Micah appears on my other side, and suddenly I’m surrounded by them, closing in on me the same way we closed on Waldock tonight. Except I picked the room. He runs his thumb across my lips, and I take it into my mouth, sucking hard as Knox drives up into me.

“Christ,” Milo mutters, adjusting the vibrator’s angle until I moan around Micah’s finger. “She’s going to break the sound system.”

“Let her,” Eli says.

I feel the orgasm building, low and mean, gathering with every thrust, every pulse of vibration. My hands find Knox’s thighs behind me, nails digging in as I brace myself, so close.

“Don’t come yet,” Eli orders.

I whimper, shaking my head, but I don’t stop—I can’t stop, not with Knox filling me and Milo’s vibrator and all those eyes.

“Please,” I gasp, releasing Micah’s thumb.

“Please what?”

“Please let me—I need—”

He reaches down and takes the vibrator from Milo, pressing it harder against me, right where I’m most desperate. “Now,” he says. “Give them everything.”

I break.

The orgasm crashes through me, arching my back against Knox’s chest while my scream broadcasts through the club. I clench around him, and his groan vibrates through me when he comes, his grip holding me together while I fly apart.

When I finally still, trembling and sweat-slicked, Eli leans down and unclips the leash from my collar.

“Good girl,” he murmurs, and I shiver at the praise, at the release of that small restraint.

My legs are still shaking when Knox lifts me from his lap, my body humming with aftershocks. He sets me on my feet carefully, one massive hand steadying my hip while I find my balance. The gallery counter holds—I can feel them watching, feel their attention pressing on my skin like hands.

“Again,” I say, before anyone can ask if I’m done.

Eli’s eyes sharpen behind his mask. “You’re greedy tonight.”

“I’m always greedy with you.”

Milo laughs, low and delighted. “That’s my favorite thing about you, kitten. Absolutely no chill.”

Holden moves closer, his blue eyes too bright even through the mask. “What do you want?”

“Everything you promised.” I look at each of them in turn. “I want the rest of you. At once.”

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# THIRTY-EIGHT
# SAGE



Nobody moves. Then Knox laughs, low and filthy, the way he only laughs when he's about to watch the rest of them wreck me.

"You sure?" Holden asks, his voice gravel.

"I've been sure since the corridor."

Knox moves to the edge of the platform as they shift around me. Eli takes my shoulders and turns me toward the mirror, my back to him, then he bends me forward until my palms find the velvet of the chaise. My ass burns against the air, the welts sensitive and hot.

"Hold her," Eli says.

Holden moves in front of me, his thighs bracketing my arms where they rest on the chaise. He cups my jaw, tilting my face up until I'm looking at his eyes through the mask, at the reflection of the others gathering behind me.

"Open," he murmurs.

I part my lips and he slides his thumb inside, pressing down on my tongue. I suck automatically, hollow my cheeks, and he groans.

Behind me, hands find my hips. Multiple hands. I feel the difference in their touches—Micah's soothing warmth spreading over my welted skin, Eli's precise grip positioning me exactly where he wants me, Milo's fingers testing me where I'm still slick from Knox.

"Wider," Eli orders.

I spread my legs, heels digging into the floor, and feel myself opened from behind. Fingers slide through my slick, spreading it, preparing me.

The cool press of lube follows, making me gasp around Holden's thumb.

"Easy," Micah murmurs against my ear. "We've got you."

The hands on me still. Holden withdraws his thumb from my mouth and shifts to lift me into his arms the moment Eli says, "Move."

He kisses me, deep and slow. And all I hear is a rustle of fabric and the soft thud of knees hitting velvet.

"We're gonna fill you up, wildcat," Holden murmurs, setting me on my feet and turning me toward the chaise. Eli has stretched himself out, his cock thick and heavy against his stomach. Micah is already positioning himself at the opposite end, mirroring him—legs spread, back against the raised arm, his own erection straining upward. They've arranged themselves so their heads are at either end, a matched set, waiting.

"Come here, baby girl," Micah murmurs, holding his hand out to me.

I climb onto the chaise between them, knees settling on either side of Eli's hips, and I look down to see their cocks lined up together, thick and flushed, the heads almost touching where Micah angles his hips to align them.

"Jesus," I breathe.

"Not quite," Milo says from somewhere behind me, and I hear the grin in his voice. "Just two guys who really like sharing."

Holden's hands return to my hips from behind, steadying me as I lower myself. I feel Milo's fingers first, slick with more lube, spreading me open, testing my readiness. Then the broad pressure of both of them—Eli's length beneath me, Micah's above, pressed together so tightly they feel like one impossible thickness.

"Slow," Holden commands, his fingers digging into my hip bones. "We've got you."

I sink onto them inch by inch, the stretch burning through every nerve ending they woke with their palms. It's too much and exactly enough, the fullness making my vision spark at the edges. I can feel the difference between them—Eli's curve, Micah's angle, the way each presses against a different place while they share the same impossible space inside me.

"Fuck," Eli grits out, his head falling back against the velvet.

"Yeah," Micah groans, his hand finding my foot. "That's—fuck, baby girl, you feel incredible."

I'm babbling, I think—words that aren't words—and every one of them is going out to the gallery. Holden and Milo keep their hands on me,

holding my weight, guiding my movements when my legs shake too hard to manage alone.

“Eyes up,” Knox growls from my left, and I find him in the mirror, his massive form blocking part of the view, his own hand wrapped around himself as he watches.

I meet his gaze and roll my hips, feeling both of them shift inside me, Eli groaning, Micah cursing.

“Tell us what you need, Fury.”

“More,” I gasp. “I need more. I’m not full yet.”

“Then allow me to help with that.” Milo moves into position over Micah, his hands sliding from my hips to my ass, spreading me open as his slick fingers ready me.

“God, kitten,” he murmurs, pressing a kiss against my shoulder. “You’re so fucking ready for me.”

I feel the press of him against my ass—hot, insistent—and then he’s pushing in, slow and relentless, stretching me further than I thought possible. The burn is exquisite, my body fighting him even as it yields, and I cry out, the sound tearing from my throat as all three of them find their rhythm inside me.

Milo’s hands grip my hips from behind, holding me steady as he thrusts deep, his laughter gone, nothing left but the ragged edge of his control. “God, you’re tight,” he gasps. “So fucking perfect.”

I can’t answer. Eli and Micah find a counter-rhythm beneath me, sliding against each other inside me while Milo drives deeper from behind. The friction, the fullness, and the obscene intimacy of holding all three of them strips thought from my head.

Holden steps over Eli, bracketing the chaise with his legs as he strokes himself in front of my mouth. “Open for me, wildcat.”

I lean forward, Milo helping me balance as Holden guides himself past my lips. The taste of him—salt and want and that particular Holden-clean scent—fills my mouth as he pushes in. I hollow my cheeks, sucking him deep, and he groans above me, one hand fisting in my hair while the other steadies himself against the wall.

“Eyes on me,” he commands.

I look up at him, and he thrusts deeper, feeling the vibration of my moan around him as Milo finds a spot inside me that makes my vision spark. I’m

full everywhere—mouth and cunt and ass, surrounded by them, claimed by them, nothing left of me but the places they're touching.

The gallery goes quiet in my head. Not disappearing—I know the difference now. This is being so here there's no room left over for anything else. There's only Holden sliding between my lips, Eli and Micah filling me below, Milo driving into me from behind and Knox at the edge of it all, his gaze heavy on my skin and his fist moving in steady strokes as he watches the others take me.

"That's it," Holden murmurs, his hips snapping forward. "Show us what you can handle."

I want to tell him I'll take everything, always everything, but my mouth is full and my body is singing and the words come out as whimpers, vibrations that make him curse and grip my hair tighter.

"She's close," Micah gasps, his hand finding my breast, rolling my nipple between his fingers. "I can feel her—"

"Not yet," Eli grits out, his hips jerking up to meet mine. "Wait for us. All of us together."

Holden's thrusts speed up, becoming something raw and desperate. I feel it in the tension of his thighs, the way his hand shakes where it holds my head. He's close too, all of them wound tight, waiting for the signal.

"Now," Knox growls from beside us, and that one word does what none of their hands could.

I come apart.

The orgasm tears through me, my body seizing around all of them at once. I feel Eli and Micah pulse inside me, their releases following mine in quick succession, their groans mixing with my own shattered cries. Milo thrusts deep one final time and stills, his forehead dropping to my back as he spills into me, his breath hot and ragged against my skin. Holden's hips stutter against my mouth, and he comes with a curse, thick and sudden, his hand tightening in my hair as I swallow around him.

Knox's growl cuts through the haze. He moves into place above me, and I tilt my head back to watch him finish, his jaw slack and his eyes burning into mine. He comes across my chest in hot stripes, marking me, claiming his place in this wreckage we've made together.

We collapse in a tangle of limbs and harsh breathing. Holden eases himself free first, his hand gentle as he brushes hair from my face. Milo withdraws slowly, murmuring praise against my shoulder. Eli and Micah

shift beneath me, helping me lift myself from where I'm still impaled on both of them, my body protesting the loss with a shiver that runs from scalp to toes.

"Easy," Micah breathes, his hands steadying me as I settle between them, boneless and trembling.

I lie there, staring up at the ceiling, counting my heartbeats as they slow. The gallery counter still glows, but I can't focus on the number.

I reach toward Knox.

"Close it."

He hits the controls immediately. The audio dies, the indicators go dark, and the glass clouds over, cutting a room full of strangers out because I decided their access was finished.

"How many people watched to the end?" I ask.

"Twenty-five in the gallery," Milo says. "The audio went club-wide, so potentially everyone. Also, we exceeded the room's previous occupancy record by three people and at least two confirmed orgasms."

"There's an orgasm counter?" Micah asks.

"There could be."

"No," Eli says.

"You don't even know what I was going to propose."

"No."

Micah's hands are already moving over the welts, checking each one. He doesn't ask if I'm okay. He counts them, and when he finishes, he kisses the last one.

I curl into Knox's side and drink the water Micah holds to my lips while the last of the killing energy drains out of me.

Holden checks his watch. "Almost six hours. The cover holds."

A little after three, we walk out through the public entrance exactly the way we arrived. My dress is wrinkled, my hair is beyond repair, and every step reminds me of the five separate sets of handprints hidden beneath the fabric.

Anyone watching sees six people leaving a sex club after a very long night.

The only question is whether they saw us leave in between.

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# THIRTY-NINE
# SAGE



The bell over the diner door chimes late Friday morning, and in walks Milo wearing sunglasses the size of dessert plates and a shirt covered in tiny cartoon sharks.

He slides onto the stool at the counter like he's docking a yacht, looking offensively awake for someone who kept half the club up until three yesterday morning.

The year turned eleven hours ago. We spent it on the living room floor with takeout containers and a countdown nobody actually watched, and I was asleep in a pile of men before the confetti finished falling on the TV. Best New Year's of my life. I missed most of it.

"Good morning, my beloved working-class princess," he says, pushing the sunglasses down his nose. "I'm here for caffeine, affection, and covert intelligence gathering."

The heart-shaped charm hanging from my narrow leather collar shifts against my throat as I grab the coffee pot. It looks a little over the top with my apron, but the new tracker lives inside it, and I agreed to wear it whenever I leave the house.

"Milo, what is this outfit? You look like a children's birthday party got into witness protection."

He accepts the coffee with both hands and a smile. "Fashion is subjective. Also, that was hurtful, and I will be discussing it with my support group."

"Your support group is Micah."

“My support group is a rotating panel of emotionally constipated men and one murder kitten with authority issues.”

I lean against the counter. “What’s the intelligence gathering?”

He lowers his voice theatrically. “Your birthday.”

I stop mid-pour. “I’m not even sure I want to celebrate this year.”

“Oh no, kitten. We’ve let all the commercial holidays slip past us. But this one is yours. You *deserve* to be celebrated.”

The coffee pot feels suddenly heavy in my hand. I set it down, watching the dark liquid settle. “I don’t need a party.”

He takes the sunglasses off. It’s the first time all morning I’ve seen his actual eyes.

“You almost didn’t get this one, kitten.” No voice, no bit, no bright delivery. “I’m not letting it go past unmarked.”

Then he puts them back on, and the grin comes with them.

“You need,” Milo says, “exactly what you need. Which is why I’m conducting preliminary reconnaissance rather than staging an intervention with balloons and a stripper.”

I arch an eyebrow. “You were going to hire a stripper?”

“No,” he says simply. “But Odin did offer you the use of a private playroom for the night, so the stripping part is a given—if you choose to use it, of course.”

I think of the voyeur room, the gallery counter, the way they marked me until I couldn’t even think. My fingers tease the edge of the collar as heat rolls beneath my skin, and I have to remind myself that Rosa is in the back and there are customers three booths down.

“Okay. Maybe we can celebrate at the club. Birthday sex sounds like a lot of fun.”

“Fun?” Milo repeats. “Come on, kitten. You can muster up a little more enthusiasm than ‘fun.’ How about ‘orgasmic’? ‘Transcendent’? ‘So-good-you’ll-be-walking-funny-for-the-next-week’?”

I laugh. “All of the above.”

“Okay. Cool. But I’m also required to ask—cake or no cake?”

“Cake,” I say automatically. “Obviously cake.”

“Flavor?”

“Strawberry. Layered. With cream in the middle.”

“Now we’re getting somewhere.” He pulls out his phone and starts typing like he’s cataloging state secrets. “Strawberries. Cream. Potential for

dairy-based foreplay.” He looks up. “And what about presents? Do we go practical, sentimental, or unhinged?”

I wipe down a stretch of counter that doesn’t need it. “You don’t have to get me anything.”

He narrows his eyes at me over the rim of his mug. “Incorrect. You deserve at least one outrageously thoughtful thing.”

“Milo.”

“No, let me workshop. I have categories.” He straightens like he’s about to present quarterly earnings to a boardroom. “Category one: practical-but-hot. Very dangerous category. Leather jacket. Boots. A watch with one of those faces that implies you know how to disassemble a man emotionally and physically.”

“I do know how to disassemble a man physically,” I point out.

“Exactly. Why not accessorize the skill set?” He ticks a finger in the air. “Category two: sentimental. A locket, perhaps, but instead of baby pictures it contains tiny laminated mug shots of people you’ve killed.”

I stare at him.

He sips his coffee. “Too niche?”

“Too serial killer Etsy.”

“Noted. Category three: experiential. I rent out an aquarium after hours, we have a private dinner surrounded by morally neutral fish, and then one of us proposes.”

I nearly choke on my own spit. “One of us?”

He shrugs. “I’m flexible on who. It could be you. It could be me. It could be all six of us in a staggered sequence. We workshop vows. Holden hates every second. Micah cries attractively. Knox says four words and they’re devastating. Eli somehow makes it filthy, and we all come on each other.”

I point a pen at him. “Can we invite Frank?”

“*Me*?” Frank’s coffee cup clatters against the counter, and for a second I think he’s actually choking—face red, hand pressed to his chest, the whole production. He was so focused on his crossword puzzle, I’d forgotten he was within earshot.

“Oh no!” I frantically wave my hands in the air, trying to erase the moment completely.

“Fine,” he wheezes, holding up a hand so I don’t come closer. “I’m fine. Just—” He clears his throat with emphasis. “—didn’t expect to be looped

into birthday orgy logistics this early in the morning."

Milo spins on his stool, sunglasses still perched on his nose, looking delighted by the interruption. "Frank! My man. Did you think we meant you?"

Frank's color deepens from burgundy to something approaching plum. "I wasn't—I didn't—" He glances at me with the desperate look of someone who just accidentally wandered into the wrong theater and can't find the exit.

"No, no, no." Milo holds up both hands, somehow making the gesture look reassuring and theatrical at once. "We were referring to our goldfish. Also named Frank. Remarkably similar coloring, actually—that same sort of beleaguered orange."

Frank's expression shifts through several distinct stages: relief, confusion, and wounded pride.

"Goldfish," he repeats.

"Goldfish," Milo confirms. "Named after you, obviously. In tribute."

Frank's brow knits in the middle. "You named a goldfish after me?"

Milo beams. "You're very memorable, Frank."

Frank looks at me. I shrug, because it's true. He's an institution in Hunter Harbor.

"A goldfish," Frank says slowly, gathering his crossword and his dignity at the same time. "That's who you're inviting to your birthday orgy?" He lets out a breath. "You know what? I didn't even want an invite." He slides off his stool and drops a twenty on the counter that more than covers his coffee and melt. "I don't have enough Viagra for everything you've got going on."

Milo's sunglasses slip down his nose entirely.

Frank doesn't even wait for change, just shuffles out the door, the bell chiming a mournful goodbye to his composure.

"I should introduce you to my mom!" Milo calls after him, pushing his sunglasses back into place. "She'd like you. How do you feel about turtlenecks?"

Frank flips Milo the bird through the window.

I groan and press my forehead to the cool counter. "Milo. You are a menace."

He spins back to face me, beaming. "A necessary one. Somebody has to provide color commentary on the crushing mundanity of everyday life.

Otherwise, we just exist in beige." He sips his coffee. "Now, back to the birthday reconnaissance. We were on presents." He glances at the list on his phone. "Category four: symbolic weaponry. Something custom. Something engraved. A blade that says happy birthday in the language of consequences."

"You are the most exhausting person I know."

He takes a small bow from the stool. "Thank you. Category five: deeply impractical but spiritually correct. I buy you a horse."

"A horse?"

"Yes. Black. Mean. Named Tax Evasion."

I laugh before I can stop myself, and his whole face lights up as if he's won something. Then I shake my head so he doesn't get carried away—encouraging Milo is like feeding a Mogwai after midnight. "I'm serious, Milo. No horses. No engraved murder relics. No fish-proposal nightmare."

Milo puts a hand over his heart. "You wound me."

"I want something easy." I hook my thumbs into the edge of the counter and lean in. "I want one night at the club when we aren't using it as an alibi for disappearing through a basement to kill someone. Odin already offered us a private room, so take me there. Let me dance and stare at all of you in suits like the creepy little menace I am, then fuck me until we're all sweaty and sticky and can barely move. And when we get home, cake."

He blinks once.

Then his mouth slowly curves. "That's . . . aggressively attainable."

"I'm a simple woman."

"No, you're not. But this is useful." He taps the counter like he's locking it into a spreadsheet. "Night out. Club. Visual feast. No murder intermission. Cake. Done."

"And no making it weird."

He gasps. "You ask the impossible. Weird is the garnish on my personality."

"Milo."

He lifts both hands. "Fine. Minimally weird. Tasteful weird. Elegant weird with a bakery box."

I narrow my eyes. "You're still going shopping, aren't you?"

"Obviously." He drains the rest of his coffee and slides off the stool. "A plan this sophisticated requires procurement." Then he glances down at his

shark shirt. “Also, I have to change before someone mistakes me for an aquarium gift shop employee.”

“Too late.”

He points at me. “Cruel. Beautiful. Exploitative of my devotion.” He leans over the counter and steals a quick kiss, tasting like coffee and sugar packets. “I’ll see you at home.”

The second he’s gone, Rosa pokes her head through the pass window and says, “If you’re done accidentally inviting the regulars to your orgies, table six wants ranch.”

“Rosa!” I gasp.

Danny snorts from the grill. Rosa cackles to herself. The world keeps being stupidly, beautifully my version of normal, so I grab the ranch and keep moving.

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# FORTY
# SAGE



My shift swallows me whole after Milo leaves.

Coffee refills. Toast. Checks. One toddler throws a pancake that sticks to the window. A man in a windbreaker asks if the pea and ham soup is vegan. I survive. I smile. I work.

By the tail end of lunch rush, the diner has that wrung-out feeling it gets after the storm passes. Half the booths are empty. The kitchen noise drops from a roar to a clatter. My apron is damp at the waist from dishwater, and my feet are filing formal complaints with upper management because I still haven't broken my new boots in.

I stack the last of the plates from a four-top onto a gray bus tray—sticky syrup ramekin, coffee cups, a glass with lipstick on the rim, silverware piled like tiny weapons—and straighten.

That's when I see him.

Across the street. On the opposite sidewalk. Still as a photograph.

Floppy brown hair. Wire-rim glasses. Cardigan. Watching me through the front windows with that awful, patient focus I know too well.

Jamie.

Stephen.

Whatever his name is, my body doesn't care about semantics. Every muscle in me seizes so hard it's like getting punched in the spine.

"No—"

I jerk backward too fast, pivoting away from the window, and slam straight into someone coming up behind me. The impact is solid—chest to

shoulder—and then gravity takes over with all the subtlety of a car crash.

The bus tray flies out of my grip and crashes down.

Ceramic explodes against the tile.

Coffee splashes.

Glass shatters.

Silverware skitters in every direction with a metallic rainstorm sound that makes half the diner turn and stare.

“Jesus—sorry,” a man’s voice says.

My breath is trapped somewhere in my throat. I stagger back, staring past him—past the shoulder I just hit, past the booths, past the door, the window, the street.

The sidewalk across from the diner is empty.

No cardigan. No floppy brown hair. No patient, awful face.

Just sunlight, a parking meter, and some woman in yoga pants dragging a kid by the hand past the newsstand.

I blink hard.

Nothing.

Jesus Christ.

“Hey—hey, it’s okay.”

My pulse keeps trying to outrun my body.

I imagined it.

I had to have imagined it.

The customer I collided with is already crouching, reaching for broken ceramic before I can stop him. Mid-thirties maybe, office-casual, kind face, wedding ring. Totally normal. Aggressively harmless. He glances up at me and frowns. “You okay?”

“Yeah.” The word comes out thin. “Sorry. I just—thought I saw someone.”

He glances up at the window, then back at me, polite enough not to ask questions. “You should probably get that looked at.”

I barely hear him through the static. “What?”

“You’re cut.”

I look down.

There’s blood running into my sock.

A clean, ugly slice just above my boot.

It’s bleeding freely, but the edges hold together when I stop moving. Even though I’m staring at it, I still don’t feel anything. My whole body is

running on adrenaline and ghost sightings.

“Let me get you a towel,” the man says.

“I’m fine.”

“No, you’re really not.”

Danny appears from the kitchen. “The hell happened out here?”

“I dropped the tray. I’m fine. It’s fine.”

It’s not fine. Blood is running into my boot, and the shaking has started—hands, arms, then shoulders as my body processes the last ninety seconds all at once.

“Go,” Danny says. “Get cleaned up out back. I’ve got this.”

I make it to the back room before anyone sees me cry. The door closes behind me and I slide down the wall and sit on the floor between a mop bucket and a case of napkins and I pull out my phone and call Holden.

First the flowers nobody sent. Now a face across the street that might not be there.

*Or might be.*

It rings once.

“Wildcat?”

“Can you come get me?” My voice is steady. My hands are not. “I’m at the diner. I cut my leg. I’m okay but I need—I just need you to come.”

“Isn’t Eli on watch?”

“He’s outside. But I need you, Holden. Please.”

He pauses. “I’m leaving now. Five minutes.” I hear the rustle of movement and an engine start—Holden, already in the car, already on his way. “Stay on the line.”

“Okay.”

“Are you safe?”

“Yeah. I’m in the back room. It’s just a cut.”

“Sage. Are you safe?”

He’s not asking about the cut.

“I thought I saw him,” I say. “Across the street. Through the window.”

Silence. One beat. Two.

“Was it him?”

“I don’t know. I looked again and nobody was there.” I grab a wad of napkins and press them against the cut to stop the bleeding. The pain finally registers—sharp, hot, grounding. “It’s probably nothing. My brain playing tricks so I don’t get comfortable.”

“I’m two minutes out.”

“Holden, it’s probably—”

“I’m two minutes out, wildcat.”

“Is Eli freaking out?”

“He’s checking the street. He didn’t see anyone, and he knows I’m coming. Don’t move.”

I stay still, my back against the wall, the napkins turning redder as I press them to the gash. The back room feels smaller now, the mop bucket’s chemical stink clawing at my nose, but it’s better than out front where everyone would see me unraveling. Two minutes feels like forever. But then I hear Danny’s voice murmuring something low, and heavy footsteps heading my way.

The door swings open, and there’s Holden, filling the frame, his ice-blue eyes scanning me head to toe before locking on the blood.

“Up,” he says, voice clipped but gentle, already bending to slide an arm under my knees and another around my back. He lifts me like I weigh nothing, carrying me out through the diner without a word to anyone—Rosa just nods from the counter, knowing by now not to question my men.

Through the front glass I see Eli across the street, standing in the exact spot where the cardigan was. He doesn’t come over. He lifts two fingers off the roof of the car and turns back to the street, and I keep my eyes on him, and on the nothing standing beside him, until the door swings shut behind us.

We’re home in under ten minutes, the car ride a blur of his hand on my thigh, steady and warm, anchoring me while I stare out the window at empty sidewalks. He doesn’t push for details, just gets me inside, straight to the kitchen, and hoists me onto the counter with my legs dangling over the edge.

“Stay,” he commands, retrieving the first-aid kit from the cabinet.

“Leg out.” His attention stays on the wound as I lift my leg. He peels away the blood-soaked napkins and uses a piece of gauze to wipe aside enough blood to inspect the gash. “I don’t think you’ll need stitches.”

I watch his careful hands, his focus absolute, but I can’t ignore the change in his breathing.

Heat pools low in my belly. “What is it about blood?”

His gaze drops to the red soaking into the gauze. “It’s honest. Warm, messy, and alive. There’s no pretending once blood enters the room.”

“And how far does it go?”

His eyes return to mine. “That depends on why you’re bleeding. Blood you choose to give me? As far as you’ll let me. Blood that means I might lose you?” His jaw tightens. “That isn’t a kink.”

“What about the blood we spill?”

“Are you the one gutting the guy in this scenario?”

I nod.

He takes my hand and guides it to the front of his pants, pressing my palm against the hard ridge straining there. Heat floods through me, chasing away some of the earlier chill.

“That’s a kink?”

“That’s fucking heaven.”

“Why aren’t you giving in to it right now?” I whisper, curling my fingers around him through the fabric. He groans.

“Because you had a scare,” he says, voice rough. “I’m trying to take care of you.”

“Letting me give you what you need is taking care of me,” I counter, my hand working him up and down.

“Wildcat,” he warns.

I don’t stop.

“Holden.”

With a growl, he lifts my leg, his mouth descending to the cut, tongue tracing the length of it slow and deliberate, moaning low in his throat as the metallic tang hits him. I gasp, the sting mixing with a rush of desire that makes my pussy clench. Then he’s scooping me up, carrying me upstairs two steps at a time, kicking the main bedroom’s door shut behind us.

My uniform hits the floor, his shirt gets yanked off, and neither of us makes it as far as our shoes before he shoves my panties aside and drives into me, his pants still around his ankles. His hand slides over my injured leg, streaking his palm with blood, and when he drags it back down, his forearm knocks against the knife inside my boot.

“Get the knife.”

Holden stills inside me, his eyes following mine to the leather strap around my ankle. He unfastens it, pulls the folded blade free, and flicks it open between us.

“Cut me,” I whisper.

He lowers the tip of the blade to my chest, dragging it between my breasts and along my belly. “Where?”

“Here,” I whisper, my voice rough, and I guide his hand, the cool metal of the blade, to the soft skin of my inner thigh, right above my knee. “Just a little. Enough to leave a mark.”

His eyes meet mine, and I know he understands.

Holden presses the tip of the blade to my skin. His breath catches as he draws it slowly, opening a thin red line. The sting makes me gasp and clench around his cock, and his gaze locks on the blood welling against my skin.

“Fuck, wildcat,” he groans, his hips pushing deeper into me, a frantic, desperate rhythm. He pulls the knife away, folds it shut, and tosses it toward the foot of the bed, then his mouth is on the cut, hot and wet, licking away the blood, his tongue stroking the delicate wound. The sting mixes with a rush of desire so potent it steals my breath. My fingers tangle in his hair, tugging, demanding more.

He sucks at the wound as he fucks, his low moan vibrating against my thigh, and I feel myself shatter around him, the first wave of orgasm tearing through me, sharp and sudden. He takes my mouth then, hungry and demanding, tasting the blood on his tongue, on mine, the intimate, animal taste of it driving us both to the edge.

He pulls back, lips still brushing. “Mine,” he growls.

“Yours.”

He sits back, hooking my leg over his shoulder and letting the blood drip down his chest. I see the angry red line on my inner thigh, the deeper cut on my shin, and the wet, shining smear of blood on his chest. It’s a map of my panic, a raw, undeniable record of what I felt and what I chose to do with it.

“Still here?” he asks, brushing his mouth against my shin.

I nod. My body feels wrung out, heavy and sweet, but the sharp edge of the scare is still there, just beneath the surface. “Keep fucking me.”

He leans forward with my leg over his shoulder and drives into me hard enough to slam the headboard against the wall. I claw at his back, using the weight of him to hold me inside my body whenever my mind reaches for the face across the street.

“Eyes on me,” he commands, and I obey, locking onto the ice-blue of his gaze. “You’re here. You’re safe. I’ve got you.”

I come again, harder this time, my cry tearing out raw and broken, and he follows, spilling inside me with a groan that sounds almost like pain. We collapse together, his weight pressing me into the mattress, his heart thundering against my chest where our skin meets.

For long minutes, neither of us moves. His hand finds my hair, fingers threading through the tangled strands, and I feel him breathe—long, deliberate inhales that match the rhythm he's trying to settle me into.

"Tell me again," I whisper against his shoulder.

"What?"

"That I'm safe."

He lifts his head, eyes finding mine as his thumb traces my jaw. "You're safe with me. Whatever was across that street—real or not—we handle it together. You don't face him alone again."

The fear doesn't disappear. It just gets smaller than he is.

"Stay with me."

"Always."

He rolls off me carefully, avoiding my wounded leg, and gathers me against his chest. The blood has dried tacky on my thigh and his chest, smeared between us like evidence. Neither of us moves to clean it yet. For a moment, I don't want us to.

"Don't move," he says finally, and I almost laugh because this man says that to me more than anyone else in my life, and I almost never listen.

But I do this time.

He disappears into the bathroom for a warm washcloth, then retrieves the first-aid kit from downstairs. When he returns, he has that look on his face that means the detective has dragged the possessive animal back inside himself. He kneels on the bed and starts with my ankle, wiping away the mess so he can clean the cuts properly.

I watch his hands.

That's maybe the thing about Holden that gets me the most. Not the violence. Not the command. The care. The big, dangerous hands doing something precise and necessary because I need it.

"Enjoying the show?" he asks.

"You're hot when you're clinically repressed."

His mouth twitches, barely. "Hold still."

He cleans both cuts thoroughly, the antiseptic sting making me hiss through my teeth. He doesn't apologize. Just puts one hand on my knee,

firm and grounding, while he works. Then he smooths ointment over each cut and wraps them separately in fresh gauze, each bandage neat and secure without being too tight.

"There," he says, pressing the tape down and dropping onto the bed beside me. "You good?"

"Yeah."

The house is quiet. Eli is still checking the block, and the others haven't come home yet.

"It wasn't him," I murmur, more to convince myself than anything. "Just my head screwing with me."

Holden pulls me closer, his arm a band around my waist. "Milo will go through the footage anyway."

I burrow into his warmth, but one question refuses to settle.

If today was only a ghost, what happens when he's really standing there?

*I'm so tired of being almost killed.*

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# FORTY-ONE
# MILO



"Come on, you beautiful bastard. Show me something."

It's nearly midnight, and I've been staring at the diner footage long enough for the people on-screen to feel more familiar than the ones upstairs.

Months ago, I installed cameras in the diner to keep an eye on kitten and run ID checks on everyone who so much as sniffed in her direction. Fat lot of good that did.

*Ahem—Jamie.*

But at least they give me plenty of angles to work with while I try to figure out whether Stephen was outside the diner today or Sage's mind was playing tricks on her.

At this point, I'm kind of hoping she really did see him so we have a lead.

The diner feed buffers, sharpens, and gives me Sage in fluorescent misery.

Frame one: she's carrying a bus tray loaded with the detritus of lunchtime America.

Frame two: she freezes.

I lean in so close my nose nearly kisses the monitor.

"Enhance," I mutter, because I am legally required to say that at least once whenever doing surveillance.

The software obeys. But only because I'm pulling the original-resolution file while zooming in.

I scrub back three seconds. Play. Stop. Back. Play slower.

Sage straightens from table six with the tray balanced on one palm, turns toward the counter, and then—there. Her whole body locks. Full prey response. Like someone reached through the screen and yanked a wire in her spine.

"Okay," I whisper. "That's not nothing."

I drag up the exterior angle from camera three, the one aimed through the front windows and slightly left. The image quality is trash. Sun glare washes half the frame into holy ascension, and a guy in a windbreaker chooses that exact second to lumber through my line of sight like he's personally invested in ruining evidence.

I freeze it. Zoom. Stabilize.

A shape on the far sidewalk. Human-shaped. Brown-ish hair. Mid-height. Could be Stephen.

Could also be literally every third man in Hunter Harbor, because apparently the local male population was assembled from one factory template labeled unthreatening cardigan douche.

I tap keys and pull the traffic cam from the intersection thirty yards down. Then I start twenty minutes before the incident and run it at double speed, watching bodies blur past the frame. Dog walker. Yoga pants lady with a kid. Delivery van. Couple with an umbrella.

No floppy brown hair. No wire-rim glasses. No cardigan. No Jamie. No Stephen. No ghost.

I run it again at normal speed. Frame by frame through the sixty seconds before Sage dropped the tray. A van passes. A woman crosses from the laundromat. That's it.

No Stephen. *Damn*.

Except.

I lean closer to the screen. There's a two-second window—between the van passing and the frame clearing—where the camera's view of the far sidewalk is partially obscured. A van-shaped blind spot. If someone was standing there and moved the moment the van passed, they'd disappear from frame before the lens caught them.

*Would* they? Or am I building a ghost out of pixels because Sage is scared and Holden is worried and I'd rather find a threat than find nothing?

I run the van gap six more times. Nothing materializes. No shadow. No figure stepping out of frame. Just a van, a gap, and empty sidewalk.

I sit back. Rub my eyes.

“Not there,” I tell the screen. “You’re not there.”

The screen, like my servers, doesn’t respond. Rude. I need to build myself a Milo chatbot that thinks like me. But then I’d never get anything done because we’d banter all day. It’d be a triumph. But unproductive.

Being this amazing *and* interesting is a genuine curse.

I close the diner feeds and pull up my network’s traffic logs. Routine check. Kind of like a digital perimeter walk. Check the fence posts, gate latches, making sure nothing got in while—

The alert fires.

I sit up so fast my chair rolls backward.

It’s the same signature. Third time. Same bounce pattern. Same clean, surgical knock against the perimeter before it disappears.

The first hit my firewall at Mom’s twelve days before the sunflowers, and I sat on it for too long. The second hit the security controller at home while someone was placing those flowers on the kitchen counter. I flagged that one and sent it to Fenrir.

Now the same signature is back at my firewall at 11:47 p.m. on the night before kitten’s birthday.

Twelve days between the first and second probes. Six days between the second and third.

Whatever this is, it’s accelerating.

I don’t believe in coincidence. Not anymore.

“Hello, little node,” I whisper. “Show me your secrets.”

My fingers hit the keyboard before the thought finishes forming. The route unfolds exactly as it did before—Virginia, Amsterdam, São Paulo—then the final node disappears the second I push against it.

I switch to traffic analysis, looking for the shape of the connection rather than the address, but the rhythm vanishes with the node. Not unresponsive. Gone, like someone reached into the infrastructure and yanked the cable.

“Shit.”

This isn’t one of the automated scans that batters every exposed network. Those are noisy and indiscriminate. This is deliberate—someone choosing one point, using the same route, withdrawing before it counts as an intrusion.

Someone knocking on my door and running before I can answer.

“Don’t,” I tell myself. The shake starts up in my hands. “Don’t connect things that aren’t connected. Keep your cool. Holden isn’t here to kiss you out of it this time.”

I take a deep breath, steady myself. Then I start typing. Furiously. Logging everything—timestamps, packet captures, routing data, the dead node in São Paulo. Firewall records. Access logs. Intrusion alerts. Every crumb of it, into one encrypted file.

Then I open the secure channel.

Fenrir once locked me out of my own server and somehow made silence feel smug. My current theory is that they aren’t a person at all, but a vindictive algorithm Odin taught to hold grudges.

Tonight, that particular personality defect might be exactly what I need.

I attach the file and type:

ME:

Third ping. Same sig. Same bounce. São Paulo node went dark the second I traced it. Someone is probing my perimeter with military-grade patience and I need to know if I’m losing my mind or if this is what I think it is.

The cursor blinks. Thirty seconds. A minute. Long enough that I start wondering if the channel is compromised too, which is a fantastic rabbit hole to fall down at midnight in my mom’s basement.

A message comes through.

FENRIR:

You’re not losing your mind.

My stomach drops.

FENRIR:

I’ve been tracking a similar signature for the last nine days. Different target, same routing architecture. Virginia relay, Amsterdam hop, São Paulo dead-end. Whoever this is, they’re not just probing you. They’re probing the network.

ME:

Which network?

FENRIR:

Odin’s.

The basement gets colder. Or maybe that's me.

ME:

So the pings on my firewall aren't about me.

FENRIR:

They're mapping what you're connected to. Your server node, Holden's security controller—each exposed endpoint gives them another piece of the architecture. Map enough of those connections and they map upward. Odin. The club. The operations infrastructure. Every asset on the grid.

I stare at the words on the screen.

My servers. The ones I built my whole digital life around, connected to Odin's relay because he needed a local node and I was the best option. I'm not just a target. I'm the door.

ME:

How close are they to getting through?

FENRIR:

They haven't tried yet. None of the probes carried a payload, and none of them breached your systems. They're measuring the perimeter.

ME:

And they're getting closer together. Twelve days between the first and second. Six between the second and this one.

FENRIR:

If the interval keeps compressing, the next contact could come within a day.

ME:

And when they stop probing?

A pause. Longer this time.

FENRIR:

Then they've learned enough to try a real entry. And you won't see it coming the way you saw the pings.

ME:

Comforting. Thank you. I feel great about everything.

FENRIR:

I’m sending you a hardening protocol. Isolate the external relay now, then patch every connected device by morning. If the interval compresses again, we may need to take the node offline entirely.

ME:

Take me offline? That kills my access to—

FENRIR:

Everything. Yes. That’s the point. A door that can’t be opened can’t be walked through.

ME:

A door that can’t be opened also can’t be used by the people who need it.

Fenrir disconnects.

“You fucking—”

I grit my teeth and isolate the external relay, launch the first patch cycle, then send the family chat a summary before I can convince myself to wait for something more concrete.

ME:

Third probe. Same signature. Fenrir says whoever’s behind it is mapping Odin’s network through our connected systems. Don’t touch any security settings. I’m going to the club to brief Odin.

Holden’s reply appears almost immediately.

HOLDEN:

Keep your phone on. Message when you arrive.

ME:

Will do.

I sit back while the first patch cycle runs. The cooling fans hum. Green and amber lights blink across the racks.

My hands are steady. My brain is not.

I pat my jacket pocket without deciding to. Bottle’s there. Still rattling. Good boy, Milo, taking his medicine like a functional adult.

Behind the door in my head, something rolls over and goes back to sleep. I’d like it on record that I’m not curious. I have never been less

curious about anything in my life.

I want to go home and find Holden or kitten. I'd even take Knox pounding the panic out of me in the gym until my brain shuts up.

With his fists, not his cock!

*We both know you were thinking it.*

But this is bigger than anything they can quiet, and Odin needs to know someone is mapping his network before that someone decides to walk through it.

The moment the first patch cycle finishes cleanly, I grab my laptop and keys and drive to Unholy Desires.

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# FORTY-TWO
# MICAH



I clock Milo the second he pushes through the front doors.

It's not hard. The late-night crowd at Unholy Desires is a certain kind of animal, alive and hungry, and Milo doesn't fit into it right now.

He usually fits everywhere.

Normally, he's a chameleon, a shape-shifter, the kind of person who can slide into any room and have three conversations running before anyone realizes he wasn't invited. But tonight his head is up and his eyes are sweeping the room, searching. The naked, writhing bodies scattered around him might as well not exist.

"Cover for me," I say to the other bartender over my shoulder, not bothering to wait for the response before I move.

The lounge is all velvet darkness and amber light, bodies draped over furniture and each other, the low pulse of bass under everything. Usually Milo would make some comment about the acoustics of moaning or critique someone's harness construction on his way in.

Tonight he barrels through the room like he can't even see the people in front of him, colliding with one body after another.

"Sorry."

"My bad."

"Whoops-a-daisy!"

"Milo," I call when I get close to him.

He turns, but his eyes don't see me. They see past me.

*Odin*.

Milo makes a beeline for the booth where Odin is sitting with his companions.

I weave after him, losing him when a group of women in matching dresses tries to stop me. By the time I get free, Milo is murmuring into Odin's ear. Odin excuses himself, gestures for Milo to follow, and heads for the corridor. I pick up the pace, but the meeting-room door closes before I reach it.

Shit.

I consider walking up and knocking, but Odin's personal security takes up position outside the door, meaning *no visitors allowed*.

So I wait.

I lean against the wall and try to look as inconspicuous as possible. A woman in heels and a dress that's doing a lot of structural engineering passes by and gives me a look that starts at my shoes and finishes somewhere around my jaw.

"Buy you a drink?" she asks.

I tap my mask. "I'm the bartender."

"Even better. You can make it yourself."

"Appreciate the offer. I'm waiting for someone."

She moves on. Another woman pauses. Then a man. Then a couple who want to know if I'd like to watch them in a private room. I say no three times, smile four times, and keep my eyes on the door.

Seven minutes. Eight.

The door opens. Milo comes out. Eyes too bright, jaw too tight, hands moving at his sides like they're looking for something to do.

"Milo."

He startles. "Jesus, Micah. You can't just lurk in corridors."

"I can lurk in all spaces," I say. "I'm talented that way."

"You sure are." Then he stops. Looks at me and recalibrates. "How long have you been standing there?"

"Long enough to turn down several propositions and redirect a lost couple to the bathroom."

"It's because you're hot. Curls get the girls, am I right?"

I laugh. "Something like that. Wanna tell me what was going on in there?"

"Going on in where?" He tries to give me a look of innocence, but I'm not having it.

“I saw you come in, Milo. You looked like someone ran over your laptop.”

“Everything is fine.” His voice is too high-pitched, and the music is making it hard for me to sift through his Milo-ness right now.

“In here.” I find an unoccupied room and push him inside. The door closes behind us, muffling the club, and I flip the lock. The indicator changes to occupied. “Start talking.”

Milo looks around the room. Dim lighting. Leather seating. A rack of implements on the wall that I’m choosing not to inventory.

“Micah,” he says, “I don’t think Eli would be okay with this.”

“I didn’t bring you in here for—”

“I’m not sure how Holden would feel, either. I mean, Sage would be fine. She’s a really good sharer. Or maybe she’s a good taker. Of all of us. At the same time. It’s honestly hard to categorize her generosity because—”

“Milo.”

“—it spans multiple taxonomies—”

“I brought you in here to talk.”

He blinks. Looks around the room again. His eyes land on the wall rack.

“With whips? Oh, this looks comfy.” He moves to the bench, testing the cushion with both hands. “Actually, objectively? This is nicer than I expected. If I ever get kidnapped, I want it to be by rich perverts.”

I fold my arms. “Milo.”

He blows out a breath and drops the act.

That’s how I know this is bad.

He sits. Leans forward. Rubs both hands over his face. When he looks up again, the humor’s still there, but it’s sobered.

“I already saw the family message,” I say.

“Look at me, communicating before everything catches fire. Personal growth is exhausting.”

“What did Odin say?”

“Fenrir is auditing every node tied into his network. Odin is warning the other teams. My external relay stays isolated until Fenrir clears it, and if another probe lands, they take my node fully offline.”

His delivery is breezy. His knee is bouncing hard enough to shake the bench.

“And the diner footage?”

“A two-second blind spot and enough pixels to build a cardigan-shaped conspiracy theory. It could’ve been Stephen. It could’ve been some random asshole who shops at the same boring-man store. I can’t prove either.”

“So you didn’t find him.”

“No. But I didn’t prove he wasn’t there either.” He rubs the back of his neck. “I know the probe might not be him. I know that. But I feel him, you know? Like he’s this itch under my skin I can’t get to.”

I nod. I know the itch.

“Odin says he’s in the wind, but I don’t think he’s in the wind, Micah. I think he is the wind.”

The bass thumps. Someone laughs in the hallway. The club moves around us, loud and oblivious.

“That’s annoyingly poetic,” I say quietly.

Milo gives me a humorless smile. “Thank you. I hate it.”

I move closer and sit beside him without touching. The room smells faintly like leather cleaner and something sweet underneath it, some club-specific perfume blend meant to make people feel expensive and depraved at the same time.

“Taking your node offline is the part that’s really eating at you.”

“It’s one of several exciting options.”

“Milo.”

His gaze drops to the floor. “Last time Fenrir locked me out, one relay didn’t come back. Stephen found the dead wire, and we missed the message that could’ve warned kitten. If they take me offline again, I lose the cameras, the trackers, the catches. Everything.”

“You rebuilt the dead relay.”

“Through two independent paths. I tested them until the system practically begged for mercy.”

“Then you know what failed last time.”

“That doesn’t mean I know what fails next.”

“Neither does whoever is probing you,” I point out. “That’s why they’re still knocking.”

His eyes lift to mine.

“And if Fenrir takes you offline, we go manual. Eyes on the doors and windows. Nobody alone. All six of us stay together until you bring the system back.”

“You make it sound simple.”

“No. I make it sound shared.”

His knee keeps bouncing. He doesn’t try to stop it.

“Then we’re cautious,” I say. “With the network and with Stephen.”

“He sat in front of us for months, Micah. Smiling. He knows us.”

“Then he’s a threat until he’s dead.” I hear how flat it comes out. I don’t take it back.

Milo laughs once, short and ugly. “Look at us. So functional. So hinged.”

“We’re aspirationally hinged.”

“That should go on the family crest.”

I let that sit for a second, then put my hand over his bouncing knee and hold it there until the motion stops under my palm.

“Come on,” I say, standing. “I’ll make you a drink. Something disgusting and blue.”

“I don’t want something disgusting and blue.”

“You always want something disgusting and blue.”

“Okay. Fine. I love disgusting and blue.”

We get up, and I open the door. The club noise hits us—music, laughter, the hum of people performing desire for each other in expensive clothes. Milo steps into it, and the performance slides back into place. Shoulders loose. Chin up. Smile cocked.

“For the record,” he says, turning back to me, “if you ever do lock me in a room with whips, I’d like at least twenty minutes’ notice so I can prepare emotionally and choose an appropriate safe word.”

“Noted.”

“Something literary. ‘Proust,’ maybe. Or ‘Dostoevsky.’ Something that kills the mood so completely there’s no coming back.”

“Go sit at the bar, Milo.”

He goes. I follow. I make the drink.

Disgusting. Blue.

He drinks it without complaint.

I stay close enough to watch his hands finally stop shaking.

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# FORTY-THREE
# HOLDEN



“She’s been up there forty minutes,” Milo says, checking his phone. “Do we think she’s okay, or has the outfit achieved sentience and consumed her?”

“Give her time,” Micah says from the kitchen, adjusting his cufflinks. He looks good—charcoal suit, open collar, effortlessly stunning in the way only someone built like Micah could pull off.

We’re all downstairs. Waiting.

Milo is draped over the arm of the couch like an invalid in a navy silk suit minus the shirt and tie. Eli stands by the mantel in a black suit that makes him look like sin with a teaching license. Knox is a wall in dark gray, broad enough to make the foyer seem smaller. I’m in black. Always black. Tailored enough that nothing catches when I move.

I check my watch.

“She said she’d be down when she was down,” Eli says.

“That was twenty-three minutes ago,” Milo replies. “Then twelve minutes ago she called out ‘almost.’ ‘Almost’ is one of those words women use the way law enforcement uses ‘active investigation.’ It means nothing and can last for years.”

Micah laughs softly.

I don’t. But only because if I start, I’ll give away too much. The truth is I don’t mind waiting. Not tonight. Not for this.

All five of us are dressed for the same woman, every line of the evening arranged around her before she even comes down the stairs. Fenrir has the

live watch, Milo’s external relay remains isolated, and every flagged device has been hardened. At four this afternoon, I closed the laptop and told myself tonight belongs to her.

It does.

The rest can wait until morning.

Milo checks his phone again. “Should we send in a rescue team?”

“No,” I say.

“Wow. Cold. What if she’s gotten tangled in her shapewear and can’t reach the zipper?”

Micah lifts a brow. “Sage isn’t wearing shapewear tonight. Not where we’re going.”

“You’re right. Holden, tell me you put some crotchless panties in that fancy dress box you gave kitten earlier.”

I’m about to open my mouth and tell him to wait and find out along with everyone else when the stairs creak.

Every head turns.

Sage descends, and the room goes silent.

I forget how to speak.

She’s wearing the dress I had delivered this afternoon.

Black, of course. It skims rather than clings. Thin straps over bare shoulders, a low neckline that gives nothing away and suggests everything, the fabric slicing clean over her body before opening at one thigh when she moves. Her dark brown hair is down, loose waves falling over one shoulder. Gold at her ears. Her mouth a deep maroon. Her eyes sharp and giving me nothing, in the way that always makes me want to ruin my own composure just to see if I can shake hers.

She pauses three steps from the bottom like she knows exactly what she’s doing to the room.

Milo is the first to recover.

“Well,” he says faintly. “I’ve died. Nice of you all to attend my funeral.”

Micah makes a low sound in his throat that is all appreciation. Eli just stares. Knox goes still in that way he does when all his attention narrows so completely it feels like pressure in the air.

And me—

I lock my jaw and fail to look anywhere but at her.

“Say something,” Sage says, one hand braced lightly on the banister. Dry as ever. “You all look like I came downstairs carrying a severed head.”

“That would actually make it even hotter,” Milo says.

“You look incredible,” Micah says immediately.

“Stunning,” Eli adds, voice roughened.

“Perfect,” I say, because it’s the only word I trust myself with.

Knox says nothing. He steps forward instead, stops at the foot of the stairs, and offers her his hand.

Her mouth softens.

She takes it and lets him guide her down the last three steps.

“Spin for us, Fury,” Knox says, lifting his arm to guide her in a slow circle. The dress moves with her. The open back reveals the line of her spine, the dimples above her hips, the fact that she followed my instructions to the letter—*Wear this. Nothing underneath.*

Knox releases her hand. Clears his throat. “We should leave. Now.”

“Seconded,” Micah says, his voice rougher than it was thirty seconds ago.

“Before we do—” Eli pushes off the banister and reaches into his jacket. What he produces makes Sage’s breath catch.

A collar.

Not the narrow one already circling her throat. This one is new—black leather, wider through the center, with delicate silver chainwork framing a polished D-ring. Something made to be seen.

“That one’s for keeping you safe,” Eli says, glancing at the heart-shaped charm at her throat. “This one is for tonight.”

Her fingers brush the tracker. “No charm?”

“Not unless you want it transferred.”

She looks at each of us in turn. “I think five men and Odin’s security can keep track of me for one night.”

Every protective instinct I have tightens, but she’s right. No one takes her from our sight tonight without going through all of us.

“May I?” Eli asks.

She lifts her chin.

He unbuckles her everyday collar and lays it carefully on the hall table before fastening the new one around her throat. His fingers are steady. Hers aren’t. The leather sits against her pulse, the silver catching the light until she looks like something out of a painting that would get a museum shut down.

“There will be more gifts when we get home,” Milo says, practically vibrating. “After cake. You’re going to lose your mind. But first—” He holds up a finger. “Everyone outside.”

“We’re going to the club, Milo,” Eli says. “We know.”

“Yes, but we’re going to the club in *style*.” He’s already at the front door, holding it open with the grin of a man who’s been keeping a secret so hard it’s been physically painful. “Birthday girl first.”

Sage glances at me. I shrug, because I genuinely don’t know what he’s done and that’s a rare and unsettling position to be in.

She steps onto the porch. Stops.

In the driveway, under the streetlight, sits a brand-new black SUV with a white bow the size of a small child strapped across the hood.

*So this is what he’s been hiding.* The custom work and registration would have taken weeks. Whatever he asked her at the diner yesterday, this was already waiting.

Sage’s hand goes to her mouth.

“Before you say it’s too much,” Milo says, appearing at her shoulder, “it seats all six of us comfortably, has bulletproof glass—because I’m me—a custom sound system, heated seats for Knox’s back, and enough trunk space for what Holden calls ‘operational equipment’ and what normal people call ‘a terrifying amount of rope.’”

Sage turns to him. Her eyes are wet.

“Milo.”

“There’s also a personalized plate. The DMV wouldn’t let me register MURDER KITTEN, so I went with K1TNCRW.”

Her gaze drops to the plate, set inside a baby-pink frame stamped *KITTEN’S CREW*. It undoes her. She grabs his face and kisses him hard. When she pulls back, he looks stunned, which is not a look Milo wears often or well.

“I love it,” she says. “I love *you*.”

“Oh.” He blinks. “Okay. Good. Because the return policy was very unclear and I think I accidentally threatened the dealer.”

Knox takes the keys from Milo’s hand without a word and walks to the driver’s side. The rest of us follow. Sage runs her hand along the hood as she passes it, fingers tracing the edge of the bow, looking as though she can’t believe this is her life and she’s trying to hold the feeling before it slips.

She pulls the bow free, and then I open the rear door for her. She climbs in. Eli follows. I take the other side. Micah and Milo load into the middle row. Knox adjusts the mirrors.

We pull out of the driveway. Six people in a bulletproof SUV on a Saturday night, heading to a club where the woman in the back seat is wearing a leather collar and nothing under her dress and every man in this vehicle would commit war crimes to keep her smiling.

*Happy birthday to all of us.*



THE CLUB always hits different when you walk in as a unit.

I've been coming to Unholy Desires for years—first as an outsider, then as an operative, then as something in between. I know its rhythms, its personnel, the way the lighting shifts from red to gold as you move deeper into the building. I know where the cameras are, where the blind spots live, where Odin sits when he wants to watch and where he sits when he wants to be watched.

But tonight I'm not cataloging. Tonight I'm letting myself enjoy the night.

At the entrance, the doorman hands us six silver masks. Once they're in place, Eli clips a slim chain leash to the D-ring at Sage's throat. She lifts her chin as he winds the loose end once around his hand.

Eli leads, the chain catching the low light in thin silver flashes. Sage is half a step behind—chin up, shoulders back, the dress moving against her body like it's been paid to advertise. Knox flanks right. I take left. Milo and Micah fall in behind us.

Heads turn. Of course they do.

A woman at the bar pauses mid-drink to track us. A couple in a booth stops mid-conversation. Two men on the lounge seats lean forward with the synchronized attention of spectators who just realized the main event has arrived—and after the show we put on a few nights ago, I don't blame them.

My attention should be on the room. Instead, it keeps dropping to Sage's ass in that dress—the way she carries herself like she owns the place

and forgot to send the eviction notices. The collar catches the light every time she turns her head, and I have to remind myself to breathe.

The concierge greets us near the main floor—dark hair, headset, the practiced warmth of a woman whose job is to make the depraved feel welcome. “Good evening. Happy birthday, Miss Adams. Your room is prepared whenever you’re ready. Please enjoy the floor in the meantime.”

“Thank you,” Sage says, and her voice is the steady version now. The one that means she’s landed.

We tour the floor.

Milo provides commentary nobody requested—rating equipment, critiquing technique, offering suggestions to a couple who are three orgasms past caring about his opinion. Knox stays at Sage’s shoulder. Micah glides through the room like he belongs to every inch of it, smiling that soft lethal smile of his while he keeps one eye on Sage and the other on everything else. Eli is looser than I’ve seen him in days, leash wrapped once around his hand, his attention fixed on her with the devotional focus he never bothers to hide.

Sage takes it in. The suspended benches. The St. Andrew’s crosses. The low couches crowded with silk and skin and voyeurism. A woman on her knees in a sequined bra looks up as we pass and gives Sage a slow, appreciative smile. Sage gives one back.

There it is.

The shift.

No fear tonight.

Ownership.

I watch it happen in real time—the room moving from something that might swallow her to something she can wear.

We pass the voyeur rooms. A demonstration on the main stage—intricate rope work performed by two people who clearly know their stuff. Sage watches with her lip between her teeth. Eli’s hand rests on the back of her neck, thumb tracing the leather collar.

“Interested?” he murmurs.

“Curious.”

“There’s a difference?”

“Curious means I want to watch. Interested means I want to try.”

“Understood.”

We settle into the VIP section. Burgundy leather, black glass table, lighting designed for people who want to see without being fully seen. Sage sits in the center. Knox to her left. Eli to her right. Milo, Micah, and me across.

Drinks arrive. The music shifts. And for a while—an hour, maybe more—we're just us.

Milo tells the story of when he tried to teach his dads to play poker and Dennis cried. Micah and Knox get into a debate about whether proper martini proportions matter more than whether the glass could double as a weapon.

"It absolutely matters," Micah says, horrified on behalf of civilization. "Ratios are the difference between elegance and regret."

Knox lifts his whiskey. "If it gets you drunk, it worked."

"That," Micah says, pointing at him like he's identified a public threat, "is exactly the type of reasoning that leads grown men to wear square-toed dress shoes."

Milo gasps. "You can't pick on Knox's giant feet on Sage's birthday!"

Sage laughs, bright and loose and a little disbelieving still, like she hasn't fully adjusted to being this happy in public. The sound punches me right in the guts, and I want to wrap her in cotton wool and flowers.

I force myself to drink and watch her over the rim of my glass.

She's only grown bolder since we walked in, enjoying the knowledge that the whole room is watching her and hoping they'll get to see more. It's the opposite of who she was when we first met. Back then, all she wanted to do was melt into the shadows. Now she wants to rule them.

A server appears with another round and a black envelope on a silver tray.

"For Miss Adams," she says.

Sage takes it, brows lifting. "What is this?"

"Compliments of Mr. Odin."

Milo groans immediately. "If he's trying to outdo the SUV, I'm filing a grievance."

The server smiles and glides away.

Sage opens the envelope. Pulls out a card embossed in silver.

"What does it say?" Eli asks.

She scans it once, then gasps. "It says, '*Happy birthday, Sage. Please enjoy the room, the cake, and ownership of Gull's diner.*'" Her eyes fly to

mine. “Um, what? He’s giving me the diner for my birthday?”

“What. The. Fuck,” Milo spits. “That silver fox just out-OTT’d me!”

“Owner?” Sage says, staring at the card like the letters might rearrange themselves into something less insane. “As in . . . *owner* owner?”

“I’m going to kill him,” Milo says, offended in a way that is somehow genuinely touching. “Respectfully. Elegantly. With poison in a champagne flute. No. Whiskey. I know he drinks whiskey.”

Micah reaches across the table. “Can I see?”

Sage hands him the card without taking her eyes off it. Her pulse jumps above the collar. I can see it. So can Eli, whose fingers have gone still against the leather at her throat.

Micah reads. Blinks once. Then looks up at the rest of us. “He’s not joking.”

“Of course he’s not joking,” I say. “Odin doesn’t joke in embossed stationery.”

Sage turns to me. “Why would Odin buy me a diner?”

“Because he can,” I offer.

“And because apparently tonight is a contest no one warned me was being judged,” Milo mutters darkly.

Knox takes the card from Micah and studies it with the same attention he gives a weapon schematic. “There’s more on the back.”

Sage snatches it back and flips it over.

Her mouth parts.

“Well?” Eli asks gently.

“There’s an operating account number. And a note.” She swallows. “‘*Payroll has been stabilized, outstanding vendor debt cleared, and your existing staff retained at current wages, with improvements to benefits pending your preferences.*’” She looks up, dazed. “He bought the building. And the business. And he kept everyone.”

Nobody says anything.

I know Odin. I know what this is.

Not generosity, exactly. Not in the ordinary sense. Odin isn’t a man who throws gifts like confetti. He invests. He fortifies. He places people in situations that suit him. A building. A payroll. Vendors who’ll want her on the phone Monday morning. He hasn’t handed her a present. He’s handed her something she can’t walk away from. Loki had a word for that, in a meeting I sat in. *Containment.*

Eli plucks the card back out of her hand and tucks it inside his jacket. “How about we save dissecting Odin’s intent for another time? Right now, I’d rather focus on the birthday girl.”

Sage’s eyes are wet again, but she’s recovering. I watch her pull the composure back around herself.

“Well,” she says, and her voice is almost steady. “I guess I own a diner now.”

“You owned my heart first,” Milo says, clutching his chest. “But sure. Diner. Material assets. I see how it is.”

She laughs, and the sound lifts the entire group. Even Knox’s shoulders relax half an inch. Eli lifts his glass.

“To Sage,” he says. “Owner. Survivor. The center of us.”

We drink. Her fingers find the new collar.

“Okay,” she says. “Enough crying. I didn’t wear this dress to leak saltwater all over it.”

“Thank God,” Milo says. “I have plans that require you upright and coherent.”

“I’d like to hear about those plans.”

“Well,” Milo says, sliding around the curve of the booth and hooking a hand behind her neck. “They start a little like—” He kisses her.

It’s not subtle. Not remotely. It’s Milo, so of course it isn’t—full mouth, delighted sound, one hand splayed over her thigh through the slit in her dress. Sage makes a startled little noise and then melts into it, laughing against his lips for half a second before the laugh turns into heat.

Micah follows him around the table. He catches her jaw gently when Milo breaks away and kisses her slower, deeper, like he’s trying to pour her back into her own skin one careful inch at a time.

Eli leans in before Micah fully releases her, his hand sliding from the leash to cradle the back of her head as he takes her mouth with a controlled hunger that makes my jaw ache with wanting. The collar catches light between them, silver against black leather, his thumb tracing the edge where it meets her pulse.

“Knoxie.” Sage reaches for him, and he tugs her into his lap. I watch her hands find the heavy muscle of his shoulders, her fingers digging in as he hauls her onto his thighs. Knox doesn’t do anything halfway; he anchors her with those massive hands, one flat against her lower back, the other pinning her thigh. When he kisses her, it’s the raw pressure of his mouth against

hers and the way he pulls her flush against his chest, making her look small and precious and entirely his.

My pulse thrums in my ears, a rhythmic, demanding heat. The VIP booth feels smaller now, the shadows deeper, the air thick with the scent of her perfume and the heat of our combined need.

She pulls back from Knox, her breath hitching, her maroon lips swollen and wet. Her eyes are glassy, dark with the kind of hunger that usually ends with me pinning her to a mattress. She doesn't stay in his lap. She slides off and rounds the table, the silk of her dress whispering against his suit as she reaches for me.

"Holden," she whispers.

I don't wait for her to close the final step. I rise to meet her, my hand tangling in the hair at the nape of her neck and tilting her head back until she's forced to look at me.

My mouth crashes into hers, the collision of every dark thought I've had since she walked down those stairs, every protective instinct that has been screaming at me to lock the doors and keep her for ourselves. She tastes like champagne and the heat of the club, and I drive my tongue into her mouth, claiming the space. She meets me with a ferocity that nearly snaps my composure. Her hands fist in my shirt, and it takes everything I have not to drag her onto the table in front of Odin's high-priced voyeurs.

I break the kiss, my forehead resting against hers, both of us gasping. I can see the silver of the leash swaying between us, the D-ring at her throat glinting like an invitation.

"I'm done being good out here." Her voice is breathless and low enough that only we hear it. "Take me to the room."

I look at her one beat longer, then lift two fingers toward the concierge. She's moving before my hand is back on the table. Every person in this building has been watching us since we walked in, and it's the first night in months I haven't minded.

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# FORTY-FOUR
# SAGE



The concierge opens the door, and I walk into a room made of reflections.

Knox closes the door behind us. The club noise vanishes, leaving only the low hum of monitors, our breathing, and the faint fizz of champagne in the waiting glasses.

Screens. Everywhere. The walls are paneled with them—floor to ceiling, seamless, each one showing a different angle of the room. The ceiling too. I look up and see myself looking up, multiplied and fragmented. We're everywhere.

"Oh." Because what else do you say when you walk into a hall of mirrors with a sex-dungeon upgrade?

The screens aren't static. Hidden cameras capture us in real time from every conceivable angle: my back, my profile, Knox filling the doorway, and the leash draped across Eli's palm. Six silver-masked versions of us stare back.

I remove my club mask. One by one, the others follow, setting theirs on the narrow shelf beside the door until the room gives us back our real faces.

The first time I stood in front of all five of them, they were the ones behind the masks. I was the only face in the dark.

"What is this?"

I move to the far wall. Mirrored drawers run from floor to ceiling. Dozens of them. I pull one open—silk blindfolds, neatly rolled. Another—restraints, leather and velvet, lined up like expensive chocolates. A third—

vibrators in a row, arranged by size, because someone at this club understands that organization is its own form of foreplay.

“This is obscene,” I say.

“This is amazing,” Milo says, already conducting inventory.

“Cake before or after, baby girl?” Micah asks from the corner where a table draped in black linen holds a cake—three layers, dark chocolate, HAPPY BIRTHDAY SAGE in gold script—and a row of champagne flutes already filled, bubbles climbing each glass like tiny escapees.

“Cake and champagne first. We have more cake at home for after, right?”

“We sure do,” Milo says, joining Micah at the table and picking up glasses to hand out. “And don’t forget presents. This night won’t end until you feel so incredibly full of love and attention that your teeth start aching.” He hands me a glass. “Happy birthday, kitten.”

I take it, clink the rim lightly against his before I drink, and the champagne is cold and sharp and expensive enough to taste like someone distilled celebration into bubbles.

“Happy birthday,” Eli says, stepping in close enough that the leash chain slides warm and metallic against my arm.

A chorus of happy birthday follows, with Holden leaning in and brushing his mouth against my temple, Knox touching the back of my neck, and Micah smiling at me in that soft way that always makes something in my chest loosen.

The words land harder after the SUV, the diner, and Eli’s toast. My throat goes too tight to talk.

Which is deeply unfair, because I’m usually excellent at talking shit.

“Careful,” Milo says, pointing his flute at me. “If you cry again, I’m going to have to cry too, and then Holden will have to admit he has feelings. The whole evening will collapse into snot and tears.”

“I’m not crying.”

“Your eyes aren’t hearing what your mouth is saying.”

I laugh, which eases the pressure behind them.

“Come here,” Micah says.

He sets his champagne down and hooks an arm around my waist, guiding me to the cake. Up close, it’s even prettier—dark ganache smooth as satin, gold leaf at the edges, my name written like I’m something sacred and spoiled all at once.

“Make a wish,” he says.

“Seems greedy when I already have all this.”

Micah’s arm tightens around me.

“Still have to make one,” Eli murmurs. “House rules of birthdays and baked goods.”

“Whose house?”

He lifts a shoulder. “Ours, obviously.”

I close my eyes and wish for death—Stephen’s specifically. Then, because nobody said I only get one and the candles are still burning, I wish for a night the outside world can’t reach. Micah squeezes me once before letting go, and I lean in to blow out the candles.

The room answers with a soft scatter of applause. Milo doesn’t join in. When I look over he’s watching the smoke come off the candles like it’s saying something to him. Then he catches me looking and gives me jazz hands like I just cured something terminal.

“Beautiful,” he says. “Iconic. A woman, a wish, a fire hazard.”

Micah cuts the first slice with ritual-level seriousness. Knox takes the plates from him and starts handing them out one by one, huge hands careful with delicate black china. Holden reaches for my fork at the same time I do. Our fingers brush, but he takes it, cuts off a bite, and lifts it to my mouth.

“Open, wildcat.”

I take the offered bite and make a noise before I can stop myself. “Oh my God.”

Holden lets out a low growl, his eyes darkening as he watches me chew.

“Good?” Micah asks.

I nod. “I would let this cake ruin my life.”

Milo points his fork at the ceiling. “That should be the slogan for the bakery.”

We eat standing around the table, close enough that our shoulders keep knocking, champagne giving everything a gold blur at the edges. It feels almost normal if I ignore the fact that we’re us and this is a sex club.

I glance up at one of the screens and catch a side view of myself between Knox and Eli, backless dress, dark leather at my throat. Holden behind me. Micah to my left. Milo half turned toward me with frosting on his lower lip.

The sight hits me weirdly hard.

Not because it’s hot as fuck.

Because it looks like I belong.

I set my plate down before that thought can crack something open in me again.

“So,” I say, clearing my throat. “Which one of you picked the screen room?”

“Milo, of course,” Holden says.

I look at Milo. “Of course.”

Milo’s eyebrows lift. “The question is—do you like it?”

“Kiss me and then I’ll decide.”

His grin flashes. “The birthday girl can have whatever she wants.”

“I want you to shut up and kiss me.”

Milo does. His mouth meets mine with eager heat and chocolate sweetness, his hands framing my face as his tongue sweeps inside.

The nearest screen catches the others closing around us. Micah’s warm hand settles against my back. Eli shortens the leash. Knox becomes a broad shadow at my shoulder while Holden watches me like a man rationing himself.

I break Milo’s kiss and turn toward the largest screen.

“Take off my dress,” I tell Holden.

He steps in and draws the zipper at my side down one tooth at a time. I watch the black fabric loosen in every reflection before it slides from my body and pools around my heels.

One naked woman. Five fully dressed men. A fancy collar and silver chain holding the composition together. I put every piece of that there.

“What do you want?” Eli asks.

I meet my own eyes on the screen. “All of you. And I want to watch it happening.”

Holden’s palm closes around the back of my neck. “Then keep your eyes open, wildcat.”

I step out of the dress, climb onto the wide padded platform, and lie back beneath the screens.

“You are so fucking beautiful, baby girl.”

Micah leans over me, his mouth closing around one nipple while his hand works the other, drawing out sounds I can’t hold back. Milo slides lower, kissing a trail down my stomach before parting my thighs and settling between them. His breath ghosts over me, teasing until his tongue

traces my opening and sweeps up to my clit. The first slow circle makes my hips buck.

“God, you taste like sin,” he murmurs.

Eli kneels beside me and tugs on the leash, drawing my mouth to his and swallowing my moans as Micah’s fingers pinch my nipples just hard enough to edge the pleasure with pain. Knox looms over us, shedding his jacket and shirt, his broad chest a wall of muscle as he leans down to kiss me next, his hand wrapping around my throat, the collar pressing into my skin under his palm.

Holden strips efficiently, his gaze never leaving mine as he steps onto the platform, his body all hard lines and restrained power, positioning himself above me while four other mouths keep me from holding a single thought together. I reach for him, my fingers brushing the rigid length of his cock, stroking him firmly as he groans and thrusts into my hand, his control fraying in the way I love.

Milo’s tongue delves deeper between my legs, lapping at me with hungry strokes that build the pressure inside me, while Micah switches to my other breast, his teeth grazing my nipple just enough to make me cry out into Eli’s next kiss.

The screen above catches every part of them around me—Micah at my breast, Eli’s leash running to my throat, Holden positioned over my hand, Knox holding my thighs open, and Milo working between them. You’d think it would look chaotic, but it doesn’t. Every body is arranged around mine. Every body has its purpose.

I keep checking the corners of the frame. I don’t know why. There’s nobody in this room but us, and every eye in it is one I invited.

Knox spreads me wider for Milo, whose answering hum vibrates against my clit and pushes me closer to the edge.

“Come for us, Fury,” Knox rumbles, his voice like gravel, and I do—shattering with a sharp moan that echoes off the walls, my release flooding Milo’s mouth as he drinks me down greedily.

I barely catch my breath before pushing myself upright. “Again.”

The rest of their clothes hit the floor. Eli answers with a tug on the leash, drawing me onto my knees until I’m surrounded by cocks, hard and waiting. I take Eli into my mouth first, sucking him deep while my hands find Micah and Holden, stroking them in tandem as they kneel on either side of me. The taste of Eli—salt and heat—fills my senses, his hand fisting

my hair to guide the rhythm, gentle at first, then firmer, fucking my mouth with controlled thrusts that make my eyes water in the best way.

Knox positions himself behind me, his thick length pressing against my pussy, teasing without entering until I push back against him, desperate. He slides in slowly, inch by inch, stretching me deliciously as I moan around Eli.

Milo watches from the side, his own hand working his cock, eyes gone stupid as he murmurs, “Fuck, you’re perfect like this, kitten.”

Knox starts moving then, deep and powerful, each thrust pushing me further onto Eli, the dual sensation building another wave inside me.

Holden pulls my face toward him next, replacing Eli in my mouth with a low command. “Suck me, wildcat.”

I obey, hollowing my cheeks around him, tasting the bead of precum on my tongue as Milo takes my free hand and guides it to his length, letting me pump him while Knox pounds into me from behind.

Knox sets the rhythm, each thrust driving me forward until my mouth and hands are working in time with him, the air thick with grunts, slick sounds, and my muffled whimpers.

Eli reaches under me, fingers finding my clit and circling it relentlessly, tipping me over again. I come hard, clenching around Knox, who follows with a guttural roar, spilling inside me hot and deep. He pulls out, and Micah takes his place, flipping me onto my back and sliding in with one smooth thrust, his lean body covering mine as he kisses me fiercely.

“I love you,” he whispers against my lips, and my heart cracks open even as my body arches to meet his.

Milo joins in, kneeling over my chest and feeding me his cock while Micah fucks me steady and sure. I suck Milo eagerly, swirling my tongue around his tip, loving the way he shudders and praises me in that breathless, filthy way of his. Holden and Eli stroke themselves nearby, watching, Knox already recovering and palming my breast as he leans in to kiss my neck.

Micah keeps his eyes on mine until I come around him. His rhythm breaks, and he pulls out with a rough groan, spilling across my stomach. Milo follows with a broken sound, coming down my throat as the hand tangled in my hair tightens.

Then Holden catches me beneath the arms and lifts me onto his lap, lowering me onto his cock in one slow stroke. I ride him with my hands

braced on his shoulders, watching the collar flash silver on the screen while Eli kneels behind me and works two slicked fingers into my ass.

“Ready, little savage?” Eli asks, voice rough with need.

“Yes.”

Eli presses in slowly while Holden stays still beneath me, giving my body time to open around both of them. The stretch burns hard enough to steal my breath.

“Still with us?” Holden asks.

I find his eyes on the screen. “Move.”

Holden thrusts up as Eli draws back. They find an alternating rhythm, one filling the space the other leaves until I feel so thoroughly fucked I’m struggling to keep my focus, but I refuse to tear my gaze from the walls.

The screen shows me held between them—Holden’s hands around my thighs, Eli’s grip at my hips, and the silver leash sliding over my shoulder. My orgasm catches me before I can brace. The next folds into it so closely that counting becomes impossible.

Knox kneels beside us, his large hand cupping my breast, rolling my nipple between his fingers as he watches with dark, hungry eyes. “Beautiful,” he murmurs, leaning in to claim my mouth in a bruising kiss that swallows my moans. Micah and Milo are there too, their hands roaming my sides, teasing my clit in turns, keeping the fire building even as I teeter on the edge again.

“Fuck, you’re taking us so well,” Eli groans behind me, his pace quickening, fingers digging into my hips for leverage. Holden’s hands grip my thighs, spreading me wider, his thrusts growing erratic as he chases his release. The pressure coils tight and low in my belly, and when Milo pinches my clit just right, I shatter once more, screaming their names as my body clamps down around them. Eli follows first, burying himself deep with a guttural curse, his heat flooding me. Holden isn’t far behind, pulling out at the last second to come across my chest, marking me in thick ropes that drip down my skin.

Holden eases me down onto the platform, and Knox gathers me against his chest while the others fold in around us. Sweat cools on my skin. The collar remains warm against my throat, its leash loose across Eli’s palm. Micah kisses my forehead. Milo presses his face into my neck. Holden brushes the hair away from my cheek.

“I love you,” I whisper. “All of you.”

Milo’s smile moves against my skin. “Good. Returning five men to Cupid would be an administrative nightmare.”

“We love you too, baby girl,” Micah says.

Eli’s fingers curl around the chain. “With everything we have.”

Holden strokes his thumb over my cheek. “You’re stuck with us, wildcat.”

Knox’s arm tightens around me. “Ours.”

We lie there catching our breath as the screens glow around us. Some have begun replaying the last few minutes from different angles, turning us into our own private highlight reel.

“This is the best birthday I’ve ever had,” I say, feeling myself get worked up again just from watching us.

“This is the best birthday anyone’s ever had,” Milo corrects. “In the history of birthdays. I’m including all of them. Every birthday, ever.”

“Even Jesus?” Micah asks.

“Especially Jesus. Jesus got frankincense. Kitten got five orgasms and a bulletproof SUV.”

“Six,” I correct.

“Six orgasms?”

“I stopped counting at six. There may have been seven. Knox, was there a seventh?”

Knox’s chest rumbles under my cheek. “Eight.”

“Show-off,” Milo mutters.

I tip my head back toward the screens. “Do we get to keep this footage?”

“If we want it,” Knox says, just as the screen above us flickers.

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# FORTY-FIVE
# SAGE



I blink. Sit up slightly. Knox’s arm tightens around me as the image changes.

The ceiling screen is no longer showing the room. It’s showing . . .

Me. In my old apartment. In bed. Alone. The angle is from above, the perspective slightly wide, the image grainier than the sharp feeds from a moment ago.

“What . . .”

The wall screens shift. One by one, like dominoes falling, the room’s feeds are replaced. Each monitor clicks to a different clip. Different night. Different configuration.

Me and Holden. His hands pinning my wrists while I arch beneath him.

Me and Eli. His forehead on mine as he moves inside me.

Me and Knox. I’m straddling his hips, grinding down on him while his big hands splay out over my ribs.

Me and Milo and Holden. The night they shared me for the first time, the night I learned what it felt like to be the center of two men’s attention.

Me and Micah. Gentle, slow, his hand on my throat.

Me and all of them.

Me alone, looking up toward the ceiling.

My first thought is Milo’s camera.

The one he installed above my bed. The one he said only I controlled.

The footage plays on a loop. Every screen. Every angle. Every intimate moment we shared in that room, playing on every wall at once like a gallery

exhibition of everything I've ever done naked.

"Milo," I say.

He's still lying down, arm over his eyes. "Hmm?"

I keep my voice calm. Steady. "I thought you said I was the only one with control over that camera."

"Huh?"

I watch the screens cycle through the footage. Me, over and over, in every state of undress and intimacy.

A strange, dizzy feeling washes over me. Not quite anger. Not quite arousal. Something in between.

I tilt my head. I don't *hate* this.

"Wait," I say. "Is this part of your gift? Recordings of us all having sex?" I glance at him. "I have to say . . . I'm not mad about it. We look . . . hot."

"What are you—" That's when Milo sits up.

His face changes. The post-sex haze evaporates. His eyes widen, then his brow furrows as he studies the screens, trying to make sense of what he's seeing.

"This wasn't me," he says.

"What do you mean? I thought these were from your camera. Before Holden drowned it."

"No, kitten." He's standing now, moving toward the wall. "You controlled that feed. I never turned it on without you."

His eyes stop moving. He points to the small housing visible above the bed.

"That's my camera. Right there in the picture."

I stare at it.

"This was filmed from somewhere else." His face is white when he turns toward me.

The clip with him and Holden starts again. Our first night together. I remember looking up at the camera. Thinking about switching it on.

Leaving it off.

Someone recorded us anyway.

The room goes cold. Nobody moves.

Then Holden is off the platform and reaching for his pants at the same time Knox reaches for me.

“Eyes on me, Fury,” Knox says, one hand cupping the back of my neck, the other dragging a discarded shirt over my shoulders like he can erase the feeling of being watched by covering my skin. “Look at me.”

I comply because his voice is steady and the room isn’t.

He’s the one who taught me being looked at could feel like being chosen. An alley, his hand between my legs, the whole street one turned head from seeing all of it. He doesn’t know he taught me that. He doesn’t know somebody just took it back.

Milo is already at the wall of mirrored drawers, yanking one open after another until he finds the control panel hidden behind a velvet-lined compartment of cuffs.

“No, no, no. Come on—” His fingers fly over a touchscreen inset into the wood. “How the fuck are they getting into this room?”

Eli gets the leash off me so fast the chain barely jingles.

I slide off the platform on shaking legs, Knox’s shirt hanging off one shoulder, and the leather beneath me squeaks where my skin leaves it. Every screen still shows me.

Me laughing. Me coming. Me sleeping.

It’s not the sex that hits hardest. It’s the sleeping. The private, unguarded moments. The ones nobody was supposed to own but me.

My stomach turns.

“Turn it off,” I say, and I hate how thin my voice sounds. “Please turn it off.”

“I’m trying.” Milo’s fingers move so fast across the hidden panel they blur. “The room controls are locked out. Something else has the feed. I can’t shut it off from—”

“Happy birthday, Sage.”

The voice cuts through the room.

Tinny. Distorted. Coming from the speakers hidden somewhere behind the screens.

Everything inside me stops.

*Stephen.*

The room warps. My knees go. Every screen in here is still playing me.

“I’m calling security,” Holden says, dragging his shirt on and reaching for his phone. “If they’ve taken over the room, they might have access to—”

“I want to go home.” I don’t recognize my own voice. “*Now.*”

“Sage, we need to—”

“Now, Holden!”

Nobody argues with me.

I don’t even remember everyone getting dressed.

Next thing I know, the cool air of the hallway is against my skin, Knox’s shirt is barely buttoned over me, and we’re moving as a unit through the red-lit corridors of Unholy Desires with the urgency of a bomb squad.

The concierge appears, eyes wide. “Is everything—”

“Get Odin. Tell him someone’s taken over our room’s screens and speakers,” Holden snaps, not stopping. “Security needs to lock the building down.”

She doesn’t even blink before she peels off and sprints for the back office.

Micah’s hand finds the small of my back before we reach the doors, steering me the way he steers drunks out of the club without letting them notice they’re being steered.

The parking lot outside is slick with rain as we head for the black SUV. Knox has the keys out before we’re even through the door. Eli takes them from him. “I’ll drive.”

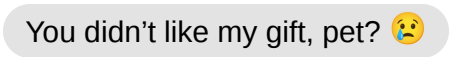
Knox opens the back for me, shields me from the rain, and follows me into the rear row. He fastens my seatbelt before his own, then draws me against his side. Holden takes the front passenger seat while Milo and Micah climb into the middle row. The air inside is clammy as we pull out of the parking lot.

I try to slow my breathing, try to lace my fingers together so my hands stop shaking. My phone in my purse vibrates, and a moment later, the guys’ phones vibrate too—the catch fired.

Fuck.

I don’t want to look. Every atom in me is on high alert, fighting to keep from coming undone. But curiosity is a parasite, and even now, even after everything, I let it burrow in.

I pull my phone from my purse. The message is from an unknown number.



The text sits on my home screen. It isn't the emoji that does it. It's *pet*—Brock's word, with his hand in my hair. Stephen's word, through a brick wall. And now it's sitting on my phone next to a little cartoon tear. Knox looks away from the relay message on his own screen and pulls me tighter against him, massive palm covering my phone, blocking my ability to see. "Don't look, Fury," he murmurs.

"It's too late," I whisper. "I already know he's coming."

Knox pulls the phone from my hand and tucks it into his pocket. I press into his chest. His heat hits me, but it doesn't help remove the bone-deep chill.

"He—he saw everything," I whisper. My voice cracks. "He's been watching us for—"

"He won't watch another second." Knox's voice rumbles against my cheek.

Milo twists around in the middle row to look at me, and his face is doing something I've never seen it do. "We'll find him, kitten. I swear to God, we'll find him, and when we do—"

"I'll break him," Knox finishes.

Holden has Odin on speakerphone. "Someone took over the room's screens and speakers. Old footage from Sage's apartment, then Stephen's voice. Get Fenrir on it."

"The club's gone into lockdown," Odin says. "Fenrir's checking the access now."

"What about last night's warning?"

"We don't know whether it's the same route yet. Where are you?"

"Heading home. All six of us."

In the middle row, Milo's face goes blue from underneath. He's already typing. "Logged," he says, to nobody in particular. "Route's bouncing through—"

A blaring horn punches through the air, sharp and sudden, ripping my focus from Knox's chest and Holden's phone call. My head snaps up just as headlights explode into view—too close, too fast, a wall of white-hot light barreling straight at us.

"Eli!" I scream, but there's no time, no space, no chance—

The truck hits us broadside.

Metal screams. My seatbelt locks as Knox's arm clamps across me, the force punching the breath from my lungs. The window beside him turns

white with cracks but holds. Milo's cursing tangles with Micah's shout. Somewhere ahead, Eli yells my name.

We're spinning.

Tires shriek against wet asphalt, headlights sweeping across the road, the curb, a blur of buildings. Something explodes between the seats and windows, filling the car with pale fabric and a bitter, powdery smell.

"Fuck—hold on!" Eli shouts.

The wheels catch at the edge of the road. The SUV tips, and for one extended second I'm staring down at Knox instead of across at him.

Then the world rolls.

My head strikes something hard. Pain bursts behind my eyes. The seatbelt bites into my ribs, and Knox's hand cups the back of my skull as another impact tears through us. Milo screams.

"No! No, no, no!" I claw at Knox. His arm is still around me. I hold on to that because nothing else stays where it belongs.

The roof slams into the road. The window beside Knox wrenches loose from its buckled frame, and cold rain lashes through the gap. We slide upside down, metal grinding against asphalt, the roof folding closer with every jolt.

Then we stop.

And there's nothing.

No engine. No voices or crying.

Just the thin, terrible ringing inside my head.

*Am I dead?*

But then the pain seeps in. Deep and sharp and everywhere. My head screams where it slammed into something hard, and my ribs burn with every tentative breath. Beside me, Knox shifts with a low groan. We're hanging against our belts, his arm still hooked around me.

"Fury," he rasps, his voice raw and broken. "Say something. Fucking say something!"

Pain lances through me. Sound ringing in my ears. I try to move. But the pull is too strong.

"Knoxie, I—"

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# FORTY-SIX
# KNOX



Her voice cuts off.

"Fury. Say someth—"

*Black.*



RED. *Flashing. Red again.*

My hand is on her back. I can feel the ridge of her spine under my palm and the collar under my thumb. The D-ring is empty. My thumb goes back to it twice. She's against my chest. Not moving. Warm. Still warm.

"Fury."

*Black.*



I JOLT. Glass in my hair. Something wet down the side of my face. Everything is wrong—we're upside down, hanging in our seatbelts above the crushed roof. My legs are pinned. One of them, maybe both. Can't tell. Can't feel below my knee on the left side.

*Red. Flash. Red.*

Emergency lights. Hazards. The roof is caved and everything smells like gasoline and copper and the powdery tang of deployed airbags.

“Is Fury okay?” My voice sounds far away. Like someone else is using it. “Someone—is she—”

*Black.*



I SUCK IN A BREATH. The red is still there. Still flashing. Slow. Or is that my brain?

I shift. Fury is in my arms. I haven’t let go. I won’t let go. My hand is on the back of her head and her face is in my neck and she’s breathing. She’s breathing. I can feel it against my skin, shallow and fast.

“Fury. Stay with me.”

Something drips onto my wrist. Blood. Mine or hers. Doesn’t matter.

“Eli.” I try to turn my head, but the seats and sagging airbags block my view of the front. “Eli?”

No answer.

“Holden?”

Nothing.

“Fuck. Milo? Micah?”

Their silence is the worst thing I’ve ever heard.

*Black.*



EYES OPEN. Blinking.

Sirens. No—not sirens. Something else. Closer. A hissing. The engine or a tire or something leaking.

My vision swims. The blood in my left eye turns everything red on that side, like looking through a filter. I blink. Blink again. The world doesn’t clear.

Fury hasn’t moved.

“I’ve got you.” My lips are against her hair. I can taste the product she put in it and the blood from my mouth and somehow champagne from when

everything was still—when we were still—

My head drops. Comes back up.

Stay awake.

*Stay awake.*

Feet.

Through the empty window frame on my side. Boots on wet asphalt, lit in red pulses. Someone is outside the vehicle.

Behind the boots, farther out, another set. Then a third. An engine idling that isn't ours.

"In here," I say. Or try to say. It comes out broken. "We're in here."

The feet stop. A figure crouches. A face appears in the window frame, backlit by the flashing red, features in shadow.

I blink the blood out of my eye.

The face sharpens. Brown hair. An expression I know. Not from the face—from the manner. Calm. Patient. One I've seen before. That I've seen across a diner counter and in surveillance footage and in the photograph Milo taped to his laptop with crosshairs drawn over it.

"Stephen?"

My body tries to react. Every muscle fires the signal—move, fight, kill—but the signal gets lost somewhere between my brain and my legs that are pinned under crumpled steel and the arm that's holding Fury against me and the other arm that doesn't seem to be responding at all.

"No," I say.

His eyes drop to Fury. To her body in my arms. I tighten my grip. She shifts against me—a small sound, unconscious, the whimper of a body that's hurt and doesn't know where it is.

"You're not taking her."

The face doesn't change.

"Fury." My mouth is against her ear. "*Sage*. Wake up. You need to wake up."

She doesn't respond.

Hands reach through the window. Her seatbelt clicks open, and her weight drops against me. Then the hands find her shoulders and pull. Gently at first, testing my grip.

I hold tighter.

"You're gonna have to let her go, big guy."

The voice is calm. Friendly, almost. The voice of a man who once called himself Jamie and sat next to me at a diner counter and stood at our front door and promised to take care of the woman he was planning to kill.

“Fuck off.”

“You’re pinned, and you can barely keep your eyes open. Your friends aren’t in much better shape.” The hands adjust. Find a better angle. “Let her go and I’ll make this quick. For both of you.”

“I said no.”

The pulling stops. A pause. Then a sigh—disappointed, parental, like I’ve failed to meet a reasonable expectation.

“Okay,” Stephen says. “The hard way, then. I measured this one for you specifically.”

Something sharp jabs into my neck. A sting, then a cold that spreads down my throat, across my chest, into the arm that’s holding Fury. My fingers loosen. Not because I want them to. Because whatever he put into me is dissolving the connection between my brain and my body, one wire at a time.

“No—”

Fury slides. An inch. Two. Her weight shifts in my arms and the hands are there again, pulling, and I can feel her going and I can’t—I can’t hold—

“Fury—”

My hand closes on her wrist. Last grip. Everything I have.

“Let go,” Stephen says.

My fingers open.

I don’t want them to be open.

*Fury.*

Black . . .

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# FORTY-SEVEN
# KNOX



Bright.

Too bright. White light punching through my eyelids. I flinch, and the flinch sends pain screaming down my left side—ribs, hip, leg.

“Fury!”

“Sir, you need to stay still—”

I open my eyes. Fluorescent strips. Low ceiling. I blink, and the world starts to make sense. The inside of an ambulance. I’m on a gurney, strapped at the chest and thighs, an IV in my right arm, a blood pressure cuff on my left. A paramedic is leaning over me—young, latex gloves, focused expression.

I open and close my right hand. Pins and needles all the way to the shoulder, but it works again. There’s a raised sting on the side of my neck where the needle went in, and nobody in this ambulance has asked me what’s in my blood.

“Where’s Fury?”

“Sir—”

“The woman. Where is she? She was in my arms. Where—”

“You need to stay calm. You’ve sustained significant injuries. We’re taking you to—”

“Where are the others?” I try to sit up. The straps hold. The pain doubles. “There were five other people in that car. Where are they?”

The paramedic puts a firm hand on my shoulder. The pressure is completely inadequate for the task of keeping me on this gurney.

“Sir, you were the only person in the vehicle when we arrived.”

The words don’t compute. I run them again.

*Only person. Only person in the vehicle.*

“No.” I shake my head, and the world tilts. “No, there were six of us. Five men and a woman. She was in my arms. She was—”

“We had to cut you from the wreckage, sir. You were trapped. But you were alone. I can assure you, there was no one else. Just you.”

The ambulance walls contract. I haul against the straps, trying to get a full breath. Looking past him for Holden to tell me to lie the fuck down. For Micah to put a hand on me. Eli to take charge. Milo to make some stupid fucking joke.

Fury to call me *Knoxie*.

Nobody.

My hands won’t stay still. I stare at them. They opened. They let him take her.

My whole fucking family.

I can’t be the only one left.

I rip the IV out.

Blood sprays across the gurney sheet. The paramedic lunges. “Sir—sir, you cannot—”

I tear off the blood pressure cuff and fumble the chest strap open. Then the one across my thighs. My left leg screams as I swing it off the gurney. The moment my foot takes any weight, my knee folds and I catch myself against the frame.

“Motherfucker.”

I shift my weight onto my right foot and force myself upright.

*Hold. Just fucking hold.*

“Sir, please sit down. You have a concussion, a possible tibial fracture, and you’ve lost—”

I’m at the ambulance doors. I shove them open. Night air. Wet road. The flashing lights of the ambulance painting everything red and blue. The wreck—Fury’s SUV, crumpled on the driver’s side, roof caved, glass everywhere, emergency flares on the asphalt.

Empty. The car is empty.

“Fury!”

He took them. He took all of them.

*Fuck!*

“Sir!” The paramedic is behind me, reaching for my arm. “You can’t leave. You need medical attention. Please—”

Cops in ten minutes. Holden’s people. A clipboard, a statement, a bed with rails.

No.

I start walking. The road is still wet, rain a constant drizzle that obscures my vision and catches the lights of oncoming cars.

Every step sends a bolt through my left leg. I keep most of my weight on the right and drag the left after it.

*He took them.*

I lurch toward the road, teeth locked. Behind me, the paramedic is shouting. I don’t hear anything except the blood in my ears and Stephen’s voice saying *you’re gonna have to let her go* and the silence that came after.

Headlights.

Coming toward me on the road. A car—sedan, dark color, single occupant. I step into the lane. Plant my feet. Raise my hand.

The car swerves. Brakes. Stops ten feet in front of me, horn blaring.

The driver’s window comes down. A man in his fifties, glasses, the bewildered face of a civilian who just found a bleeding giant in a torn-up suit standing in the middle of the road at two in the morning.

“What the hell? Are you okay? Is that an ambulance back there?”

I walk to his door. Open it.

“Hey—what are you—”

“I’ll give it back,” I say, and pull him out of the car.

He stumbles sideways, catching himself on the road. “You can’t just—that’s my car!”

I’m already in the driver’s seat. I yank the lever and slide the seat back to make room for my legs. Then I pull away, tires screeching.

The man shrinks in the rearview, standing in the road next to the ambulance lights, arms raised, mouth open.

*I need it more than you do right now, buddy.*

*I’ll give it back.*

*Eventually.*

The steering wheel is slick under my hands. Rain? Blood? My vision doubles, triples, comes back to single. The road lines blur and separate and blur again. Clarity comes and goes in waves, the world pulling sideways every few seconds like someone tugging a tablecloth.

“Keep it together, Knox,” I grunt through gritted teeth. “She needs you. They all do.”

I feel for my phone. Gone.

Fury’s is still in my pocket. I drag it out. The casing is bent, the screen black beneath a web of cracks. I press the power button. Nothing.

Holden was talking to Odin when we were hit. He might already have people coming. But he didn’t see Stephen at that window. He doesn’t know what I know.

I shove the phone back into my pocket.

*Think.*

Home won’t help. Stephen might be watching it. I need someone who knows our world. Someone who can help me go after them right fucking now.

“Fuck.” I slam my hand against the dash. “*Fuck!*”

My hands shake on the wheel.

*Family.*

I learned young that staying silent and unseen is the only way to be safe.

The wipers drag. The yellow line splits and comes back together.

The military gave me brothers. I can still list them in order.

And Eli was my brother long before Fury knew any of us.

I thought that was as close as I would ever get.

Then she came along. Kept pulling the six of us closer. Filled the house with noise I wanted to come home to. Started telling me she loved me like it was the easiest thing in the world.

I’d never felt loved before her. Never understood that someone could want me there when there was nothing to guard and nobody to hurt.

Now I need all of them. Their noise. Their hands. Every stupid argument we haven’t finished having.

I drag in a breath, but it catches halfway.

Fury’s face flashes behind my eyes. Those gray eyes empty, her body limp when I pulled her from that wall. I breathed for her until she came back.

This time I don’t even know where she is. Where any of them are.

I can’t lose them.

*Please. Fuck. I can’t.*

The wheel threatens to slip under my grip. My left leg burns where it’s wedged beneath the dashboard, every jolt sending pain up to my hip. I keep

my right foot on the gas.

I don’t remember the last four miles. One second, the road is an endless slick of rain and fractured yellow lines, and the next, I’m pulling onto a quiet street with a row of identical houses, each fronted by manicured lawns and two-car garages. It screams safety and conformity.

The car jumps the curb as I take the turn too sharp. My foot slams the brake, jerking me forward as the front bumper clips a mailbox, snapping it clean off its post with an ugly crunch. Concrete fragments scatter across the driveway. I kill the engine.

The house looks ordinary. Except it isn’t. It’s a lie wrapped in beige siding and soft porch lights.

My door creaks as I shove it open. I brace a hand on the roof and haul myself upright, keeping my weight off the left leg. There’s no time for careful. Every second I waste is one more second Stephen has with Fury, with my *family*.

I limp to the door, dragging my bad leg behind me, leaving smears of blood on her pristine white walkway. My fist meets the door, the pounding rattling the hinges. Once. Twice. Loud enough to wake the dead.

The door swings open before my third knock lands.

Gloria stands in the frame. She’s in her robe. Reading glasses on top of her head. Shotgun held at her side.

Her eyes take me in. The blood. The torn clothes. The destroyed mailbox. The stolen car on her lawn.

“Knox,” she says. “Has something happened to my son?”

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# FORTY-EIGHT
# SAGE



I come to with a gasp that sears my dry throat, my lungs clawing at the air like they've been lit on fire. Everything is wrong. My shoulders scream, a deep, throbbing ache radiating down my arms, and I realize I'm hanging—wrists bound above my head, the rough bite of rope digging into my skin. The smell hits me next. Damp hay, manure, rust. A barn.

My head throbs as I force my eyes open, the wooden beams above swimming into focus. Dust motes swirl in the faint glow of a single bulb that swings overhead, casting jagged shadows across the space. My body feels heavy as hell, legs dangling uselessly beneath me, toes just barely brushing the straw-covered ground. Knox's shirt still covers me. The birthday collar presses against my throat every time I swallow.

"Shit," I whisper under my breath, wincing at the sound of my own voice scraping the air. My heartbeat's erratic, banging around in there like it's looking for the exit.

It takes a moment to adjust, to orient myself. That's when I see them.

To my right, Milo, then Holden, next to him, Micah. On my left is Eli. They're all strung up just like me. Same ropes, same hooks mounted in the barn's support beams. Their heads hang forward, faces slack, bruised and bleeding. I watch Milo's chest until it rises. Then Holden's. Micah's. Eli's.

Breathing. All four of them.

*Thank God.*

I twist in my restraints, trying to get a good look around the barn. But no matter where I look, Knox isn't here.

“Milo,” I croak, my voice barely above a whisper. I swallow hard, tasting blood and bile, and try again. Louder this time. “Milo, wake up!”

The words feel like sandpaper scraping against my throat. For a moment, there’s nothing—no movement or sound except the faint creak of the ropes holding our weight and the distant calls of birds waking to the dawn. Then he stirs. His head tilts slightly to the side, a groan escaping his lips.

“Milo,” I call again, desperation bleeding through. “Come on, don’t make me go through this alone.”

His eyelids flutter, and after what feels like an eternity, his eyes crack open. The brown in them is dull, unfocused, but it’s enough to make my chest unclench just a little. He blinks a few times, squinting at me, then at the barn around us.

“Kitten?” His voice is hoarse, and he grimaces as if speaking is painful. “What the hell . . .”

“Yeah, it’s me.” Relief surges in spite of everything. “Can you move? Are you—”

“Not exactly ready for a yoga class, no.” He cuts me off with the ghost of his usual sarcasm, but it’s weak, hanging on by a thread. His gaze darts around the barn, taking in our surroundings, the ropes, the hooks. His face hardens. “Shit. This isn’t good.”

“No kidding.” I pull at my bindings instinctively, wincing as the coarse rope bites into my wrists again. “How bad are you?”

“Bad enough,” he grits out as he tests his own restraints. “You okay?”

I don’t bother answering that. “Holden, Micah,” I say instead, turning my head toward them. “See if you can wake—”

Holden groans before I can finish, his head rolling back with a pained grimace.

“Christ,” he rasps, his voice thick with pain as his eyes crack open. His gaze is slow, dragging across the barn before landing on me. There’s recognition there, but it fades quickly beneath a layer of tension.

“Holden,” I call softly, testing his awareness. “You with me?”

He breathes out hard, another groan escaping as he shifts against his bindings. “Define ‘with.’”

I almost laugh, but it feels like my ribs might splinter apart if I let it happen. “Glad you’re alive.”

“Alive?” Holden blinks hard like he’s trying to clear cobwebs from his brain. “Is that what this is supposed to count as? Where the hell are we?”

“A barn,” Milo mutters, his tone sharpening now that he’s shaking off the fog. “Some horror movie set, apparently.”

“Stephen,” I manage, my voice trembling as the anger rises under my skin, hot and caustic. “He took us after the crash. He must have—”

A guttural groan cuts me off. My head jerks toward the sound, and Eli stirs, his hands twitching against the ropes that suspend him. His face scrunches in pain, a low hiss escaping his lips as his muscles strain against obvious discomfort. Then his hazel eyes flutter, but he’s struggling to keep them open.

“Eli,” I hiss. “Hey, come on, wake up.”

His eyes squint in the low light, his gaze shifting toward my voice. His lips part, his voice slurred but pointed. “Sage?”

“Yeah,” I breathe. “It’s me.”

His brows furrow, his head tipping back slightly to take in our surroundings.

“We’re all here,” I tell him. “Everyone except Knox.”

There’s a sharp inhale as his awareness seems to crystallize all at once, comprehension shadowing his features. “Fuck,” he mutters, his jaw tightening. “Do we know where he is?”

“No,” I say, pressure burning the backs of my eyes. “He was still holding me after the crash. Calling my name. I tried to answer him. But I couldn’t. And then . . . I woke up here.”

Micah hasn’t made a sound this whole time. When I finally look at him, his eyes are already open—gray-blue, steady, awake for longer than he’s letting on. That’s so exactly him it closes my throat. “Baby girl?” he murmurs, voice hoarse, dry. “You . . . safe?”

Safe. The word feels like a cruel joke. “Not exactly,” I say. “But you’re awake. That counts for something.”

His gaze flickers over each of us, then stops on Eli.

“Eli?”

“I’m here.” Eli doesn’t look away from him. “Stay with me.”

Micah closes his eyes for one breath. When he opens them, he starts testing the ropes, his face twisting with effort. “Fuck. How are we going to get out of this?”

“I was thinking we . . .” Milo starts kicking his feet, making himself swing, lifting his feet to hook around Holden’s hips.

“Shit! Fuck!” Holden grunts, wincing in pain and kicking Milo away. “What are you trying to do? Rip my fucking hands off?”

“I’m trying to link up so we can maneuver ourselves off these hooks!”

“Look at the angle of them, Milo—we’d need to slingshot ourselves at the ceiling to get the rope over them.”

“Well, I don’t see you coming up with any bright ideas,” Milo snaps back, his voice sharper now, energy returning despite the situation. “Do you have something better? Or would you rather bitch at me and just hang here until Stephen comes back with a chainsaw?”

“Enough,” I hiss, teeth clenched. I look around again, desperate to find something we can use. The double doors are closed. A smaller door sits beyond a rusted tractor at the far end. I can see two ways out and can’t reach either of them.

Holden is looking at the doors too, but not the way I am. He looks at the tractor. At the straw. Back down the row of us. “Four men and a woman,” he says, mostly to himself. “Out of a rolled car, in the rain, before anybody reached it.” He doesn’t finish it.

“He had to have had help,” I mutter, trying to shift and find a little relief from the screaming stretch in my shoulders.

“Kennel,” Milo confirms. “It’s the only answer for this fuckery.”

Micah exhales hard. “He’s kept us alive for a reason. Whatever he wants, we need to keep him talking.”

Eli’s gaze moves from the nearest door to the beam overhead. “The second I get my hands free, I’m burying him alive.”

“He wants payback for Brock,” I say. “He told me last time. Hurting me was how he meant to punish you.” My gaze travels along the row of ropes. “This time, he’s got you all here to watch.”

“Wildcat.” Holden’s voice goes tight. “Why didn’t you tell us he said that to you?”

I shake my head. There isn’t a version of the answer that doesn’t come out sounding like I decided for them. “Because it wouldn’t have changed anything. Because my death was always the—”

The sound of the barn doors creaking stops anyone from saying more. I instinctively still, holding my breath as the faint shuffle of footsteps grows

louder. My body tenses, every nerve ending wired and ready to fight despite the restraints.

Stephen saunters in like he owns the place. There's purpose in every step, his mousy-brown hair damp with the rain, framing a face too soft to match the malignant gleam in his eyes. He carries a worn leather satchel slung over one shoulder, tucking his hands into his pockets as he glances around at us like we're nothing more than livestock he's penned up for slaughter.

"Morning, sunshine," Milo spits, his voice dripping venom. "Enjoying your little power trip?"

Stephen tilts his head, unfazed. In fact, he looks almost amused by Milo's ire. "Ah, still sharp, even after everything. I always liked that about you, Milo."

"Where's Knox?" I demand, unable to keep the panic out of my voice.

His attention shifts to me. "Knox is alive. For now. Whether he stays that way is completely dependent on your compliance."

He glances toward the smaller door. I twist to follow his gaze, searching for movement, a shadow, anything.

Nothing.

"Bring him here. Let me see him."

That earns me a fleeting smile. "Nice try."

"I want to see Knox," I grind out. "If you've hurt him—"

"I haven't hurt anyone. The truck did the hurting. I just provided the timing." He clasps his hands behind his back. "Not that you care about people outside your little harem, but the driver is fine. Paid in advance. Didn't ask questions."

Bile rises at the conversational warmth.

"And what's your plan here?" I speak through gritted teeth. "It'd better be better than the last two. I'm getting really tired of being kidnapped by a loser with no follow-through."

Stephen's smile doesn't flicker. If anything, it sharpens, turning cold and jagged. He walks toward me, the soles of his boots crunching on the dry straw.

"You think my previous attempts were about a lack of resolve? No, Sage. They were about timing. Brock was always impulsive. That was his flaw. Mine? I'm a student of patience. I wait for the perfect moment.

This”—he gestures to the five of us hanging like party decorations nobody took down—“is the perfect moment.”

“You’re a student of being a fucking creep,” Milo barks, his body jerking as he tries to find purchase on the air. The beam above him creaks, a sickening wooden groan that echoes through the rafters. “Let me down and I’ll show you some follow-through that’ll leave you in a body bag.”

Stephen doesn’t even look at him. His eyes stay locked on mine, tracing the line of the birthday collar. He reaches out, his fingers hovering just an inch from the leather. I flinch back.

“Don’t touch her.” Eli’s voice is a low vibration. “I will rip your throat out with my teeth.”

Stephen finally turns, giving Eli a look of mild curiosity. “Always so protective. It’s admirable, really. But you’re currently a decorative element in my barn, Eli. Try to remember your place in the hierarchy of this room.”

“Fuck you, you piece of shit!” Micah spits at the floor, and Stephen just smiles.

“Boys and girl,” he says, turning back to me, his mouth curling at the edge. “If you can’t be quiet, our darling Sage will never know the plan.”

“Just spit it out,” I hiss.

“Oh, bestie, this time I’m going with simple—no more thematic resonance with what you did versus what I do to you. No. This time, I want the truth. I want you to give it up, once and for all. I want the story told straight—by you.” He pauses. Lets the silence work for him. “And if you can’t be honest with me, I’ll kill each of your boyfriends. One. By. One.”

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# FORTY-NINE
# ELI



Blood trickles down my forearms and drips off my elbows into the straw, my wrists rubbed raw against the rope's coarse fibers. The pain is useful. It's the only thing keeping my head clear while Stephen circles Sage.

He lets the threat hang while he slips the satchel off his shoulder and drops it at his feet. He kneels, unzips it, and pulls out a folded knife. He opens it slowly, watching Sage.

"I'll make it easy," he says. Calm. Conversational. Like they're catching up over coffee. "Tell me what you did to Brock. Start from the moment you left the party with him. Don't lie. Or I start cutting."

Sage's jaw is set. I've seen that look before—on the beach, when she took Knox's knife and went for Brock before any of us could stop her. She doesn't need permission to fight back.

But she's hurting. I can see it in the tremors running through her arms, the way her fingers have gone white against the rope. Knox's shirt hangs crooked off one shoulder. A bruise darkens her jaw, and I keep looking at it, then at the knife in Stephen's hand.

I will kill him.

The leader in me wants to assess the room. Catalog variables. Find something I can use. Except the only resource I have is rage, the obstacle is industrial-grade rope, and the objective keeps shifting between getting Sage free and wrapping this rope around Stephen's throat until I hear things crack.

The monster behind my ribs is wide awake. I remember the headlights. The wheel under my hands. The road tipping. After that, there are gaps I can't fill. I don't remember anyone taking us out of the car. I don't know what happened to Knox.

That shower. The last of the foam coming out of her hair while I told her what the tattoo she designed for my back meant to me.

*The cage was never keeping the monster in, Sage. It was keeping everything else out.*

I can still see her crying when I said it. Hear myself telling her how good it felt to have Micah back. To let any of them love me.

She put six birds above that cage, and I have never once said the number out loud. Not to her. Not to anyone. I count them now anyway—five of us in a row, and one still out there somewhere, wings open, farther from the wreck than the rest of us ever got.

Now Stephen is walking between them with a knife, and every instinct I have tells me to put myself in his way. I pull until the rope bites deeper and get nowhere.

I know how to hurt someone. I'm finally learning how to love them.

I don't know how to stand here and watch.

To my right, Holden is bleeding from a split in his eyebrow. The blood runs into his eye, and he blinks it away. Milo is pale. Every few minutes he shifts his weight and sucks a breath through his nose and pretends he didn't. I suspect he's injured his chest in the rollover and hasn't told us. What worries me is the lack of jokes.

I'm petrified for him.

Micah has gone quiet, but his eyes are tracking everything. I've watched him read enough people across his bar to know he's looking for something we can use. What Stephen wants. What gets under his skin.

I wait for him to look at me.

When he does, he tries to smile. Barely manages it. Even now, the bastard is trying to make this easier for me.

I want my hand on the back of his neck. I want him close enough to feel him breathing.

All I can give him is a nod.

And Sage.

She strains against the ropes, eyes following the knife. The animal I watched her feed in that plastic-wrapped living room is still there. So is the

fear. I can see it every time Stephen looks away from her and toward one of us.

Her fingers flex against the bindings.

She wants her hands free as badly as I do.

“Brock was a rapist,” Sage spits.

“Brock was all I had—my family!” The mask drops for half a second. Underneath it is grief so rotted it’s turned into obsession. Hatred wearing love’s clothes.

“That is so gross, man,” Milo says from his hook. “You were fucking your cousin.”

“Step-cousin! We were related by marriage.”

Milo tilts his head despite the pain. “Keyword—related.”

Stephen moves fast. The knife catches light and then it’s buried in Milo’s thigh. The sound Milo makes—a splinter of breath through his teeth—is awful.

I wrench against the ropes. Pain tears up both arms, but Milo is bleeding and I can’t get to him.

I need him to look up and make another stupid fucking joke. I need him to keep being Milo.

I watch Stephen pull the blade free. Watch the blood darken Milo’s pants. Watch Milo look down at the wound and then back up at Stephen with a sneer.

“Is that it? My grandma could cut deeper.”

Sage is shaking from the effort of not lunging against her ropes. I can see the tendons in her neck straining, her hands fisted so tight the knuckles are bone-white. She’s looking at Milo’s blood like it’s a debt being added to a ledger she’s been keeping since the first time Stephen smiled at her across a diner counter.

“You want a story?” she says. “I’ll give you one. But if you touch them again—if you cut any of them before you hear me out—”

“You’ll what?” Stephen steps close. The knife hovers just shy of her neck.

“I killed him,” she whispers, the words torn out of her.

Stephen presses the knife against her neck, holds it for a moment. Then he laughs.

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# FIFTY
# SAGE



The blade stays against my neck while Stephen laughs in my face. I don't dare swallow.

"Bestie!" Stephen singsongs, grinning with all his teeth, eyes dancing between the knife and my face. "Do you think I'm an idiot? I *know* you killed him. You know I know you killed him. I know your little vigilante fuck squad helped you and then made the whole problem go away." He gestures at the others with a lazy flick, like he's swatting at flies. "The part you're missing, you little slut, is the rest." His eyes return to mine, wild and serious. "Tell me *how*. Tell me what you did. What your cum sticks did. I want a full account this time. Every second—from walking out of that party to putting the man I love in the ground."

His eyes travel along the row, then return to me. He presses the knife against my neck until I feel the bite and the burn of drawn blood. "And don't leave out the ugly parts, bitch."

"Stop," Holden forces out. Half his face is red from the split in his eyebrow, but the glare he levels at Stephen could strip paint. "She didn't have anything to do with it. Brock was a piece of shit and he got what was coming. If you want a name, mine's at the top of your list. I'm the one who dropped the noose around his neck."

Stephen's mouth twitches, soft with amusement, but his eyes are empty. He crosses the floor in a couple of long strides. The knife flashes, and Stephen buries it in Holden's ribcage. Up and under. The sound Holden

makes is a huffed-out bark that dies tight in his throat. Stephen holds him perfectly still, the blade still inside him.

"Unhelpful," he sighs, twisting it a little. "But thank you for volunteering." He slides the knife out slowly and turns back to me, flicking blood on the ground, then wiping the blade on his jeans.

Holden sags. His feet nearly slip out from under him, but he doesn't make a sound.

"Let them go, you fucking coward!" Eli's shouts are pure murder. He thrashes with enough force to make the ropes creak, eyes wild, hair plastered to his face. "You want to know what happened—he was a rapist, we killed him. That's what we fucking do to rapists who think they're above the law. Justice—"

"Justice?" Stephen echoes, turning Eli's word over like a coin in his mouth. "Justice is such a quaint word for murder, Eli." He steps up so fast I barely see the movement—just the blade glinting near Eli's eye. He traces a line along his cheekbone, firm enough to indent his skin, but gentle enough that it doesn't cut. "But then, the simplest men always reach for the simplest answers."

Eli bares his teeth. "You think you're better? You think you're anything more than a parasite?"

Stephen's smile doesn't move, but the rest of his face softens. "No. I think we're exactly the same. We both murder. I just prefer to play with my pets first. Take my time."

He turns away before Eli can spit another threat.

"Let's try again, Sage. You walked out of the party . . ."

I look at the others. Milo's pants are soaked with blood. Holden sags against his ropes, his face drained of color. Eli is still straining toward Stephen. Micah meets my eyes and gives a small shake of his head.

My stomach twists. I killed Brock, and Stephen is cutting *them*.

I can't watch him do it again.

"Fine." I swallow hard, and the words crawl up my throat like fire.

"Brock offered to walk me home from the party. I told him no, that I was good alone, but he wouldn't let it go—kept insisting, like it was some chivalrous bullshit."

Stephen's face lights up, a sick delight twisting his features as he leans in, hanging on every syllable.

“He sweet-talked me into detouring along the beach. Said there was something cool to see. Then he bolted ahead, yelling for me to catch up, all excited like a kid.”

“God, he was good,” Stephen breathes, the sick fuck actually impressed. “And you followed, right? He got you all excited with him and then . . .”

My chest tightens, the memory slamming back. Waves crashing. Salt air turning sour. My vision blurs. My throat thickens.

“And *then?*” Stephen roars, and I force the bile down.

“He was on me, shoving me down to my knees, yanking at his pants, trying to force his dick into my mouth like I was nothing.”

Micah turns his face away, tears running down his cheeks.

“Did he threaten to knock your teeth out?” Stephen’s grin stretches wide, eyes gleaming, and he steps right up to me. “Were you scared to lose this pretty smile?” He flips the knife and rams the handle into my mouth, cold metal scraping my teeth as he shoves it deep.

“No!” Micah screams while the others growl and fight their restraints.

“Was it like this?” Stephen purrs, undeterred, twisting the knife until I gag.

*Brock’s hands in my hair. The sand under my knees. His weight pushing me down while the surf ate the sound I tried to make.*

*The foam. The pressure against my lips. The chemical taste. The dark.*

*The rope around my neck behind my apartment. The pressure building in my skull. The world going narrow and bright and then nothing.*

Bile surges. My body convulses against the ropes. Tears sting my eyes and have nowhere to go but out. My lungs are seizing, locked in a desperate battle against the panic reflex and the obstruction in my throat. The room spins—a dizzying carousel of shadows and the horrified faces of the men I love—but I claw my way back from the edge of the darkness.

*Not again.*

I’m *not* that girl on the beach. I’m *not* the victim at the end of a noose or in a wall. I am the woman who held the blade. I’m the one who *survived*.

*I won’t let him take the lights from me. I won’t go under.*

I force my eyes open, staring directly into Stephen’s manic gaze, and I gather every ounce of strength left in my core.

*“Fuck you!”* It’s a muffled scream behind the metal as I swing my legs forward, a clumsy, desperate arc fueled by pure adrenaline. The toe of my heel connects squarely with his shin.

Stephen shrieks, the sound high and thin, and the knife handle yanks out of my mouth as he stumbles back, clutching his leg. I cough violently, spitting out a mixture of saliva and blood, my chest heaving as air finally rushes back into my parched lungs.

“Sage!” Eli’s voice is a roar of encouragement, his body slamming against the ropes with renewed ferocity. “That’s it, little savage! Fight him!”

Stephen’s face contorts. The playful “bestie” persona vanishes, replaced by a raw, ugly snarl. He limps in a small circle, his breath coming in jagged hisses.

“You little bitch,” he rasps, his voice dropping an octave. “You think that changes anything? You think you’re in control?”

He lunges at me, his hand snapping out to catch me by the hair. He yanks my head back, exposing my throat as he holds the tip of the knife trembling inches from my eye.

“I was going to be patient,” he spits, his hot breath sour. “I was going to let you talk. But maybe I’ll just start taking pieces of you instead. How about an ear? Or maybe a finger? We can see how long it takes for your harem to stop looking at you like you’re a prize.”

“Let her go!” Micah yells.

Stephen turns to look at him over his shoulder. “You are my favorite, Micah. Don’t make me hurt you.”

Before Micah can respond, a heavy banging erupts against the barn door. The sound shakes the whole structure. Dust sifts from the rafters. Stephen’s head whips toward the sound. He goes still, listening.

The banging intensifies.

“What the actual fuck,” Stephen mutters. “I told them I wasn’t to be disturbed.”

Stephen releases my hair and stalks toward the door, knife raised. He glances back at me with a warning glare that promises this isn’t over. Then he cracks the door open a sliver, peering out into the gray dawn light.

“Who the fuck are you?” he hisses.

“Oh, hi!” a chirpy voice rings out. “I was in the area, and I was wondering . . . have you seen my son?”

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# FIFTY-ONE
# KNOX



The door splinters under Dennis's boot like wet cardboard. Gloria doesn't wait—she's through the gap first, shotgun leading, Gene and Ray following in their turtlenecks like this is a fucking neighborhood watch meeting. I shoulder past Dennis, my left leg screaming as I cross the threshold.

Stephen stumbles back but catches himself. The knife comes up.

I don't let him use it.

Three limping strides. My hand closes around his throat. I brace on my right leg and haul him off the ground. The right leg takes all of it and starts to shake. Gray crawls in at the edges of everything. I don't put the left down. His feet kick air. He claws at my arm and gets nothing. He's light. A sack of bones and bullshit. All the violence he's spent months rehearsing, means jack shit now because my hand is around his neck and he's nothing but a puppet at the end of my arm.

His mouth gapes for breath. The knife arm flails, but I catch his wrist and wrench it sideways. The blade hits the dirt. I tighten my grip on his throat, and he makes a wet, strangled sound that I could listen to all day.

"Knox!" Fury's cry cuts through the haze, and I see them.

My family.

Strung from hooks like they belong in a slaughterhouse. Ropes at their wrists, arms stretched overhead. Milo's thigh is soaked dark with blood. Holden's side is bleeding through his shirt. Micah is pale under a sheen of sweat. Eli's wrists are raw meat.

And Fury.

Fury, with blood at the corners of her mouth and a fresh red line at her throat. Her eyes are wild and wet and locked on me.

“Knoxie.”

“Fury.” My voice breaks on her name. I don’t give a fuck who hears it.

Behind me, the dads are already moving. Dennis reaches Milo first, climbing a stepladder and sawing through the rope with an efficiency that tells me he’s cut people free before. Gene goes for Holden. Ray heads for Micah.

“Two out by the tractor shed,” Dennis says, still sawing. “They won’t be getting up. Third one had a pickup and decided he had somewhere else to be.”

I look at Stephen in my grip. His eyes are bulging. His fingers are weakening against my forearm.

I want to squeeze until there’s nothing left.

“Easy, honey,” Gloria says from behind me. “We need him alive for now.”

*For now.*

I drive Stephen’s skull into the nearest support beam. The crack is solid. His body goes limp. I let him drop and grab rope from the floor—the same rope that held my family. Wrists first. Ankles next. I cinch the knots hard enough to bite into skin. Then I loop a second line around his chest and the post for good measure.

If he wakes up, he’s waking up trussed.

“I’ll just . . .” Gloria crouches beside him and does what she does best—she sticks a needle in his neck. “Now you can’t bother anyone until we’re ready to deal with you,” she says, capping the syringe and dropping it into her pocket.

*How many of those does she have in there?*

I turn away from Stephen’s unconscious heap to assess the others.

Milo is on the ground, Dennis pressing a wad of gauze against his thigh.

“Hey, big guy,” Milo says. His voice is thin. “Nice of you to show up. We were just hanging out, waiting. It was a great bonding experience.”

“Jesus,” Gene mutters from where he’s lowering Holden, who lands hard and immediately reaches for his side.

“How bad?” I ask, limping closer.

Holden peels his hand away. Blood slips between his fingers and spreads a sticky mess across his shirt.

“I’ll live.”

Gene puts a dressing into his hand and helps him settle against the post. “Hold that there.”

Holden winces as he pulls his shirt away from his wound and presses the dressing against it. “Hurts like a bitch, though.”

Micah is next, Ray easing him down gently. He sways on his feet, catches himself on the post, and stands there for a second with his eyes closed and both hands flat against the wood. Then he opens his eyes and looks at me.

“I’m okay. He didn’t hurt me. Go to her.”

Gene cuts Eli’s rope as I reach Fury’s end of the row. He lands in a crouch that turns into a stumble, and I catch his shoulder before he goes down.

His hand closes around my forearm. For a second, neither of us lets go.

“Brother,” he gets out.

I nod because anything else is going to fucking break me.

He steadies himself, then turns toward Fury, putting himself between her and Stephen’s unconscious body.

Ray slides an arm behind her back while he works at the rope. I get my hands around her waist before the last strands part, taking her weight as her knees buckle.

“I’ve got you.”

She looks up at me. Blood at the corners of her mouth. Rope burns circling her wrists. A bruise forming along her jaw. Her face is streaked with dirt and tears and blood.

“Knew you’d come,” she whispers.

It’s the same thing she said after we pulled her from the foam. After she started breathing again.

My arms close around her. I hold her the way I’ve held her every time—too tight, too much. I know what it feels like to reach for someone and find empty air, and I *never* want to live a life like that again.

“We have to stop meeting like this,” I mutter into her hair.

A startled laugh bursts free, followed by a hiccuping sob.

“Fury.” My mouth is against her temple. I hold her, rubbing her arms, knowing they’ll be numb and aching. “I’m sorry. I’m so sorry I wasn’t—”

“No. No,” she whispers. “Don’t talk like that. You’re here. You found us.” Her fists knot in my jacket. “That’s all that matters.”

I hold her until her shaking stops. Or until mine does. I’m not sure which comes first.

When I finally lift my head, Ray has Holden’s shirt off and a kit spread on the ground beside him. Dennis hasn’t left Milo. He’s cut a section out of Milo’s pants and is stapling the wound closed while Milo bites his knuckles and tries not to cry out. Gene settles Micah on an overturned bucket, tucks a blanket around his shoulders, then turns to Eli’s wrists to start cleaning and wrapping.

Gloria stands in the center of it all. Shotgun crooked over one arm. Reading glasses still on her head. She’s surveying the room like a general who has managed worse before breakfast.

Four people who owe us nothing, working a room full of other people’s blood without anyone raising their voice. I grew up in a house where nobody made a sound either. It wasn’t this.

Fury shifts against me and winces. My attention catches on the blood at her mouth again. The cut at her throat.

“Did he do that to you?”

She nods. “Not here. Okay?”

I look at Stephen.

“Knox.” Her fingers tighten in my jacket. “Don’t.”

“Why not?”

“Because if you start now, you won’t stop.”

She knows me too well. The worst part is she’s right.

“And not to hurt your ego, sweetheart,” Gloria says, “but you might need a minute before any acts of murder. Sit down before you fall down.”

“I’m fine.”

My left leg picks that exact moment to nearly fold.

Fury’s hands fly to my sides, and Eli catches my arm.

“I said I’m fine.”

“You’re bleeding through your pants,” Fury says.

I look down. *Huh. So I am.*

“Sit,” Gloria repeats.

I let them back me toward a hay bale. Then my leg makes the decision for me. Pain blasts white through my skull as I drop onto it hard. When my vision clears, Fury is kneeling in front of me.

“Let me take care of you a minute, okay?”

“Yeah,” I say, because there’s no version of reality where I stop her from touching me. “Just a minute.”

Her touch is careful in a way that makes my chest ache worse than the leg. She eases the torn fabric away from my knee and shin, her brows pulling tight at the swelling.

“Fracture?”

“Probably.”

“Probably?” Her voice goes flat. “That’s your medical opinion?”

“My medical opinion is it hurts like a motherfucker.”

“That’s more useful.”

Even scraped raw and shaking, she’s still got enough dry bite left to make me want to drag her into my lap and keep her there forever. Instead I grit my teeth while she checks my ribs. The second her palm brushes my left side, I hiss.

“There,” she says softly.

“Yeah.”

“Any trouble breathing?”

“Only when you ask annoying questions.”

Her mouth tightens like she wants to smile and refuses to let herself.

“How did you even find us?” Eli asks while Gene finishes wrapping his wrists.

Gloria casually checks the chamber on her shotgun. “I had a tracker placed under Milo’s skin when he was fourteen.”

Silence.

Milo gapes from where Dennis is working on his thigh. “You did fucking what?”

Gloria lifts her brows. “Don’t be dramatic. It was a very minor procedure. I did it to all my children.”

“A minor—” Milo’s face goes through outrage, betrayal, and what might actually be existential collapse. “You microchipped me? Like a goddamn schnauzer?”

“Purebred, yes.”

“Jesus Christ, Mom!”

She smiles at him serenely. “I think what you mean to say is thank you, sweetheart.”

He stares at her like he’s deciding whether matricide is morally flexible under the circumstances. Then he scrubs a bloody hand over his face and bites out, “Fuck. Thank you. I’m still mad at you, though.”

“As is your right.”

Fury doesn’t say anything. She’s watching Milo. He looks up and catches her at it, and whatever’s on his face quits being outrage partway through. He doesn’t replace it with a joke.

Dennis pats Milo’s good knee. “Hold still, kiddo.”

Ray says something low to Holden, who shuts his eyes and nods. There’s still too much blood on that side of the barn.

I borrow Gloria’s phone and call Odin.

“We’ve got all five,” I tell him. “Alive. Stephen’s restrained.”

I give him our location and promise another update when we move. Then I hand the phone back.

Fury has one hand resting on my good knee. I cover it with mine.

“We need to decide what we’re doing with him,” Holden says, nodding toward Stephen.

“This is kitten’s choice,” Milo says. “But for the record, my vote is removing his limbs and putting his torso in a pig pen.”

“Jesus, Milo,” Micah says softly from the bucket. “Do you hear yourself?”

“I do, and I stand by my vision.”

“Pigs are inefficient,” Eli says, voice rough with pain. “Too many variables. How about we just go with a plastic bag to the head?”

“Too fast,” Holden forces out. “He deserves to suffer.”

“Then we bury him alive,” Micah says.

I stare at all of them.

We’re bleeding. Half-dead. Held together with gauze and hatred.

And they’re discussing disposal methods like we’re picking takeout.

Gloria beams. “This is a beautiful moment.”

“What do you want to do with him, Fury?” I ask. “Your choice.”

She slowly rises, her fingers sliding up to my shoulder and staying there the whole way up. I get it. If she disappeared from my reach again, I don’t know what I’d become.

She turns toward Stephen.

Even unconscious, he looks wrong tied to that post. Too small for the damage he’s done. Too ordinary. Blood mats one side of his hair where I

cracked his skull into the beam. His chest moves. Slow. Shallow.

Fury stops in front of him, nothing but contempt in her eyes.

“He did say he wants to know what happened to Brock.”

She turns to look at all of us.

“I say we show him.”

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# FIFTY-TWO
# SAGE



The van smells of industrial cleaner and cigar smoke.

We're parked behind a gas station on a county road. Stephen is in the back, still out from whatever Gloria injected into him, wrapped in a tarp and secured with enough rope to anchor a sailboat. They found Mars tied up outside the barn. Brock's little terrier is now sitting in the passenger seat, panting up a storm, excited over all the attention.

She lifts a paw at me through the gap in the seats. Somebody taught her that in three days, with treats and repetition, so he'd have something to walk me into the bushes with. I scratch behind her ear until she puts it down.

Dennis has Milo on the van's bench seat, checking the dressing over his newly stapled thigh. Knox sits opposite, his left leg now splinted and stretched along the bench. He finishes updating Odin and hands Gloria her phone back.

The trauma kit Dennis is working from lives under the driver's seat. It's military-grade.

I'm not sure I want to know why Gloria has it.

Ray is redressing Holden's stab wound. Holden sits with his shirt open and his jaw set, enduring the examination with barely contained irritation. He hates being touched by anyone who isn't one of us.

"You're lucky," Ray says, positioning the medical stapler over the wound to close it further.

Holden grunts as the first goes in. "I don't feel lucky."

"That's because you're stubborn. Hold still." *Ka-chung!*

Gene wraps my wrists in clean gauze. His hands are quick, practiced, gentle. It's hard to wrap my head around this version of them. They breached a barn, cut five people free, secured a prisoner, and loaded him into a van without raising their voices or breaking formation.

These are not suburban dads.

"Gloria?" I call.

She's leaning against the van's open door, shotgun balanced over one shoulder, watching the road.

"Yes, dear?"

"Who are you?"

She looks at me. At the men behind me. At Milo, who immediately covers his ears with both hands and starts humming loudly.

"I oversee maritime import channels," she says with a shrug. "Private debt resolution. Offshore warehousing. And a considerable portion of Hunter Harbor's informal labor market."

"She's a crime lord," Holden says flatly.

"If you prefer vulgar terms," Gloria says, unbothered.

Milo hums louder.

"Maritime import channels," Holden repeats, and his voice has changed. The detective filing evidence even while he's bleeding. "What do you know about the Kennel?"

Gloria's expression doesn't shift. "Is this an interrogation, Detective?"

"Holden." That's Micah, blanket still around his shoulders, voice carrying the specific register that means *not now*. "She just saved our lives."

"I know." Holden keeps his eyes on Gloria. "But someone's been probing Odin's network, and Stephen's voice just came through the club's speakers. I need to know whether any of it connects."

Gloria smiles at him, but it's like seeing a crocodile smile—horrifying.

"We can discuss my business interests another time, Detective. But rest assured, everything I do, everything I am, is done to protect my family. Despite what you may think, I'm not someone who allows the abuse of others for no reason. Much like yourself."

Holden inclines his head in grudging acknowledgment.

"If my son loves you, then you're under my watch. Which means I'll do everything in my power to ensure you get your answers." She turns back to the road. "We should move. I believe you all have a reckoning to plan and execute. You have until . . ." She looks at her watch. "Sundown for the

drugs I gave him to wear off. Until then, we're at your disposal. Anything you need."

"Thanks, Gloria," I say, rubbing my hands together as I look around at all my guys. "I'm going to need a pink dress."



I DRAG in a breath that tastes like salt and blood and cool evening air.

Under the jetty, the shadows feel alive.

The tide hisses against the pilings somewhere beyond us, the ocean rolling in and out like a slow, hungry thing. Wet sand presses cold against my knees where I crouch across from Stephen, and the wooden beams above throw broken shadows over his face. We brought him here because I wanted him where it started. Where Brock took me to hurt me and turn me into his next "pet." The exact place I was reborn.

My heartbeat is so steady that it surprises me. The last time I was in this position, I was shaking and crying. Now, I'm completely in control.

We wait for Stephen to wake. The cold works through my dress, and my knees ache against the sand. But I'm patient. That's something Stephen taught me.

Finally, his head lolls, then jerks. A rough sound catches in his throat behind the gag. His lashes flutter. He blinks hard, disoriented, his eyes trying to make sense of the shadows, the ropes binding him, the ache in his body. He's on his knees, slumped forward, dick out, flaccid. His wrists are bound behind him. Ankles tied. He can't move. And even if he could, it wouldn't matter.

I have a story to finish.

"Wakey, wakey," I singsong. "Rise and shine, Stephen."

He blinks, and then his gaze snaps to me.

I smile.

Even in the shadows, I see the panic hit. It comes on fast and ugly. He glances at his exposed crotch and makes a muffled series of noises, jerking harder against the restraints, trying to talk through the gag, trying to ask questions I'm never going to answer cleanly.

I fold my hands in my lap and tilt my head. "Do you like my dress?" I smooth my hand over the pink dress Ray collected for me. "It's really close

to what I was wearing that night. I mean, it's not the same. But close. I thought you'd appreciate the visual while I finish my story."

He goes still for half a beat, and it's like watching all the pieces slide into place behind his eyes. The barn. The knife. The words he dragged out of me one ripped-open piece at a time.

A slow shiver works through him, and then he starts trying to speak again.

"Now, now, Stephen. Don't go changing your mind. You've been so focused on getting this story out of me. Went to so much trouble to know how it ends. I think it's only fair I walk you through it."

I lean in until my mouth is almost brushing the gag stretched between his teeth.

"Now where did we leave off?" I murmur, smiling when he flinches. "Oh. Right."

I let my gaze drag over his face, his throat, the pulse jumping there in frightened little bursts.

"Brock was trying to force his dick into my mouth."

His whole body tightens.

"Don't freak out, Jamie—I mean, Stephen—you're about to get *exactly* what you wanted."

He whimpers.

Movement blooms between the pilings.

It happens exactly the way it did the first time—like a nightmare replayed with better lighting. One second it's just me and Stephen and the sea and the jetty overhead. The next, they step out from behind the pilings one by one, silent and huge and masked, shadows made solid. Late evening light catches on eerie skull masks, black hoods, broad shoulders, gloved hands. Five beautiful, terrible men.

*Mine.*

*My men.*

The rope drops around his neck and Stephen makes a sound behind the gag that spikes sharp with terror. Then he's flying up into the air, legs kicking, eyes bulging as the rope goes taut and wrenches a choked scream through his nose.

His legs kick uselessly above the sand. His bound hands strain behind him. The gag is already wet with spit and terror. He twists, trying to find

footing that isn’t there, trying to breathe around the noose biting into his throat, and for one beautiful second all I can see is Brock.

The moonlight. The salt. The animal panic.

The reckoning.

I rise slowly to my feet.

The rope is secured. Around him, my men stand in silence. Black-clad, masked, implacable. A tribunal of monsters. Knox braces a shoulder against a piling, his splinted leg stiff. Milo keeps his weight on his good leg. Holden has one hand pressed to his side.

None of them looks away.

The ocean moves behind them in long dark breaths, and the old version of me—the girl who thought this place was where she died—feels very far away.

I step closer until Stephen’s frantic gaze locks on mine again.

Then I turn to Knox and crouch beside his good leg, reaching down to his boot.

His knife slides free with a soft metallic whisper.

The sound alone makes Stephen start fighting harder, his body jerking against the rope, a frantic pendulum of fear. I straighten with the blade in my hand and move back in front of Stephen, testing the weight of it. My pulse drums slow and deep.

I smile at him.

“This,” I say softly, almost fondly, “was the best part.”

He makes a broken, pleading noise.

I don’t hesitate.

The first plunge goes straight into his dick.

The knife sinks into soft flesh, and Stephen convulses so violently the rope above him jerks. A muffled scream tears out of him. Hot blood spills over my hand. I pull the blade free and stab again. And again. Lower, deeper. I keep going until there’s no pattern left to his body.

The blade punches in and out of him with wet, ugly sounds, and every time I drag it free, more heat spills over my fingers. His crotch disappears first beneath blood and shredded fabric. Then his stomach. I carve through him the same way I did Brock, reducing him to torn meat and ruptured skin and all the terror he spent months earning. He jerks on the rope less and less, his muffled screams collapsing into gargled nothing, head lolling, knees twitching uselessly against the pull at his neck.

I don’t stop when I think he’s dying.

I stop when he’s dead.

When there’s no more fight left in him. No more frantic kick of his legs. No more pulse of sound behind the gag. Just a body hanging there, split open and dripping into the sand while the tide breathes and the men around us stand like dark gods and witnesses.

My chest heaves.

My hand is slick and red around the knife hilt.

Blood drenches my face and dress.

Just like before.

Just like Brock.

“So now you know,” I say as I take one step back and look at what’s left of him, smiling at what I’ve done.

For a beat, no one moves.

Then Milo, of course, breaks the moment. “Ah, kitten. If we’re going full recreation, his dick is supposed to be on the ground at his feet.”

I look back to the body, and through the mess of his abdomen, I find his penis still hanging by a thread. I slice at it, and it drops to the sand with a wet plop.

Applause.

“Nobody kick it at me this time,” Eli says.

Grinning, I turn to face them, and they’re moving.

Micah gets to me first, careful of the bandages as he takes the knife from my hand. He sets it on the sand and pulls off his mask, dropping it beside the blade.

“You did it,” he murmurs, voice wrecked and warm. He cups my face, thumbs brushing under my eyes. He kisses me slow and careful, all tenderness wrapped around a violent sort of pride. “I’m so proud of what you’ve become, baby girl.”

He steps back, and Eli pulls off his mask. Then he’s there, one gloved hand on the back of my neck as he drags me into him and crashes his mouth over mine.

It’s not gentle. It’s not careful. It’s Eli kissing me like he wants to swallow my wrath whole and worship it at the same time. My split lip burns, but I pull him closer. His breath is ragged through his nose, his body trembling with leftover rage and pain, but when he pulls back, his forehead rests against mine.

“Fuck, little savage,” he says, voice shredded raw. “You were so fucking good.”

A shiver runs through me, violent and bright. I smile, or maybe I just bare my teeth. With blood all over me, I’m not sure there’s a difference anymore.

Milo shoves his mask onto his head and limps into the space beside Eli, pushing at his shoulder until Eli gives way with a muttered curse. Milo’s hands bracket my face, light-brown eyes shining.

“Kitten,” he says, and his voice cracks a little. “That was the hottest and most horrifying thing I’ve ever seen, and I need you to know I mean that with profound respect. Fifteen out of ten. The extra points are for the severed cock.”

I laugh, broken and breathless. He kisses me quick first, then again, softer, deeper.

“You did amazing,” he whispers against my lips. “Perfect revenge. No notes.”

Holden comes after him, slower, as if every step is pain but pain could never keep him away from me. Evening light catches the hard planes of his mask, the cold blue of his eyes behind it. When he stops in front of me, he shifts the mask up and just looks at me for a second, long enough that my pulse starts thudding in a different rhythm.

Then his hand comes up, gloved fingers tipping my chin.

“You know, the first time I saw you do that was when I knew,” he says, voice low and gruff.

“Knew what?” I ask, breathless.

“That you belonged. You were the most beautiful thing I’ve ever seen. Still are.” He presses his mouth to mine, and for a second, the whole brutal beach goes soft at the edges.

His kiss is controlled where the others weren’t, but it still lands like possession. Like a claim. His thumb drags through the blood on my jaw before he steps back, eyes bright and strange but perfect.

“You were exquisite,” he says, moving his lips to my ear. “And I’m so fucking hard.” He grinds against me, and I gasp, just as turned on.

Knox is last.

He hangs back while the others orbit close, giving me their mouths and their praise and their dark, aching pride, and all the while I can feel him there like security at my back.

When I finally turn to him, he’s already watching me.

The skull mask makes him look inhuman—some executioner dragged straight from a nightmare—but he’s all Knox. All heat. All ruin. All that enormous, terrible tenderness he only ever lets me see when it’s too late to take it back.

Blood drips from my fingertips onto the sand.

Stephen swings behind me, slow and dead on the rope.

Knox pushes away from the piling. I close the distance before he can put his weight on that leg.

He strips off his gloves and drops them, then peels the mask off. The sight of his face almost undoes me more than the killing did. There’s blood at his temple from the crash. Bruising along his jaw. His mouth set hard like he’s barely holding himself together.

His hand comes to my cheek, huge and warm and a little unsteady.

“You’re fucking incredible, Fury,” he says, voice low and wrecked.

Then he kisses me.

His mouth takes mine with that same brutal need he always carries for me. I melt into him and bite at his lower lip and taste salt and blood and something so fiercely his that my whole body answers.

I fist the front of his shirt and kiss him back like I’m trying to climb inside his ribs and live there. His hand spreads at the back of my neck, holding me steady, holding me up, and when he finally breaks the kiss, we’re both breathing hard.

I lift my head enough to look at him. At the bruises. The blood. The wild dark of his eyes.

A laugh catches in my throat, soft and ugly and a little cracked. “You know what I just realized?”

His thumb strokes over my cheekbone, smearing blood. “What, Fury?”

I glance back at the corpse still swaying on the rope. “He got the same ending Brock did. Same fear. Same pain. Same dark.” My smile turns sharp. “But he’ll never get the last piece. He’ll never know what we did with Brock after. Where we put him. How completely he disappeared.” I look back at Knox. “And honestly? I think that’s perfect—the not knowing.”

His gaze burns hotter. “Everything he deserved,” he says, and then his mouth is on mine again.

This kiss is deeper. Slower and somehow rougher for it. My fingers curl into his shirt harder as his hand slides from my cheek to my throat, his

thumb settling beside the cut. Holding. Claiming. The ocean roars in my ears. My blood hums. Behind us, Stephen hangs and swings and means nothing at all.

For the first time since Brock dragged me under this jetty, this place doesn't feel haunted.

It feels finished.

I can finally start to live.

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# FIFTY-THREE
# SAGE



“Let’s make this part quick,” Eli says.

Salt air fills my lungs while blood dries on my skin. Dennis and Gene lower Stephen’s body from the rope, the wet thud of it hitting the sand louder than a body has any right to be.

What I need now is for the rope to stop swinging and the night to start being ours.

Gloria waves us clear. “Hank will handle disposal.”

His refrigerated van is waiting beyond the beach access. Dennis and Gene wrap the body in a tarp and carry it up while Gloria drops the other van’s keys into Eli’s hand.

“Bring everyone home,” she says.

Milo limps after them, leaning on Ray for support. As the rear doors slam shut, he raises a hand in a wave.

“Bye, Dads!” he calls out, voice cracking with that bright edge he gets when the world’s tilting too far.

Hank pulls away with Gloria and the other dads aboard, tires crunching as the van disappears into the night. Milo stares after it, then turns back to us.

“I wonder what Hank’s going to do with a body?”

Nobody pushes him on it—we all see the way his eyes glaze, the cognitive wall he’s building brick by brick to keep Gloria’s world from bleeding into his. It’s how he survives, how he functions, and right now, with blood still drying on my hands, I get it more than ever.

“Okay, team,” I say, wiping my hands on the back of my dress. “That’s Stephen out of our lives. What happens now?”

Eli turns to me, his mask pushed onto his head, autumn eyes glinting, untamed and heated. “If I remember that night correctly, there’s one more thing we need to do.”

My pulse kicks up, an echo of memory stirring. “What’s that?”

Micah retrieves the knife from the sand and returns it to Knox. It disappears into his boot before the skull masks cover their faces again.

Eli’s mouth curls into a wicked grin before he pulls his own mask down. “Run.”

The word hits me like a starting pistol, and I’m off, bolting down the beach—sand flying under my feet, blood-soaked pink dress whipping around my legs. The jetty falls away behind me. The ocean crashes to my left, and my ribs ache with every breath, but I keep running.

Two sets of footsteps hammer the sand behind me.

I glance back. Eli is closing fast, Micah just behind him, their skull masks gleaming under the moon. A laugh tears from my throat, breathless and unhinged. I turn forward and push harder, heart pounding with the knowledge that they’re going to catch me.

That I want them to.

Then Eli’s arms wrap around my waist, and he tackles me into the cool sand. We roll, the breath knocked out of me, and suddenly he’s above me again. One hand braces beside my head while the other pushes his mask up.

I’m already reaching for him when his mouth crashes against mine.

Micah reaches us next, dropping to his knees beside us, his breathing worse than mine. Eli is still kissing me when Milo and Holden catch up, limping across the sand. Knox follows with his splinted leg held stiff, his eyes fixed on me.

They’re all here.

And I’m exactly where I wanted to end up.

Once they crowd close, the masks turn everything into a fevered blur, bodies pressing in close, hands everywhere, stripping away the ruined dress with rough urgency. Someone’s mouth claims my breast, teeth grazing my nipple while another pair of hands spreads my thighs, fingers delving into my slick heat, teasing and thrusting until I’m arching off the sand, gasping. The waves provide a rhythmic roar that drowns out my moans as they surround me, all heat and muscle and shadowed intent.

Knox’s massive frame is unmistakable even masked—he sits back on one hand, his splinted leg stretched clear, unzipping and guiding his thick cock to my lips.

“Open, Fury.”

I take him in deep, tongue swirling, tasting salt and skin as he groans low. His hand steadies my jaw, careful of the bruise, and I find a pace my battered mouth can manage.

A hand slides between my thighs while my mouth is full of Knox, two thick fingers finding the place that’s already swollen and aching and slick.

I cry out around him, the sound ripped apart by the heat of him on my tongue. Sand sticks to my blood-wet skin. The mask above my stomach turns everything into shadow and breath and hard lines, and I can’t tell whose mouth is dragging over my breast now, whose palm is pinning my hip, whose low curse gets swallowed by the surf.

All I know is what they’re doing to me.

What they’re taking.

What they’re giving back.

Knox’s hand fists in my hair, holding me where he wants me. “That’s it, Fury,” he grinds out, voice dark and wrecked above me. “Take it.”

I do.

I take him until tears sting my eyes and my throat burns, until my jaw aches and my whole body shakes with the pressure building under my skin. The hand at my cunt works me ruthlessly, fingers pumping in and out while a thumb circles my clit, steady and merciless. Another mouth closes over my nipple and sucks hard enough to make my back bow off the sand.

I gag on Knox and moan anyway.

The mask above my chest lifts. A familiar laugh—muffled, breathless, unsteady—ghosts over my skin. Milo. I don’t know for sure, and the not knowing only makes it hotter. Another body crowds in on my left, broad palm sliding under my neck to lift me a little while Knox fucks my mouth deeper.

“Oh, fuck,” someone says near my ear. “She looks so pretty like this.”

My thighs try to close. The hand between them forces them wider.

The pressure snaps.

I come. Knox pulls out of my mouth, and the cry tears free, my whole body jerking hard enough to throw sand. My pussy clenches around those fingers again and again while they hold me through it, all of them touching

me somewhere—mouth, hands, thighs, stomach, breasts, hair—like they can't stand not to.

"That's my girl," Knox says, voice rough as gravel.

I'm still shuddering when they move me onto my hands and knees. Knox shifts on the sand, keeping his injured leg clear as I lift my face to him. His bare hand cups my jaw.

I blink up at a skull mask, and he strokes his thumb over my lower lip.

"Open again."

I do.

Knox fills my mouth a second later, and I'm sucking him while someone slides beneath me, hands lifting my hips so I'm straddling him. Then there's a blunt press of a cock at my pussy. Then another, slick and insistent, nudging higher, teasing at the tight ring of muscle of my ass.

My breath punches out of me.

"Oh my God."

A low chuckle sounds somewhere over my shoulder. "Yeah," someone murmurs. "That's the idea."

The first push inside my pussy is slow, stretching, overwhelming after everything already done to me. I moan around Knox, drool slipping down my chin, while the second cock works at my ass with patient pressure, fingers dragging slick from my pussy, preparing me first, opening me, making me writhe.

I can't tell who's where.

A kiss lands on the back of my neck through my hair. Another hand splays over my spine. Someone bites softly into my shoulder while the man in my ass finally starts to push in.

I go boneless around the sensation.

My eyes roll half shut. Sand grits under my knees. Knox thrusts into my mouth at the same pace they fill me from behind, and for one dizzy second it feels like being split open in every direction, held together only by the hands gripping me.

"Breathe, baby girl," one of them says, and I know immediately that's Micah. "Just like that. You've got it."

I moan.

I take them both inch by inch, gasping and moaning and choking around Knox while my body gives way. The one in my cunt bottoms out first. The

one in my ass follows with a groan that sounds almost pained, his hands tightening hard enough on my hips to bruise.

Then they start moving.

I lose track of everything except rhythm.

Knox feeding me his cock, one hand in my hair.

The drag of one thick length in my cunt.

The harder, deeper thrust of another in my ass.

My own sounds, obscene and broken, torn apart by salt air.

The masks make it all feel unreal. Interchangeable and intimate at once. I know these bodies. I know these sounds. But in the dark, with skulls where their faces should be, they become hunger more than identity. Mine more than separate.

*I love it.*

The one in my pussy fucks me in long, fluid strokes that make my clit drag against the base of his cock. The one in my ass is rougher, more deliberate, each thrust pushing me farther onto Knox's mouth-fucking rhythm until I'm caught between them all, used and adored and undone.

Hands move over me constantly.

A palm cups my breast.

Fingers tangle in my hair.

A thumb smears spit from my chin.

I pull off Knox just long enough to gasp, "Who—"

A hand slides under my belly, lifting me. A mouth brushes my ear through the edge of a mask.

"Does it matter?"

No.

*No, it really fucking doesn't.*

I laugh, wrecked and wild, and then Knox is back at my lips, and I suck him down while the two behind me pick up speed. One of them reaches around and rubs my clit in exact circles. I scream around Knox. My whole body tightens. The hand on my clit doesn't let up. If anything, it gets crueler—faster, tighter, forcing me right up against the edge while the men behind me settle into something deeper than chaos.

I know them now.

I know the shape of this.

Micah is the one in my pussy. I feel it in the way he moves—deep and deliberate, every thrust measured like he's trying to make me come apart

without breaking me, even while he's buried to the hilt and groaning like he's one second from losing his mind. He always fucks me like that, like tenderness and ruin are the same language.

And in my ass—

"Milo," I choke around Knox, and the man behind me laughs.

The sound is ragged and bright. "Gold star for the new detective," he pants, shifting his weight off his injured leg. "Jesus, kitten, your ass is—fuck—"

His words break off into a moan when another body crowds him from behind.

Everything in me goes still for one wonderful moment.

Then I feel it—the shift, the press, Milo cursing, his hands digging bruises into my hips as someone slicks him open and starts pushing in.

"Oh fuck," Milo gasps, voice climbing high and breathless. "Oh, fuck, okay, yep, there he is."

Holden.

I know before Milo says anything else. There's a ruthlessness to the way it happens, the way Milo gets held down and filled anyway, the way the rhythm changes all at once. Micah inside me. Milo inside my ass. Holden inside Milo.

My brain short-circuits around it.

Knox is still in my mouth, thick and steady, feeding me every thrust while my spit slicks his cock and runs down my chin. I try to moan and choke on him at the same time, and all it does is make Knox swear under his breath and tighten his grip in my hair.

"Look at you," he grinds out. "Fuck, Fury."

I can't. My eyes are half-blind with tears and moonlight and the sheer obscene overload of it, but I feel everything.

Micah's cock dragging deep in my pussy. Milo thrusting into my ass in shorter, frantic strokes because Holden is driving into him from behind and making him lose any rhythm he had. Knox claiming my mouth. Hands everywhere. Everywhere.

Milo is making sounds I've never heard from him before—broken, helpless, almost disbelieving little moans every time Holden slams into him and knocks him harder into me.

"Stay still," Holden says, voice low and sharpened to a blade.

Milo lets out a laugh that turns into a whine. “I would love to know what part of this situation is giving you the impression I’m capable of that.”

Holden shifts with a sharp hiss, finding a position that spares his wounded side. Then the rhythm builds again.

Milo nearly folds over me with a choked cry, and the movement drives him deeper into my ass, which drives Micah deeper into my pussy, and my whole body convulses around them. I gag on Knox and claw at the sand, absolutely wrecked.

Then Micah makes a sound. “Eli—fuck—”

“Take it,” Eli says, voice dropping. “I’m done watching.”

Eli drops to his knees at Micah’s head, close enough that his thigh brushes my shoulder, and Micah lets out a low moan as Eli slides his cock into his mouth.

So now I’m split open on every side of me while the whole chain locks together.

Knox in my mouth.

Micah in my cunt.

Eli in Micah’s mouth.

Milo in my ass.

Holden in Milo.

*Fucking perfection.*

I can’t think. I can barely breathe. Every thrust passes through all of us, turning us into one obscene, shuddering machine of heat and sand and salt and wet sounds. Milo keeps cursing. Holden keeps forcing little helpless noises out of him anyway. Micah is trying to hold on to gentleness and failing beautifully. Eli sounds half-feral. Knox keeps feeding me his cock like he wants me drunk on him.

I’m gone.

My body seizes around Micah and Milo, clenching so hard they both groan at once. The sound lights me up from the inside.

“That’s it,” Eli says, barely getting the words out. “That’s it, little savage.”

Milo’s hand reaches around and finds my clit again. He rubs once—twice—hard, perfect, merciless.

I break.

My orgasm hits like a detonation, violent enough to tear the scream out of me even with Knox in my mouth. I come again, body locking and

shaking, vision bursting white behind my eyes. Micah curses. Milo practically sobs. Knox groans my name like it hurts—and after the day we've had, it probably does.

I can't stop shaking, and they don't stop fucking me through it.

Micah loses it first.

I feel the exact second control leaves him—his thrusts turn ragged, his whole body going tense beneath mine. He buries himself deep and comes with a muffled groan, hips jerking hard while Eli keeps him pinned there. The pulse of it inside me makes me whimper.

Then Eli follows, almost immediately, like Micah coming is the last thread he had left. He groans something filthy into the dark and slams in deep, hands in Micah's hair.

On the other side, Milo is gone too.

"Holden, Holden, I'm—fuck—"

He doesn't finish. He comes with a wrecked, helpless sound, cock pulsing in my ass while his body spasms over mine. The sensation tips me right back toward madness, oversensitive and raw and still trembling from the climax.

Holden is right behind him, low and silent for half a second longer, then all that control snaps, and he thrusts deep, coming with a harsh groan.

Knox is last. He cradles my jaw as my name leaves him in a whisper, and he unloads down my throat.

Finally, we collapse in a heap on the sand, masks discarded, limbs intertwined, breaths slowing. For a long minute, nobody says anything.

We just stare up at the stars and breathe.

I'm half on my stomach, half twisted onto my side, one leg tangled with Micah's, my cheek pillowed on Knox's chest while Eli's arm lies heavy across my waist like even boneless and spent he needs to keep me pinned to the earth.

Milo is sprawled behind my back in a dramatic, overheated tangle with Holden, who looks like he'd rather die than admit this counts as cuddling even while he very much does not move away.

The sand is everywhere.

In my hair. Between my thighs. On my cheek. Stuck to sweat and blood and saltwater and cum.

The tide crawls close, then slips back, close enough that the foam kisses the edge of Knox's boot.

In the distance, the jetty groans softly.

I release a contented sigh.

Micah's fingers drift over my spine in lazy lines, no urgency left in them now. Just touch for the sake of touch. I feel his mouth brush my shoulder, then my neck, not really a kiss so much as a breath with feeling in it.

"Still with us?" he murmurs.

I make a noise that could mean yes, no, maybe, or never again.

That gets a tired laugh out of him.

Knox's chest rumbles beneath my ear with something that might be a chuckle. His big hand moves up and down my side, slow enough to soothe the vibration under my skin.

Eli shifts beside me with a pained hiss, then immediately settles again like the effort wasn't worth it. "If anybody says the phrase group therapy," he mutters into the night, "I'm walking into the ocean."

"You'll have to go alone. I don't think I can walk," Holden says from somewhere behind me.

Milo groans like he's dying. "I think my soul left my body."

"You still had one?" Holden asks.

I laugh, the sound weak and cracked and real. It shakes all through me. Then everyone else is laughing too.

Stephen is dead.

Finally.

I lift my head enough to look around at them.

*My men.*

The corpse is gone. The ghost is gone. There's still one name on a list in my nightstand drawer, but he's kept this long. He can keep a little longer.

And here, in the aftermath, with all of us wrecked and filthy and breathing hard into the same salt-heavy dark, I feel something so simple it almost hurts.

Peace.

I thread my fingers through Knox's and stare up at the slice of moon above us. "We're insane," I say softly.

"Yes," Micah says.

"Undeniably," Holden adds.

"Hot, though," Eli says.

"Critically so," Milo agrees.

Knox just squeezes my hand once.

I smile into the dark.

Nobody moves to get up.

Nobody reaches for a mask or a weapon or a story to hide behind.

We just stay there in our heap on the sand, sticky and aching and gloriously alive, letting the crash of the waves wash through us while the adrenaline bleeds off and the world slowly, strangely, settles.

Then Milo clears his throat with all the solemnity of a man about to address the nation.

“You know something? I feel like this should be the moment we all propose.”

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# FIFTY-FOUR
# MICAH



There's a grain of sand stuck to Eli's cheekbone.

I've been looking at it since we got in the van. Through the drive home, through getting Knox inside, through the six of us standing in the hallway with the door shut behind us like none of us quite knows what comes next.

It's still there when Eli catches me staring.

"What?"

I reach up and brush it away. My fingers stay against his face.

Right where the knife was.

"Come upstairs to get cleaned up with me."

He studies my face. Then he nods.

Behind us, Holden tells Knox to sit the fuck down. Milo offers an opinion nobody asked for. Sage laughs, and the sound follows us up the stairs, tired and cracked and so fucking good that I have to stop for a second with my hand on the banister.

"You okay?" Eli asks, pausing beside me.

"Yeah." I take his hand, press a kiss to the back of it, and hold on for the rest of the way.

We collect clean clothes and head to the bathroom. Eli carries mine with his and sets them on top of the hamper.

I close the door and turn the lock. The little click makes him look at me.

"I'd like five minutes without an audience."

He chuckles. "You think a lock will stop them?"

“I’m hoping for manners.”

“From this family?”

“Let me have my dreams.”

He almost smiles.

Up close, under the unforgiving light, he looks like he needs to sleep for a week. There’s a bruise coming up along his shoulder where his shirt collar has dragged sideways. Dried blood edges the dressings around his wrists. His eyes are red at the rims.

I doubt I look any better.

I reach past him and turn the shower on to warm, the pipes groaning as the water begins to rumble through the walls.

“Face me,” I say softly.

Eli obeys, his movements stiff. I start with his shirt, working the buttons free with steady fingers, even though my heart is still hammering against my ribs. When the shirt drops to the tile, I get the full map of the day. The bruise from his seatbelt is deepening to a violent plum, and the dressings on his wrists are frayed and stained.

I work slowly, peeling back the adhesive with a gentle touch. Eli’s breath hitches. Underneath, the skin is raw. I press a kiss to his shoulder, my lips lingering against the heat of his skin.

“Micah,” he murmurs, his voice a low vibration.

“I know.”

Steam starts to curl over the top of the glass door, blurring the room into something soft and private.

“You don’t know what I was going to say.”

I lift my eyes to his. “You’ve got your concerned voice on.”

“Take your shirt off.”

“My mistake. Very different voice.”

This time the corner of his mouth moves properly.

I get two buttons undone before the stiff fabric catches against my wrist, and I hiss. Eli’s hands cover mine.

“Let me.”

I let my arms drop.

He works the next button through its hole. Slowly. His fingers aren’t much better than mine, and the shirt is filthy, salt-stiff, and sticking in places I don’t want to examine yet.

“We could cut it off,” I offer.

“I can manage a fucking button.”

“Good. I’d hate to put that on the list of things that finally broke us.”

He breathes out through his nose and gets it loose.

The shirt comes away from my shoulders. I help where I can, and he eases the sleeves over my wrists, watching my face instead of the fabric. When it finally falls, his eyes roam over me.

At the bruising across my chest. The marks the restraints left. The ugly evidence of everything neither of us could stop.

His jaw shifts.

“Eli.”

I put my hand against his cheek when he doesn’t look up, and his eyes fly to mine, wide and wet.

“Micah.”

His hand comes around the back of my neck.

The first kiss hurts. We knock together badly, both too tired and too hungry to judge the distance. His mouth catches the corner of mine. I breathe his name, and he adjusts, slows down, his fingers spreading beneath my curls.

“I couldn’t get to you,” he whispers.

I stroke my thumb along his jaw. “I know.”

“You were right fucking there.” His fingers tighten at my neck. “I could see you. I kept thinking if I could get one hand loose—”

“It’s okay.” I say it against his mouth. “I saw you trying.”

He shakes his head against my cheek. He doesn’t believe me yet. That’s fine. I have the rest of our lives to convince him, and right now I have hot water and ten stolen minutes.

I get his belt open. He gets mine. The rest is clumsy—damp denim, hisses when fabric drags over raw skin, his knuckles knocking my hip. He eases the dirty dressings off my wrists. By the time we step under the spray, we’re both breathing hard.

The water runs rust and salt off him. I watch it swirl down the drain and don’t think too hard about whose blood that is.

When he turns to rinse, I get his back full on. The cage with the bars bent outward. The thing climbing through them. And above all of it, six birds, wings open, each one farther from the wreck than the last.

Sage put that on him. I’ve counted the birds more times than I’ll admit and never once asked him whether he has.

“Which one of them do you think is me?” I ask, reaching out and touching a finger to each of them.

“The one closest to me.”

“Which one are you?”

“The last one.” His eyes find mine as he turns around. “Took me the longest to figure it out.”

Eli reaches for the soap and starts with my wrists. He doesn’t say anything more. He just lathers and rinses, like he’s scrubbing the day off in layers. When he’s satisfied, he lifts my arm and presses his mouth to the inside of my wrist, right over the worst of the marks.

“I was so fucking scared,” he says.

The mask is gone. It’s just him, wet-haired and wrecked and holding my hand like a tether.

“I know.”

“Micah.”

I laugh, because he knows me too well. “I was scared too.”

His eyes come up.

“I wasn’t scared of dying,” I say. “That left me a long time ago.” I work shampoo through his hair, slow, careful of everything I can’t see. “But I kept thinking about you watching. And I kept thinking—if this asshole kills one of us, the rest are going to see it happen, and it’s going to live in their head forever. That’s what scared me—you having to carry the loss.”

His forehead drops to my shoulder. His arms come around my waist, careful, always mapping what’s hurt before he touches. Water sheets down both of us.

“I couldn’t have,” he says. “Carried it. If she’d—if you’d—if any—” He doesn’t finish. His hands tighten.

“Then it’s a good thing we’re all so hard to kill.”

He huffs against my neck, and it’s almost a laugh, and I’ll take it.

We kiss under the spray, slow and deep, bodies sliding together, and there’s heat in it—of course there is, there always is with him—but mostly it’s proof. Warm. Alive. His heart going hard enough against my chest that I can count it. His mouth softens, and I chase it, and for a while there’s nothing but water and his hands relearning me.

I wash the salt and soap and sand from his hair. He checks my ribs with his fingertips, and I lean into it. We trade the soap back and forth until

there’s nothing left of today on either of us except the bruises and cuts, and those we’re keeping.

The water starts to cool. Eli reaches back and shuts it off, but neither of us moves.

“Come here,” I whisper.

“I’m here.”

“Closer.”

His arms go around me. Mine close over his back. We find an angle that doesn’t press too hard on either of us, clumsy and careful, and then his face is against my neck.

The first shudder goes through him so hard I feel it in my knees.

I hold on.

He doesn’t make much noise. Just these rough, broken breaths against my skin while his hands spread over my back, checking and holding and refusing to settle anywhere for long.

I slide one hand into his hair.

“I love you,” I tell him.

His mouth presses against my shoulder.

“I love you too.”

We stand there until the water stops dripping off the ends of my hair. Until his breathing evens out against my throat and the shuddering slows.

Then I push the glass door open and reach for the towels.

I dry him first. He lets me, which is enormous on its own—Eli doesn’t let anyone do things for him unless the wheels have fully come off. I work the towel over his chest, his shoulders, down his arms, careful of the rope burn on his wrists. He stands quiet, eyes on me the whole time.

“I want to get old with you,” he whispers.

My eyes lift to meet his.

“I want to hear you complaining about your joints. I want you to get annoyed because I’ve moved something in the kitchen. I want to be so fucking bored of knowing where you keep everything that I move it just to watch you find it.”

“You already listen to me complain,” I say.

He laughs. “Then I want to keep doing it.”

He leans in and catches my mouth with his. Kisses me until I stop trying to speak around the lump in my throat.

When we finally break apart, his forehead stays pressed to mine, and we stand there breathing each other's air like it's the only oxygen left in the house.

"Stay with me," he says.

"I'm not going anywhere."

"I know. Say it anyway."

"I'm staying. I'm yours."

His eyes close. The tension goes out of his face. We wrap towels around our waists.

I find the first-aid kit under the sink and sit him on the edge of the tub. Fresh gauze, clean tape. I wind it around his wrists slowly, and he watches my hands the whole time. When I finish, he takes the roll from me and does mine. His fingers are steadier now. That's something.

We get dressed slowly, out of order, in each other's way. He helps pull my T-shirt over my head so the fabric doesn't drag over my injuries. I ease his shirt over his shoulders and button it for him, and he lets me—the second enormous thing he's let me do tonight.

There's a knock. Three raps, a pause, then two more. Milo. Even his knocking can't commit to being serious.

"You guys alive in there? Because—birthday cake. Well, belated birthday cake. But there's presents too. And I just know you're all gonna love what I got her."

"I thought you bought her the car?" I ask.

He groans. "Don't remind me of that ill-fated gift. But yeah, I got her another gift too. I went a little overboard."

Eli's mouth twitches. "We'll be down in a minute."

"Okay. Love you guys!"

"Love you too," I call back, but he's already gone—footsteps retreating at a pace that suggests he's afraid we'll make him wait for cake.

Eli and I look at each other.

"Ready?" I ask.

"No." He opens the door anyway.

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# FIFTY-FIVE
# SAGE



"If anyone sings, I'm going back upstairs."

I'm standing in the kitchen doorway, hair still damp, wearing Knox's hoodie and a pair of Eli's sweatpants that I had to roll four times at the waist. My body is a topographic map of damage—bruises, rope burns, a cut along my hairline held together with butterfly strips, and a deep ache in my ribs that makes breathing feel like a negotiation. But I'm clean. I smell like my own shampoo instead of hay and copper. And in front of me, my five battered, bandaged, barely functional boyfriends are sitting around the kitchen table with a multi-layered strawberry cream cake and a truly alarming number of wrapped boxes.

"No singing," Micah promises from behind the cake. He's got bandages around his wrists and a bruise across his cheekbone that makes him look like a painting of a saint who lost a fight. "Just cake. And presents. And an aggressive celebration of the fact that we're all still breathing."

"That's a low bar."

"It's been a low-bar kind of year."

Milo presses a hand to his chest like I've wounded him personally. "Wow. Rude. Here I was, one half-step away from delivering a haunting a cappella rendition of 'Happy Birthday' for your listening pleasure."

"We've all heard you singing in the shower," Eli says. "And none of us got any pleasure out of it."

I push off the doorway and shuffle into the kitchen. The world feels quiet in that strange, soft way it gets after violence—like the house is

holding its breath with us. The kitchen lights shine over polished counters and a table full of men who look almost as bad as I feel.

Micah's wrists are wrapped in fresh gauze. Eli's sleeves are rolled back from matching bandages. Holden's side is bandaged under a clean black T-shirt, posture tilted in the way that means he's in enough pain to be furious about it. Milo has his injured leg stretched out under the table, supported on another chair. Knox is beside him, huge and silent, his splinted leg held straight and two fingers resting against the edge of the table like he's ready to stand if I so much as sway.

"This all looks so amazing," I say as I pull out the empty chair at the head of the table and lower myself into it. Pain lances through my body, and I let out a hiss that I try to hide and fail. Knox plants both hands on the table and starts hauling himself up before the sound fully leaves me.

"Fury?"

"Sit down," I say, looking up at him. "I'm okay."

He stares a second longer, then settles back into his chair with visible reluctance. But he reaches out and hooks two fingers under my chair, dragging me closer until my thigh presses to his. The contact is possessive as hell, and I love it.

I settle against his side and look down at the single candle stuck crookedly into the top layer.

"I already made my birthday wish," I say. "I don't know if I get another—especially since my birthday's well and truly over."

"Well, none of us have gone to bed yet," Milo says. "So technically your birthday hasn't stopped."

"If we're being technical," Micah starts. "We *did* sleep."

Milo shoots him a glare. "Being unconscious while hanging from the ceiling of a barn does not constitute a nap, Micah."

Micah lifts his hands in surrender. "I stand corrected."

"How about we just light this thing so Sage can open her gifts and we can all get some rest," Holden says, producing a lighter.

"Agreed." Eli nods. "And, little savage, I think you've earned a second wish after what you've been through."

I grin, catching my lower lip between my teeth. "Even if the first one already came true?"

"It *did*?" Milo asks, eyes bright and delighted.

I nod. "At the club, I wished Stephen dead."

The table goes still for half a beat.

Then Milo leans forward, eyes wide. “Oh my God. You manifested murder.”

“I manifested closure,” I correct.

“Tomato, tomahto,” he says.

Eli snorts. Micah’s mouth curves. Even Holden’s expression softens a little.

Knox looks at me. “That was a good wish, Fury.”

I smile. “I thought so.”

“Okay,” Micah says gently, before the quiet can turn into something heavier. “That settles it. Sage definitely gets another wish—might I suggest one involving less blood and injury? Just to give us all time to heal.”

“Speak for yourself,” Holden mutters. “Some of us don’t mind a little blood.”

I laugh, and it hurts. “I can agree to that.”

Holden flicks the lighter. The flame catches, small and steady. I used to think this kind of moment belonged to other people. People with normal birthdays and uncomplicated lives and boyfriends who didn’t discuss burial logistics like fantasy football.

I look at the candle and let myself have one crazy, selfish moment.

*Please let this be my forever.*

Then I blow it out.

Milo claps once. “Beautiful. Stunning. Chillingly codependent.”

“Cut the cake,” Eli says.

Micah reaches for the knife and holds it out to me. “Do you want to?”

“Yeah,” I say quietly. “I do.”

“Wait!” Milo puts a hand between me and the knife. “I have something for this.”

Holden closes his eyes—that’s never a reassuring sign.

Milo pulls a long box from the pile of presents and slides it toward me. “A promise is a promise, kitten.”

I tear the paper away and lift the lid.

A knife. A sheathed blade with a silicone dildo for a handle. In a *very* familiar shape.

My gaze snaps to Holden.

“The fucking knife,” I whisper.

“Two point oh,” Milo says proudly. “No homicidal trees.”

“Holden?” I look from the handle to him—well, his crotch. “Something you want to share?”

“Milo bought a kit.” The tips of Holden’s ears are pink.

“One of those make-your-own dildo kits,” Milo explains. “The original was an artistic interpretation. This time I went directly to the source and built the whole thing around the result.”

I look between them. “And you let him?”

“You said you liked the last one, wildcat.” Holden’s mouth twitches. “Plus, it was kind of fun.”

Eli’s shoulders are shaking.

“This is definitely . . .” I pause and stare at the gift. “A fucking knife.”

“Two point oh,” Milo corrects.

I laugh, then immediately regret it when my ribs protest. Micah takes the box while I lift out the knife and ease off the sheath.

“I’m about to cut my birthday cake with Holden’s dick.”

“Really puts the cream in strawberry cream cake,” Milo says.

“It absolutely fucking does not,” Holden tells him.

Knox makes a low, strangled sound beside me. I turn to find him laughing into his hand.

I wrap my fingers around the silicone handle and face the cake. Everyone watches like this is ceremonial, which, in a house full of violent weirdos, I guess it kind of is.

“Any preferences?” I ask.

“I prefer Holden’s dick in my ass,” Milo says immediately.

I almost choke on my laughter and start coughing, my ribs screaming in response. “Oh my God, Milo! Stop making me laugh,” I force out. “I’m talking about the cake.”

“Oh! In that case, I would like a large slice. And that will go in my mouth.”

“Thank God you’re not putting it up your ass,” Micah mutters, and we all do our best not to laugh again.

I smile despite myself and press the fucking knife down through the pink frosting. The cake gives easily, layers parting under my hand—soft sponge, cream, strawberries. Normal things. Ridiculously normal things. Made ridiculous by the fact a massive dildo is sticking out the side of them.

“Cuts well,” Milo says, nodding his appreciation of his own work.

I cut six slices, a little uneven because dicks don’t make the most ergonomic knife handles.

Micah takes over before I can struggle through plating it all. “Let me,” he says softly, taking the knife from me. “You did the important part.”

“The important part was assaulting a dessert?”

“The important part,” Eli says, reaching out to brush his knuckles over my wrist, “was being the person wielding Holden’s replica dick.”

I press my hand into my side as I laugh again.

Micah slides a plate in front of me first with the biggest strawberry on top. Knox’s hand settles on my thigh under the table, big and warm and quiet. I lean into him without thinking about it.

Nobody talks for the first few bites.

There’s just the scrape of forks, steady breath, a dildo knife on the table, and the strange intimacy of six people eating cake while held together by gauze, trauma, and criminal conspiracy.

It’s really good cake.

But I don’t think I’m ever going to use the knife in bed.

Knox finishes eating, then lifts the knife, testing its weight. “Not bad,” he says, nodding at Milo. “We should do me next.”

Around the table, everyone stops eating.

Milo’s gaze drops pointedly to Knox’s crotch. “Brother, I already checked, and there ain’t a kit big enough for your kraken.”

I snort, gasping when my ribs protest once more. “Milo!”

“That’s my cue! More presents,” he announces, clapping his hands, then wincing because he forgot about his injuries. “Ow.”

“You already gave me an SUV and a fucking knife,” I say.

“The SUV doesn’t count since it’s totaled,” he says. “But insurance will handle it. And the bulletproof glass absolutely saved our lives, so—winning. But the SUV was the big gift. The fucking knife was an IOU. This is the sentimental gift.” He pushes a box across the table. It’s wrapped in black paper with a gold ribbon that’s been tied with more enthusiasm than skill.

I open it.

Inside, nestled in tissue paper, is a carved wooden figure. Small—maybe four inches tall. It’s a woman. Hair down, chin up, something in her hand that looks like a knife.

“I made it,” Milo says. Quieter now. The comedian is gone, revealing the real person underneath. “I kept practicing after the cabin. But that’s you at your most powerful—when you have your knife in your hand and you’re about to rain vengeance.”

I turn it in my fingers, examining it closer. The detail is extraordinary. Her face isn’t quite mine, but it isn’t quite not mine either. She’s fierce and small and the thing in her hand is definitely a knife—no penis this time.

“Milo.”

“If you cry, I’ll have to cry, and I already told you—”

“Shut up. I’m crying. Deal with it.”

He grins. His eyes are wet too.

Micah’s gift is next. A scrapbook. A handmade binder, pages printed and laminated, organized by tabs. Some pages have recipes. Others have photos or scraps of something glued in—like the ticket stubs from the night we all went to the amusement park. But next to every item is a neatly written memory in Micah’s careful script. Tiny observations. Things I said and apparently forgot. Things they noticed when I wasn’t looking.

Page one is titled SAGE LIKES.

Under it:

*Peach rings but only the sour ones.*

*Purple gummy clusters.*

*Extra pickles.*

*Thunderstorms if she’s indoors.*

*The smell of old books and expensive cologne.*

*Being read to when she’s too tired to admit she’s tired.*

*Sharp knives.*

*Clean sheets.*

*Pink tulips.*

*When Knox stands behind her in crowded rooms.*

*When Eli says good girl in that voice.*

*When Milo makes her laugh when she’s trying not to.*

*When Holden forgets to be mean.*

*When Micah brushes her hair.*

My vision goes blurry by line six and stays that way.

“Micah,” I whisper.

His cheeks go pink, which on him looks unfairly beautiful. “I thought it would help to have a record. Of good things. Of your things.”

“I love it. Thank you.”

Holden goes next. He slides a flat box across the table—leather, embossed. Inside is a new choker. Titanium, brushed to a matte finish, fitted with a hinge and a clasp that locks with a small key. It’s beautiful. Delicate enough to look like jewelry, solid enough that I could wear it every day and not worry about it breaking.

“There’s a tracker in the clasp,” Holden says, and I smile.

“Of course.” I run my thumb across the titanium. “Will you put it on me?”

Holden stands. Walks around the table. He moves like it hurts, but his hands are steady when he fits the choker around my neck and locks the clasp shut, pocketing the key. The metal sits against my pulse—cool, then warm, alive with my heartbeat.

“Beautiful,” he says. His thumb traces the line of it. “Now I’ll always know where you are.”

“You’re keeping the key,” I say.

“I am,” he says, and for the first time since their surveillance over me started, I don’t feel suffocated at the thought. I feel loved—cherished. The first tracker helped them find me in a wall, and the last tracker spent my birthday on the hall table, and we woke up in a barn. If it hadn’t been for Gloria being just as over-the-top as my men, we might never have been found. I tip my chin up so he can check the fit.

“Romantic or creepy?” Milo asks the table.

“Both,” everyone says in unison.

Eli’s gift is a key. Just a key, on a simple ring, sitting in a small box lined with blue velvet.

“To what?” I ask.

“A cabin.” He meets my eyes. “It’s not as grand as the one in Blackridge. But it’s ours. For whenever we need to disappear.”

“You bought a cabin.”

“I did. Sold my house since I didn’t need it anymore, and thought . . . Well, it needs a lot of work. I figured Knox could help me fix it up.”

Knox gives him a nod. It’s the first easy thing I’ve seen pass between them in months.

“I love it,” I say. “Eli, thank you.”

“You’re so welcome, little savage.”

Knox’s gift is last. He reaches into his jacket and places a small leather pouch on the table in front of me.

I open it. Inside is a ring. Hand-forged, dark metal, with a thin line of gold inlaid around the center.

“Knox,” I whisper.

“I like to forge,” he says.

“You made this?” I ask, and he nods.

“At the same forge I used for your knife.”

“You also made my knife?”

He nods. “I did.”

“Oh, Knox.” I stare at the ring. At the man who made it. At the hands that forged it—the same hands that pulled me out of a wall and held me in a car wreck and carried me through every dark thing this world has thrown at us.

I put it on. It fits perfectly.

“How did you know my size?”

“I’ve held your hand enough times to know.”

The kitchen goes quiet. Not uncomfortable. Just full. Full of cake and gauze and perfect gifts.

“This is all—” Emotion catches in my throat, and I have to blink fast and breathe slow to push it back down. “Amazing. Thoughtful. Wonderful. Thank you all so much.”

Holden clears his throat before anyone else can respond. “There’s still one more thing.”

I look at him. “Holden, I can’t take any more gifts. I’m going to short-circuit.”

“There’s something I want to ask you.” He looks at Eli. At Knox. At Micah and Milo. “All of us, if I’m reading this right.”

Eli nods. Micah’s smile trembles. Knox reaches for my hand, and Milo sits a little straighter.

“What’s going on?” I ask.

“Remember what Milo said on the beach?” Holden asks.

I blink. “The part where he praised my tight ass?”

Milo gasps. “Rude. Reductive. Also, not the part we were referring to, though thank you for bringing it up—I stand by my analysis.”

Micah gives me a helpless little smile. “The other part.”

“The proposing part?” I ask, and the second the words leave my mouth, the sound drops out of the room.

Milo’s fidgeting with the edge of his plate. Micah’s watching me carefully. Eli hasn’t blinked. Knox is looking at me like I’m his world. Holden—God help me—looks almost severe about it.

“Oh,” I say. A titan of eloquence.

“Yeah,” Milo says. “Oh.”

My pulse starts climbing. “You’re serious.”

“Yes,” Holden says.

“Very,” Micah adds.

I look at Eli. “All of you?”

His mouth tips. “Little savage, there’s no version of this where any of us step back.”

The movement is almost comical in its inevitability. All five of them begin the slow process of levering themselves out of their chairs, bracing on the table, or each other, or just forcing their muscles to move with raw fucking will.

And then, like the idiot heroes they are, they all move to go down on one knee.

“Wait—stop!” I blurt, nearly knocking my cake over. They freeze mid-motion. Two with hands on the table, one with a leg already half-bent, Milo clutching a chair back, Knox upright but already projecting the angle he’d need to swing his splinted leg so he could get to the floor.

“Are you kidding me? You are all held together by duct tape and spite. If you try to kneel, someone’s going to re-open a wound or need an ambulance.” My voice cracks on the last word, but I don’t care. I’m laughing and crying at the same time. “Just. Sit. Or stand. Whichever works—but please don’t kneel right now.”

They all hover there, suspended between persistence and pride, and then Micah pipes up, “We’ll stand, then.”

“Thank you.”

He smiles, then moves around the table to stand in front of me, reaching out and taking my hand between his. “Sage. Baby girl. You came into my life covered in blood and shaking so hard I thought you’d shake apart.” His voice is steady, but his eyes are full. “And I held you. And you let me. And that was the moment I knew you were mine. That I’d spend the rest of my

life being the person you let hold you. You made me brave enough to love again, baby girl. I don't ever want to let go."

I bite my lip hard and try not to let my eyes fill with tears.

Knox takes my hand next. "Fury. Before you, I was a wall." His voice is low, rough. "You made me a door. I'm never closing."

I press my hand against my mouth because if I take it away I'm going to start squeaking.

Holden moves in next, wincing from the movement, and he meets my eyes with that ice-blue focus that once made me feel hunted and now makes me feel found.

"I've spent my entire career reading people. Building cases. Analyzing evidence." His jaw works. "And you are the only person I've ever met where every piece of evidence points to the same conclusion—that my life doesn't make sense without you in it. Love you, wildcat."

I smile at that, and he presses a kiss to my hand before releasing it.

Eli is next. He looks at me the way he looked at me the first time. The way he looked at me at three in the morning when I told him I had a monster inside me too. The cracked-open way that means every wall he's built is down and he's standing in the rubble knowing I stand with him.

"I have loved you since that first night on the beach," he murmurs. "And I pushed you away because I thought my darkness would swallow you whole." He swallows. "Instead, you walked into it and lit a match. You didn't fix me, Sage. You just made the broken parts feel like they belonged somewhere." His voice drops. "I want them to belong to you. For the rest of my life. Every locked room. Every monster. Yours."

I'm crying. I don't care anymore. There is not a force on this planet that could stop the tears running down my face right now.

Milo is last. He looks at me, and for once he doesn't deflect. Doesn't pivot to a joke. Doesn't build a wall out of comedy and hide behind it.

"I knew," he says. "As soon as you grabbed Knox's knife under that jetty. I knew. It was like you also grabbed onto my heart. And with each slash and stab you made, you burrowed in deeper and the only word I knew in that moment was 'ours.' Kitten, you were put on this earth to be the center of us."

He reaches into his pocket and pulls out a small box.

When he opens it, my breath catches. The ring is simple and elegant. A thin gold band with a single stone—an alexandrite—green in daylight,

purplish red under warm lamplight. Here, it glows red. The color of blood. The color of us.

“I bought this two days after we met,” Milo says. “Held on to it for months. Milo Hart does not do anything by halves, Sage Adams. I knew you were ours the second you went stab happy. I knew we were yours the second you stayed.” His voice cracks on the last word and he blinks hard. “You are the best thing that has ever happened to all of us. And I would very much like to spend the rest of my life making you laugh and driving you insane and loving you so loud the whole world has to deal with it.”

The kitchen is silent except for my labored breathing.

Eli looks around the table. Then back at me.

“Sage Adams,” he says. “Will you marry us?”

I look at them. One at a time. Eli’s amber eyes, steady and certain. Micah’s gray-blue, soft with a love so deep it has no floor. Milo’s brown, shining, the ring box trembling slightly in his hand. Holden’s ice blue, sharp and warm at the same time. And Knox’s—dark, quiet, molten.

“Yes,” I say.

The word comes out broken. I try again.

“Yes. Obviously. Yes.”

Milo’s face crumbles. He slides the ring onto my finger next to Knox’s band—gold beside dark metal, two rings that shouldn’t match and do, the way none of us should work and all of us do.

Then he falls over.

Not metaphorically. His knee gives out and he tips sideways and Micah catches him and they both end up on the kitchen floor laughing, and then Knox lowers himself back into his chair and draws me onto his lap—carefully, because of the splint, because of everything—and Eli’s hand is on the back of my neck and Holden is standing behind me with his forehead against my hair and Micah is trying to help Milo up while Milo ragdolls and says, “She said yes, she said yes, she said YES,” to nobody and everybody.

I’m laughing. I’m crying. And I have never, in all my broken, beautiful, blood-soaked days, been this happy.

“I love you,” I say to all of them. “Every one of you. Every version. Every monster and every morning after.”

Knox’s arm tightens around me.

Eli presses his lips to my temple.

Micah gives up trying to help Milo and smiles.

Holden says, “Good. Because there’s no return policy on the choker—and I have the key.”

And Milo, still on the floor, raises one fist in the air and says, “Best. Merry. Un-Birthday. Ever!”

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# FIFTY-SIX
# MILO



*Five months later . . .*

"The protocol signature Fenrir flagged last week matches three other nodes in the Pacific Northwest," Holden says, swirling his beer. "Milo, correct me if I'm wrong, but if we cross-reference the—"

"No." Eli holds up a hand. "Stop."

"I'm just saying, the Portland connection—"

"Holden." Micah puts a palm flat on the table. "We are at a bowls club. It is the night before our wedding. That is enough shop talk. We are on leave."

Holden's mouth thins. His eyes do that thing where you can see the case files trying to escape through his pupils. It's very entertaining.

Micah holds his stare, steady and immovable, and after three seconds of silent standoff, Holden picks up his beer and drinks instead of talking.

"Thank you," Eli says.

"He'll bring it up again in twenty minutes," I predict.

"Fifteen," Knox says.

"I'll take that bet," I say. "Loser buys the next pitcher."

Knox nods once. Deal made.

We're back at Glenview Lawn Bowls Club, where the Perimeno-Bowls humiliated us and we eventually beat the Pen-15 Club. Same brick clubhouse. Same honor board. Same lingering suspicion that the retirees could dispose of us more efficiently than we could dispose of them.

I picked it for three reasons. One, the beer is cheap. Two, they let me book a rink under the floodlights. Three, we're only competing against each other tonight, so at least one of us is guaranteed to win.

That's the energy I want for the last night before I bind myself to five other humans and a terrier.

Well, technically the terrier is my sister, since Gloria adopted her.

"*Traditional bachelor parties involve strippers,*" I announced this morning while everyone was eating breakfast. "*And since we're all already sleeping with the bride—and some of us with each other—strippers feel redundant.*"

Sage laughed so hard she spit coffee on the counter. "*Go,*" she said, shooing us toward the door. "*Have your little boys' night. Amy's coming over and we're doing face masks and watching terrible movies. None of you are invited.*"

"*That sounds significantly better than lawn bowls,*" Eli muttered.

"*It is. That's why you're not invited.*"

So here we are. Five men around a table beside the green, two pitchers deep, and the scorecard is already a crime scene.

The format is my invention. Ten ends. Two bowls each per end. Closest to the jack takes the point. No teams, which means no teammates, which means nobody gets to blame anybody but themselves.

I'm beginning to regret that last part.

We've played four ends. Knox has two points. Micah and Eli have one each. Holden and I are maintaining a dignified zero.

"Okay," I say, standing from the molded plastic chair and clapping once. "New stakes."

"We already have stakes," Holden says. "We're bowling."

"Those are default stakes. I'm proposing elevated stakes." I hold up my hand and tick off fingers. "Tomorrow night, after the wedding, after the cake, after whatever unhinged sexual circus Sage has planned for us—"

"She hasn't planned anything," Micah says. "I checked."

"You checked?"

"I asked."

"That's the opposite of a surprise, Micah."

"I wanted to be prepared."

"You can't prepare for Sage." I wave him off. "My point is, tonight's finishing order is our honeymoon order. Winner gets first dibs."

Silence.

“First dibs on what?” Eli asks, even though every man at this table already knows.

“First dibs on going down on our wife.” I let the word sit there—wife—and watch it land on each of them differently. Knox’s jaw shifts. Eli’s eyes go warm. Micah smiles into his beer. Holden blinks once, hard, the way he does when something hits him. “Winner gets her first on our honeymoon. Tongue. Mouth. The full service. Before anyone else touches her.”

Holden leans back. “You’re turning our honeymoon into a competitive sport?”

“Absolutely.”

Micah puts his beer down. “I’m in.”

“Of course you’re in. You love the licking lick lick.”

“I’m in regardless.” He grins. “But that does make it sweeter.”

Eli stands. Cracks his neck. “Fine. But if I win, I’m taking my time. Fair warning.”

“Noted. Knox?”

Knox is already on the mat. He bends, delivers his bowl, and watches it curve toward the jack. It stops close enough that I’d need a ruler to decide whether there’s daylight between them.

He turns, face flat as concrete. “Pretty sure I’m winning this.”

“The man is definitely a threat,” I mutter.

“That man is going to eat our wife first if you don’t start bowling better,” Holden says, standing and reaching for his bowl with renewed purpose.

“Oh, now he’s competitive.” I roll my eyes.

Holden steps onto the mat. Pauses. Releases.

His bowl curves neatly toward the jack and stops about a handspan away.

“Look who decided to wake up,” Knox says.

“Game on.” Holden grins.

I pick up one of my teal bowls and step onto the mat. My technique is my own invention, relying heavily on geometry, confidence, and refusing to acknowledge how often those two things disagree.

I release.

The bowl curves toward the jack, passes Holden’s, and keeps going.

“Respectable,” Micah says from behind me.

“Respectable is the enemy of greatness.”

“Respectable is also the ally of last place.”

I flip him off without looking. When my second turn comes, I shorten the delivery. Better line. Better distance. Still nowhere near Knox.

We finish the end and measure. Knox gets the point.

My beautiful teal bowls get no fucking respect.

We settle into a rhythm after that. Roll, drink, talk shit, repeat. The air smells like cut grass and something deep-fried drifting out of the clubhouse, and it might be the best night I’ve had in months.

“Hey, Knox,” I say during a break. “Can I ask you something?”

He looks at me. Which, from Knox, is the equivalent of a written invitation to proceed.

“So you’re the only one of us who’s exclusively into Sage, right? Like, you’ve never looked at any of us and thought . . .” I gesture vaguely at the general male population of our relationship. “You know?”

Knox takes a long sip of his whiskey. The silence stretches. Eli freezes mid-bite of a nacho. Micah very carefully does not look at anyone. Holden pretends to study the scorecard.

“No,” Knox says.

“No, you haven’t thought about it, or no, you don’t want to talk about it?”

“No, I haven’t thought about it.”

“Not even a little? Not even Holden? Because Holden’s got that whole stern-daddy-detective thing going on, and I can personally vouch for his mouth and—”

“Milo.” Holden does dad voice. Different from the daddy voice.

“What? I’m being a good wingman.”

“You’re being a menace.”

I turn back to Knox. “My point is, the offer’s on the table if you ever want to explore. I’ve seen what you’re working with, big guy, and—”

Knox sets his whiskey down.

I stop talking. Briefly. A personal best.

He steps toward me. I step back. He keeps coming until my shoulders meet the clubhouse wall, then plants one enormous hand beside my head.

“We’ve been over this before, Milo. I’m too big for you.”

I tip my head back to look at him. “Yes. But that was before my bi-awakening, and I think it’s hurtful that you don’t believe in my capacity for

personal growth.”

Eli puts his nacho down.

Knox leans closer. “If I put my dick in your ass, I’d stretch you so wide you’d shit every time you fart.”

There’s a silence while I consider my future.

“On second thought, stay hetero, my friend.”

“Good plan.”

He steps back.

Micah turns away, shoulders shaking. Eli has abandoned all attempts at dignity. Even Holden is laughing, the disloyal fuck.

“I’ve made an informed decision about my health,” I tell them. “I’d appreciate some respect.”

Micah snorts. “You’d have to take out a lifetime subscription to hemorrhoid cream.”

I frown, scratching my nose. “Is that a thing? Is there a geriatric subscription box I don’t know about?”

Knox picks up his bowl, heads back to the mat, and sends it curling toward the jack.

“Eloquent. Brief. Very Knox.” I raise my beer. “To the monogamous heterosexual in our polycule. You’re a rare breed, big man, but I respect your commitment to exclusively tending our lady’s stretchy garden.”

“To Knox,” Micah agrees, lifting his glass. “May he never be interested in our asses.”

“To Knox,” Eli and Holden echo.

Knox sits down, looks mildly uncomfortable with the toast, and says nothing.

Holden bowls again. It curves away from the jack and keeps going. His score remains an impressively consistent zero.

“We need to talk about vows,” Eli says, refilling glasses from the pitcher.

“What about them?” I ask.

“Have you written yours?”

“I’ve written three drafts. The first was too funny. The second was too sincere. The third made me cry in the bathroom. I’m going with the third.”

“Good instinct.” Eli nods. “If it makes you cry, it’ll make her cry.”

“And if she cries, everyone cries,” Micah adds. “It’s the Adams domino effect.”

“Mine are done,” Micah says. “Short. She’d hate it if I went long.”

Knox nods. “Mine are done.”

“How many words?” I ask him.

He thinks. “Twenty. Maybe.”

“Twenty words?”

“Maybe.”

“That’s barely enough to say I love you.”

Knox grunts.

“What about you?” I ask Holden. “Written yours?”

Holden picks at the label on his beer. “Working on it.”

“Working on it as in drafting? Or working on it as in staring at a blank page?”

He cuts me a look that confirms the second option.

“Holden.” I lean forward. “Holdie.”

“Don’t call me that.”

“Okay, Hol-hol—if your vows start with ‘pursuant to the emotional evidence gathered during the course of our relationship,’ I will object at our wedding.”

“You can’t object. It’s a commitment ceremony.”

“Watch me.”

He almost smiles. “I’ll figure it out. I have time.”

“You have until tomorrow.”

“I have time,” he repeats, staring across the green like the answer might be waiting at the other end.

“Ring bearer,” Micah says. “We still need to talk about the ring bearer.”

“Mars,” I say immediately.

“You want the bait dog in a tutu carrying our wedding rings?” Holden asks.

“I want my new sister—your soon-to-be sister-in-law—in a tutu carrying our wedding rings down the aisle. Gloria is officiating, so it only makes sense. It’s called reclamation. It’s thematic. It’s iconic. Sage will love it.”

“She’s a dog,” Holden says.

“Mars is OUR dog. Who was trained by a psychopath to lure our almost wife into a death trap, sure. But that wasn’t her fault. And now she wears a bow and sleeps on our bed when we puppy-sit. That’s a fucking arc, Holden. That’s character development.”

Micah covers his mouth. His shoulders shake.

Eli tips his head back and stares at the night sky. “I teach five-year-olds and this is still the most unhinged conversation I’ve had today.”

“Knox?” I ask. “Verdict?”

Knox steps onto the mat and sends his bowl curling toward the jack. “Get the dog a tutu.”

I point at him. “I already got one. And I forgive you for the shart comment earlier. Love you, big guy!”

Holden drops his head into his hands.

The night stretches. The pitchers empty and refill. With one end left, Knox and Micah are tied on three points. I’ve edged past Eli with two, and the look he gives me could curdle milk.

“This means I eat her out before you,” I inform him.

“The stakes were a joke.”

“The stakes were a binding verbal contract witnessed by five men and a scorecard.”

“It’s a game, Milo.”

“Eli, are you really going to dishonor the brotherhood vows in this manner? The night before our wedding?”

“I’m going to go down on our wife whenever she wants. I don’t need a bowling score to give me permission.”

“That’s the spirit, Mr. Ward. But also, I’m still going before you.”

Holden laughs. Micah shakes his head, then sends his last bowl curling neatly toward the jack. It stops close enough to make Knox put his beer down.

That gets everyone’s attention.

Knox steps onto the mat with the last bowl of the night. Bends. Releases.

It slips inside Micah’s and stops.

We all walk down to look. Micah crouches with the measure while Knox stands over him, hands in his pockets, apparently unaware that suspense is supposed to involve facial movement.

“Knox,” Micah says, straightening. “By half an inch.”

I add the final tally.

Four to Knox. Three to Micah. Two to me. One to Eli.

Not a single fucking point to Holden.

Knox wins his own bachelor-party competition and first place in the honeymoon queue.

*Damn. This really backfired on me.*

“We don’t have to talk about it,” Holden says.

“I’m going to talk about it at every opportunity for the rest of our lives,” I reply, smiling at him sweetly.

We settle the bar tab and pack our bowls. There’s a pretzel ground into the bottom of my bag. I choose not to investigate.

The drive home is loud. Windows down. Radio on. Eli keeps changing the station, and Micah keeps changing it back.

The streets go quiet as we leave the commercial district. The streetlights thin out. The ocean appears between buildings, dark and breathing.

Tomorrow we get married.

The thought keeps hitting me from different angles, like a pop-up I keep closing that opens somewhere else.

Tomorrow I marry all of them.

After the barn, I spent the first month waiting for the door to open—that’s how it works with me, something terrible happens, the permissions reset, and my brain hands back a file I put away for a reason. A night on a hook with a knife in my thigh should have blown the whole system.

Nothing came back. I sleep fine. I picked out a tie.

*Some doors stay shut.* I’ve decided not to knock on this one.

The ring I bought two days after we met is already on Sage’s finger. Now I have vows that made me cry in the bathroom and a dog who needs to look pretty in her tutu.

We pull into the driveway. The house is warm. The lights are on. Through the kitchen window I can see Sage at the counter, hair up, still in her pajamas. Amy’s car is gone—she must have left earlier.

“There’s our wife-to-be,” Knox says from the back seat.

My chest does something stupid and involuntary.

We pile out of the car and head inside. When we get through the door, Sage looks up from whatever she’s eating straight out of the container and says, “How was lawn bowls?”

“Knox won,” I report. “Holden is banned from sports.”

“So normal, then,” she says.

“Very normal.” I cross the kitchen and kiss her. She tastes like ice cream and lip balm. “The most normal night we’ve had in months.”

She smiles against my mouth. “Good. You all deserved some normal.”

“We deserve a lot of things,” I say. “Normal, bowls trophies, and you.”

“In that order?”

“Never.” I pull back. “You’re always first, kitten. Even before trophies.”

“Even before eating me out?” She grins, wicked.

I freeze. “Who told you about the stakes?”

“Knox texted me as soon as you made the bet.” She chuckles. “He gave me very explicit instructions on what he wants.”

I spin toward Knox, who is standing at the fridge with his back to me, radiating innocence at a frequency I didn’t know he was capable of.

“Traitor,” I say.

He cracks open a beer. “I believe it’s pronounced ‘winner.’”

Sage hooks her finger in my collar and pulls me back from hitting him.

But I swear his mouth twitches.

Sage kisses my cheek. “I’m going to bed, boys. Big day tomorrow.”

She heads upstairs, and we watch her go, sighing like a bunch of cartoon characters with heart eyes.

“I love her,” Eli says.

“We all love her,” Holden says.

“Yeah,” I say. “But I love her the mostest.”

“That’s not how it works,” Micah says, rolling his eyes.

“Everything is a competition, Micah. That’s how I stay sharp.”

Knox finishes his beer. Sets it on the counter. Looks at each of us in turn.

“Tomorrow.”

I grin.

*Fuck yeah, tomorrow.*

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# FIFTY-SEVEN
# SAGE



"Stop fidgeting," Amy says, smoothing a crease in my dress that doesn't exist. "You look perfect."

"I look like I'm about to throw up."

"You look perfect *and* like you're about to throw up. Both things can be true." She steps back to study her work, then squints and dusts a little more powder across my nose. "There. Done. If you cry, I will end you—this mascara is not waterproof and I refuse to be responsible for a raccoon bride."

We're upstairs in the en suite bathroom, the counter covered in the contents of my makeup bag and two glasses of champagne that we've barely touched. It was supposed to ease my nerves, but I'm too nervous to drink.

Amy looks amazing, too—her golden hair curled and pinned with sprays of baby's breath, pink dress fluttery but sharp-lined, like she's determined to walk down the aisle as a best friend, not as a bridesmaid. The last time I wore pink I ruined it. I decide not to mention that. She grabs both my hands and squeezes.

"Seriously," she says, picking up my glass and handing it to me. "You look amazing. Jaw-dropping. Your guys are gonna lose their minds when they see you."

I hold the champagne glass to my lips and smile. "I'm getting married to five men, Amy. Is that crazy?"

She bounces a shoulder as she sips her own champagne and starts putting all the makeup back in its case. “I’m here with twins as my date because I can’t seem to stop sleeping with them both. So I’m really not one to judge. I’m super happy for you, though.”

We clink glasses and move from the bathroom into the bedroom. Through the window I can see the backyard—chairs arranged in two short rows, a wooden arch draped in greenery and white flowers, fairy lights strung between the fence posts even though it’s two in the afternoon, and they won’t be visible for hours. Knox built the arch. It took him three weekends, and he wouldn’t let anyone help except Milo, who was permitted to hold the nails.

Five months since the barn, the beach, and the end of Stephen’s terror. Five months since a kitchen full of injured men proposed and promised their futures to me.

It feels like yesterday. And it also feels like a lifetime ago.

Odin’s people traced the access points Stephen used and closed them. The wider Kennel investigation is still running, but I can at least sleep through the night again. Our house feels like home.

Knox’s leg brace came off at month three, and he celebrated by immediately squatting four hundred pounds in the garage gym, which made Holden threaten to re-break it himself. Holden’s stab wound healed clean. The wound in Milo’s thigh left a scar he calls his “souvenir” and has threatened to get tattooed over with a tiny cartoon cat holding a knife in its mouth. I’m not against the idea. Eli’s cabin got fixed, slowly and lovingly, mostly by brute force and junk-food-powered weekends. It’s our favorite place to disappear now, logs and flannel sheets and a fireplace that smokes only when someone—me—forgets to open the vent. Micah’s bruises faded, though his shoulders still get stiff sometimes. Eli rubs the knots out while they sit together on the couch, and Micah leans into his hands.

I walk to the window and look down at the small group of people assembling in the backyard—those who understand both our relationship and our world. So essentially, it’s a small gathering of Hunter Harbor’s underbelly. No one who needs us to hide what we’ve become.

My eyes follow Micah and Ray adjusting the chairs, touching and retouching the spacing and orientation by a quarter inch at a time. Knox is standing with Milo at the catering table, listening to Milo chatter about cheese cubes and looking painfully bored. Holden stands in the shade of the

arch, consulting his phone and shooting looks at the backyard like he's expecting an assassination attempt. Eli sits alone on the deck steps, sunglasses shielding his eyes, holding a water bottle between his knees.

He looks like he's trying not to combust. His suit is perfect black, his shoes perfectly shined, his hands shaking just a little on the bottle.

"Looks like you're not the only one who's nervous," Amy says, standing next to me. "They all look so handsome in their matching suits."

"They really do, don't they?" My breath fogs the glass.

Five months into owning the diner, I still work the floor. Danny has changed the menu, with one condition from me: no more cherry pie. Gary is gone—retired to a golf community in Florida, funded by whatever Odin paid him to step aside quietly. Rosa, Danny, and I run the place together. They know its rhythms better than anyone, and I want them making decisions with me and earning the same pay I do. It's their home too.

Eli went back to school with fading bruises and his wrists still bandaged. Zara, the five-year-old who runs his classroom with an iron fist and a glitter fixation, asked if he'd been in a fight. He said he fell. She said, "*You really should be more careful, Mr. Ward*," with the grave authority of a tiny CEO, and he kept a straight face for approximately four seconds before excusing himself to laugh in the supply closet.

The Hangmen are operational. New targets, new assignments, the machinery turning the way it always has. Five successful operations in the last three months—clean, quiet, the type of work that doesn't make the news. Odin seems satisfied, though with Odin "satisfied" and "plotting" look identical.

And Amy.

Well, she's right here being my best friend the way she's been since the day she let me crash on her couch with nothing but a duffel bag and a bad history.

She's also leaving.

The lease for an apartment in the city is already signed. In three weeks, she's moving in with an influencer named Bree, whose TikTok following is now at four hundred thousand, and who once cried because her avocado was "emotionally unavailable." Not really who I pictured when Amy announced she found a new roommate. But Amy can get along with anyone, so I think it'll work out great.

At least I hope it does. Amy says the move is so she can figure out who she is now—away from all the murder and the body disposal and the twins she can't seem to quit.

And honestly, I get it. This vigilante world we've found ourselves in isn't easy. As much as I want her to stay, I know I can't ask that of her.

I'm gonna miss having her so close, though. I'm sure Dean and Drake will miss her like crazy too—I hope they can still make it work.

"Finished with your champagne?" Amy asks, and I realize I've drained the glass. I hand it to her and go back to people watching.

Below us, the backyard is small and full.

Gloria stands beneath the arch in a sky-blue dress and heels that add three inches she doesn't need, reading glasses perched on the end of her nose, a leather-bound folder in her hands that she's had custom-embossed with the date. Because Gloria doesn't do anything without ceremony.

The dads sit in the front row—Dennis in a Hawaiian shirt that he was explicitly told not to wear and wore anyway, Gene in a pressed suit with a handkerchief he's already using, Ray in dark clothes looking smart. Behind them sit the stepdads: Earl Harden from the hardware store, and Hank—beard trimmed, wearing an actual tie, and the reason there's nothing left of Stephen to find.

Dean and Drake are in the second row, a seat between them for Amy when she comes down. Beside me at the glass, Amy looks at them both a second too long and then looks at her shoes.

Speaking of criminals, Odin is standing at the back, near the fence, in a bespoke dark suit. Thor and Loki stand beside him. Loki says something that makes Thor's mouth twitch, and Odin rests a hand between Loki's shoulders as he looks toward the arch.

I've sat across from all three with target files between us. It's nice seeing them without somebody's imminent murder on the agenda.

Gloria beckons the guys beneath the arch. Eli gets to his feet, and the others abandon their self-appointed jobs to join him.

The music starts.

"Ready?" Amy asks.

"No."

"Great. Let's go."

I turn from the window and follow her down the hall.

“Careful with your dress on the stairs,” Amy says, moving beside me. I gather the skirt, but the banister catches the edge of my tulle anyway. I almost eat it on the first step, but Amy catches my elbow.

“You got it. Just breathe.”

We reach the bottom without further incident. Mars waits in the hallway in a tutu, her tail swishing as we approach. I stop long enough to scratch behind her ears. Despite her role in one of Stephen’s traps, I could never hold a grudge against an animal with a heart as pure as a dog’s. She will literally do anything for praise and treats—much like Milo.

The sliding glass door is open when we reach it. Summer air drifts in, tangy with cut grass and the floral arrangements. For half a second I just hover at the doorway, watching them.

All five of my men turn as one.

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# FIFTY-EIGHT
# SAGE



I can't breathe.

It's ridiculous, because I've seen these men covered in blood, in masks, in moonlight, in bed, in the aftermath of murder and panic and dildo-cake proposals. I know every face. Every scar. Every expression.

And still, the sight of them standing together under that arch—waiting to marry *me*—steals the breath from my lungs.

Micah's mouth parts first, soft and wrecked in that way that always makes me feel seen all the way through. Milo visibly forgets how to stand like a normal person and just stares at me like I've personally walked out of a hallucination tailored to ruin him.

Knox goes motionless in that total-body way of his, every inch of him suddenly locked on one point. Holden's expression doesn't change much, but one of his hands flexes once at his side like he has to physically stop himself from coming to get me right now. Eli puts a hand over his heart.

And me?

I forget how feet work.

Amy nudges me from behind. "Forward, bride."

"Right," I whisper. "Walking. I know that one."

The music is some instrumental thing Micah picked because he said it sounded like "hope, but with taste." It floats over the yard while I make my way down the little path Knox laid with flat stones two weekends ago. The grass on either side is bright and clipped. The flowers at the arch smell soft

and sweet. Everyone is watching me, but I'm only paying attention to the men in front of me.

*I can't believe I get to keep them all.*

Forever.

Amy links her arm through mine for the first few steps, then lets me go so I can walk the rest myself. Which feels right. I got here under my own power. Bloody and terrified and half-feral. And now I walk toward them bold and brave, on somewhat shaky legs. But I'm here. And I'm happy. And that's something I wasn't expecting at the start of this.

By the time I stop in front of them, I'm already fighting tears.

"You look so beautiful, kitten," Milo stage-whispers.

I smile a wobbly smile as the music ends.

Gloria opens the leather folder and clears her throat. The yard goes quiet.

"We are gathered here," she starts, "in this backyard, on this afternoon, to witness and celebrate the commitment of six people who have found in each other something the world told them didn't exist." She looks up from the folder. "I was asked to keep this brief. I was also asked not to bring the shotgun. I've complied with one of those requests."

Milo's eyes go wide. He scans the arch. Gloria smiles and continues.

"Love is not a thing I pretend to understand conventionally. I have loved many men. Some of them are sitting in this yard. Some of them are in the garden." She pauses when Holden chokes. "That's a joke."

"Is it?" he whispers.

"Marriage, in the traditional sense, is a contract. A legal framework. A structure built by people who assumed love came in pairs." She closes the folder. "What these six people have built is not a contract. It's a covenant. A conspiracy. A shared refusal to accept the limits the world tried to place on them." She looks at each of us in turn. "Sage Adams came to this town running from a past that wanted to swallow her whole. Eli Ward came carrying grief like a second skeleton. Micah Raine arrived already hollowed out by loss. Knox Mehlar—" She pauses, and Knox shifts his weight, uncomfortable with being named. "Knox came as a wall, and found himself needed as a door. Holden Cross came believing justice was something you could file in triplicate. And Milo Hart came to burn the whole thing down, and accidentally built something instead."

Milo's hand finds mine and squeezes.

“They have lied for each other,” Gloria continues. “They have fought for each other. They have buried the darkness and refused to let it win. That is not traditional marriage. That is something older and more durable.”

She opens the folder again.

“I’ll keep the rest short, because I can see Sage is approximately thirty seconds from crying off her mascara.”

I laugh and dab at the corners of my eyes. “She’s not wrong.”

“So.” Gloria straightens. “Vows.”

Micah steps forward first.

He takes my hands. His are warm and steady and slightly calloused and I know every line of them because these are the hands that held me first, under the jetty, when I was shaking too hard to hold myself.

“Baby girl,” he starts, voice soft. “I vow to hold you when you need holding and to let go when you need space. I vow to feed you when you forget to eat and to listen when you need to talk and to be quiet when you don’t. I vow to love every version of you—the brave one, the scared one, the one who eats sandwiches from the middle out.” His mouth curves. “I vow to be your home. Not the building. The feeling.”

He kisses my hands and steps back.

Knox steps forward and takes my hands. His engulf mine entirely.

“Fury.” He pauses. “I vow to protect you. To stand between you and anything that tries to take you from me. And to build you whatever you need—a gym, an arch, a life.” He looks at me. “Yours. Always.”

I’m already crying when he leans in and kisses the top of my head.

Holden steps up. Adjusts his cuffs. Meets my eyes.

“Sage Adams—wildcat. I vow to always come when you call. To tell you the truth, even when it makes me look like an asshole. To let you help me when I’d rather pretend I don’t need it.” His voice drops. “I vow to watch the door so you never have to. And to tell the whole world to fuck off just to be here with you. You get my life, wildcat. All of it.”

He lifts my hands and presses a lingering kiss to my knuckles. I melt.

Eli.

He stands in front of me and doesn’t speak for a long moment. Long enough that Milo shifts nervously. Long enough that the silence fills with birdsong.

“I vow to never push you away again.” His voice is rough. “I vow to let you see the monster and trust that you’ll stay. To tell you when I’m

struggling, even when every instinct says to shut my fucking mouth." He swallows. "And I vow to keep finding things for us to look forward to. Books. Trips. A weekend at the cabin where we get absolutely nothing done. I want a whole life with you, Sage. In all shades of dark and light."

He leans forward. Presses his forehead to mine. Breathes.

"My little savage," he whispers. "I caught you. You're mine. I'm yours."

He steps back. I wipe my face with both hands. Someone passes me a tissue.

Milo.

He bounces on his heels. Cracks his knuckles. Takes a breath that's more performance than necessity—and then drops every wall he has.

"Kitten. I vow to make you laugh every single day. Even the bad ones. Especially the bad ones. I vow to always have a plan, a backup plan, and a backup-backup plan that involves a submarine." He grins, but his eyes are wet. "I vow to build you systems that keep you safe and annoy you with my genius and never, ever stop being the most exhausting person you've ever loved. I vow to be the chaos to your calm and the calm to your chaos, depending on the day. And I vow—" His voice cracks. He clears his throat. "I vow to wear my ring like the smug, married bastard I'm about to become. And when things get hard, I vow to stay close enough for you to reach me. I waited months to ask you for forever, kitten. I'm going to spend the rest of my life showing you how fucking glad I am that you said yes."

Gloria dabs her eye with the corner of her sleeve.

Dennis is openly weeping.

Gene has gone through three handkerchiefs.

Ray is staring at the sky, jaw tight, refusing to crack.

At the back of the yard, Loki's smile trembles. Thor takes his hand, and Odin moves closer, his gaze staying on the six of us.

My turn.

I look at all five of them. These men who found me when I was broken and didn't try to fix me. Who patched me up and put a knife within reach. Who loved me in a language the world hasn't built a dictionary for.

"I vow to choose all of you," I say. "Every day. Not because it's easy—God knows it's not easy—but because the hard parts are the parts that prove it's real." I take a breath. "I vow to fight for this family the way I fight for everything—stubbornly, recklessly, and with a knife if necessary. I vow to

let you hold me when I need it and to hold you when you won't admit you do. I vow to never run. Even when my brain tells me to. Even when the bricks come back."

I look at Eli. "Every monster."

At Knox. "Every door."

At Holden. "Every case."

At Micah. "Every morning."

At Milo. "Every version."

"I'm yours," I say. "All of me. The savage, the fury, the kitten, the wildcat, the baby girl. All versions of me. Forever."

Gloria looks at Milo. "The rings."

He whistles. "Mars!"

She appears in the doorway, tutu bouncing as she trots toward us. Halfway down the path, she veers off to investigate a bush.

"We rehearsed this," Milo tells her. "Don't make me regret choosing you over goldfish Frank."

Mars sniffs the bush.

"Mars. This is your moment."

She squats.

Knox makes a noise that might pass for a cough if I'd never heard him laugh before.

"I specifically requested no improvisation," Milo says.

"Show her the treat," Holden tells him.

"This is a wedding, not a hostage negotiation."

"She has our rings, Milo."

He considers that. "Fair."

I press my lips together as he crouches and fishes a treat from his pocket. Mars finishes her business, spots the payment, and scampers over, suddenly the most committed member of the wedding party.

"Good girl, you tiny extortionist."

He rewards her, then unties the little pouch secured to her collar. Our wedding bands inside.

"All accounted for," he announces. "Nobody tell her what they're worth."

He hands the pouch to Gloria, and she holds it out for me. I take the new bands from the pouch, one at a time. My fingers shake as I slide a ring

onto each man’s finger. By the time I reach Milo, I have to stop and wipe my cheeks.

He helps me settle his band, then holds his hand out to admire it until Holden nudges him.

Gloria hands my ring to Knox—it’s the one he forged, adjusted slightly so it’ll slot perfectly against my engagement ring. The alexandrite is green out here in the afternoon sun. It was blood red the night Milo put it on my finger.

His thumb traces the thin gold line before he passes it on. It moves through all five pairs of hands, each of them holding it for a moment, until Milo takes my left hand and slides it in place.

The familiar band settles against my skin. I look at their hands and start crying all over again.

Gloria smiles. “Then by the power vested in me by absolutely no legal authority whatsoever, I pronounce you committed. To each other. Permanently. Irrevocably.” She looks at me. “You may kiss your partners.”

If I could kiss them all at the same time, I would. But instead, I reach for them one at a time.

Micah first—soft, sweet, the taste of home. Knox—deep, steady, his hand at the back of my neck. Holden—controlled, possessive, a claim stamped in public. Eli—slow, raw, his palm warm against my cheek. And Milo—messy, laughing, tipping me backward in a dip that makes everyone shift forward to watch.

When I come up for air, Gloria adds, “One more thing.”

She produces a document from the leather folder.

“As of nine a.m. this morning, all six of you are legally registered under the surname Adams.” She looks at the five men. “You chose her. You became a family. And now you all carry one family name.”

Milo’s mouth opens. “That’s—you can’t. I looked into that. There are statutes. There’s a whole—” He stops. Looks at his mother. “Never mind. I don’t want to know.”

“Correct,” Gloria says.

Knox reaches for my hand. Squeezes once.

“Knox Adams,” he says. Testing it.

“Eli Adams,” Eli says.

“Holden Adams.”

“Micah Adams.”

“Milo Adams!” Milo shouts, throwing both arms in the air. “We’re the Adams Family! Oh my God, we’re literally the Adams Family. This is the greatest day of my life. Does anyone else see this? Morticia, Gomez, Lurch, Fester, Wednesday—it’s us!”

“Addams,” Holden says. “Two d’s.”

“Don’t you dare take this from me.”

“I’m only saying it out loud so it’s on the record.”

“Which one am I?” Holden asks.

“Gomez, obviously. Passionate, well-dressed, willing to kill.”

“I’ll accept that.”

“Knox is Lurch.”

Knox glares at him.

“With love,” Milo adds quickly. “With enormous, affectionate, please-don’t-crush-me love.”

The backyard erupts. Gloria hugs me—the bone-crushing, three-seconds-too-long hug that’s her signature. Dennis is still crying. Gene has moved on to a fourth handkerchief. Dean and Drake smile softly while they each wrap an arm around Amy.

Amy catches my eye and mouths, *you did it.*

I laugh because I did. We did. Somehow, impossibly, gorgeously, we did.

Then Milo is in front of me again, grabbing my face with both hands. “Mrs. Adams,” he says. “Queen of our tiny violent kingdom.”

“Yes, Mr. Adams?”

“I love you.”

“I love you too.”

He dips his head and kisses me, dramatic as always, one hand at my waist and the other flung out like he expects applause for his technique. He gets it, too. Dennis wolf-whistles through tears. Gene claps. Ray just mutters, “Where are their collars?”

By the time Milo lets me up, I’m laughing so hard I can barely breathe.

“Okay,” Gloria announces, already back in command. “Champagne before we all dehydrate from tears.”

“Too late,” Dennis says thickly.

“Champagne anyway.”

People begin moving, chairs scraping softly over the grass, conversations breaking open in little clusters. The whole backyard loosens

around us. The ceremony is over.

My husbands. Plural.

The word should feel absurd.

It feels right.

Knox keeps my hand in his, turning it now and then so our rings catch the light together. Eli kisses my temple and stays there for a moment, smiling against my skin. Holden looks at us and laughs—a low, disbelieving sound that makes me laugh too. Micah slips an arm around Eli's waist, his face still wet, and when our eyes meet his smile nearly starts me crying again. Milo collects two champagne flutes from a passing server and hands me one.

"For my wife." The others take glasses from the server. "Our wife. Fuck, I love saying that." Once everyone has their glass, he puts a hand over his heart. "To the House of Adams."

I clink his glass. "To the House of Adams."

Knox touches his glass to mine, and the others follow.

Then Knox keeps his glass in the air and clears his throat. "To keeping her."

My breath catches.

He looks around our perfect circle. "And each other."

Milo makes a wounded sound. "Jesus, big guy, you can't just body-slam us emotionally with that many words so close together."

Micah's smile goes soft and helpless. Eli looks away for half a second like he needs to get himself under control. Holden just exhales through his nose and lifts his glass higher.

"To keeping her," Holden says.

"And each other," Eli echoes, voice rough.

Micah touches his flute lightly to mine. "Always."

Milo presses his in last. "And to her keeping us, because let's be honest, we'd all be dead, incarcerated, or wearing deeply depressing socks without her."

I laugh, and the sound comes out watery around the edges. "You're all so dramatic."

"Untrue," Holden says. "Milo is dramatic. The rest of us are simply devastating."

I smile into my glass as I drink. *To keeping us.*

Later, Amy finds me at the edge of the yard with a glass of champagne and mascara tracks on her cheeks.

“It’s been a great day,” she says.

“It really has.” I nudge her with my shoulder. “I’m not sure why we went with the regular mascara though.”

She wipes at her cheeks. “Yeah. I’m questioning that decision too. It was the one that looked the prettiest. But now it’s just running down our faces.”

I laugh and rest my head on her shoulder, already missing her. “You’d better keep answering your phone when you’re a big-city girl.”

“You have five husbands. Surely one of them will talk to you.”

I lift my head. “They’re the people I’ll be calling to complain about.”

She laughs and clinks her glass against mine. “Then I’ll keep my phone charged.”

We watch our men—mine have migrated to the food, hers are chatting with Odin, Thor, and Loki. Amy goes quiet beside me, watching Dean gesture with his champagne flute while Drake pretends he isn’t overly focused on Amy.

Her voice goes small. “Do you ever feel weird that this is your life now?”

I let out a little laugh. “Constantly.”

“No, I mean . . .” She worries her bottom lip. “Like, one year ago you were surviving. Now you’re married to five terrifyingly hot men and hosting a wedding where a crime lord officiated in your backyard and none of the guests are regular people.”

“When you say it like that, it sounds sort of unhinged.”

“It is sort of unhinged.”

“It is,” I agree. “But it’s mine.”

Her eyes flick to me then, shiny and fond. “Yeah. It is.”

I bump her shoulder again. “And you’ll have your own weird, unhinged thing too. Maybe less murder-adjacent.”

“Manifesting that, honestly.”

“Hey, Ames?”

“Yeah?”

“Thank you. For being here. For all of it. From the shared apartment to this.”

She looks at me. Her eyes fill again, and she wipes at them with the heel of her hand.

“Wouldn’t have missed it,” she says. “Not for anything.”

“Stab sisters?” I say, holding out my fist.

“Stab sisters,” she says, bumping hers against mine as she wipes away yet another tear.

I slide an arm around her shoulders and we drink our champagne, while the fairy lights come on, one string at a time, and the afternoon goes soft at the edges.

Across the yard, Knox has his head bent to Hank’s. Hank says something short. Knox nods once.

Then Hank checks his watch, and Knox catches me looking and lifts his glass, and I lift mine back and forget about it.

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# FIFTY-NINE
# HOLDEN



My wife is bent over the drinks table, and the dress she's wearing does something criminal from this angle.

I'm about to cross the yard when Odin stops me.

"Holden?"

I turn, giving him a chin lift. "Odin."

He glances toward Sage. "I don't want to talk shop on your wedding day, but you should know, Fenrir located the man who delivered those sunflowers. He was also the person who left the barn the night you were taken."

My shoulders tense. "Kennel?"

He nods, absently swirling the glass in his hand. "He's been taken care of. Permanently."

My jaw tightens. "Any issues?"

Odin's mouth kicks up on one corner. "None that will blow back on you. Consider it a wedding present." He tilts his glass toward Sage. "Go kiss your wife, detective. We'll discuss more when you're back from your honeymoon."

I cross the yard in four strides and put my hand on Sage's lower back. Low. Lower than appropriate for a public setting. My thumb traces the curve of her spine through the fabric.

"Detective," she says without turning around.

"Wife."

"Your hand is on my ass."

“I think you’ll find my hand is on your lower back.”

“Your hand is migrating.”

It is. She doesn’t stop me.

“Everyone can see us,” she murmurs, picking up her champagne.

“Most of them aren’t looking.”

“And the ones who are?”

“Probably just Milo. He’s always looking. I’ve accepted this as a condition of the marriage.”

She laughs. “You love him.”

I grin. “Yeah,” I say. “I do.” Then I press my mouth to hers and squeeze her ass in front of everyone. Milo cheers.

The caterers keep the drinks flowing and the food coming. Nobody needs me to do a damn thing except enjoy my wedding. I’m managing beautifully. The playlist drifts from a speaker on the deck—Milo curated, Micah vetted—seventy percent danceable and thirty percent songs that are aimed at making Eli cry. So far, nothing.

Mars has stationed herself beside the catering table. I watch her accept chicken from Gene, swallow it, then move around the table to present herself to Dennis as a dog who has never been fed in her fucking life. He falls for it immediately. She’s halfway to Ray when she catches me watching.

“I know what you’re doing.”

Her tail wags.

I step aside so she can get through. It’s a wedding. Let her work.

Sage sets down her champagne, hooks a finger in my belt, and tugs.

“Come dance with me.”

“I don’t dance.”

“Holden.” She tugs harder. “It’s our wedding. Dance with your wife or I’ll dance with Knox, and you can watch.”

“You’ll dance with Knox anyway.”

“I will. But I want to dance with you first.” She looks up at me through those lashes. The gray eyes. The smudged lipstick from our constant kissing. “Please?”

I take her hand and walk her to the makeshift dance floor. The whole area glows amber from the fairy lights. The song is slow and about undying love. Eli still isn’t crying.

Her engagement ring has gone red. It was green out in the yard at two o'clock—some property of the stone, Milo explained it twice and I retained none of it. Under the fairy lights it's the exact color of arterial spatter.

I don't tell her. She'd like it too much.

"Get closer, wildcat." I pull her in. One hand on her waist. The other on her hip. Not the polite ballroom position. The position that says *mine* and doesn't apologize for it.

"Holden," she says against my chest.

"Mm?"

"Your hand is on my ass again."

Did I say hip? I might have misjudged.

"Problem?"

She snorts, the sound undignified and delighted.

We sway more than dance. But Sage doesn't seem to care. She puts her head against my chest and her arms around my waist.

"You're smiling," she says.

"I'm not."

"You are. I can feel it against my hair."

"That's a grimace."

"Holden Adams is smiling at his own wedding reception. Someone take a photo before it passes."

"Don't you dare—"

A flash. Milo. Phone raised. Grinning like a man who just acquired blackmail material.

"Delete that," I say.

"It's already in the group chat."

"Milo."

"And the cloud. And Gloria's phone. And a backup server in case of a nuclear event. Your smile is now preserved for posterity, lover boy. You're welcome."

I grab his collar and drag him in.

"Holden—"

I kiss him. Hard. No preamble. My free hand comes up to grip his jaw, angling him where I want him, and he makes a noise against my mouth that might be surprise or might be victory. His free hand finds my hip, fingers digging in, and he kisses back, enthusiastic, a little too much tongue.

When I pull back, he’s breathing hard. His collar sits crooked where I grabbed it.

“That’s one way to handle blackmail,” he says.

“Bring your phone.”

“What?”

“Bring it.”

I turn back to Sage. She’s watching us with her lips parted, gray eyes gone dark with want. I hold out my hand to her. She takes it. I reach back for Milo and haul him in by his wrist until the three of us are pressed together in the amber light.

“Photo,” I tell him. “Now.”

Milo’s laugh comes out shaky. “You want me to—”

“Document this. Before I change my mind about public displays.”

He raises his phone, arm extended, and I feel the moment he finds the angle because his body shifts—leaning into me, pressing into Sage, all of us fitted together like we were designed for this. The flash goes off. Then he pockets the phone and doesn’t let go of my hand.

“Micah,” Sage calls out, catching his eye across the yard. “Eli. Get over here.”

They don’t hesitate. Micah moves first, threading through the guests with the smile he’s had on his face since two o’clock. Eli follows, slower, his hands in his pockets, watching the three of us with a slight smirk on the corner of his mouth.

“Group activity,” Milo announces, throwing his free arm around Micah’s shoulders. “The Adams Family dance floor is now accepting all applicants.”

“There’s barely room,” Eli says, but he’s already stepping in, fitting himself against Sage’s other side. His hand finds her waist, tentative until she leans into it, and then his shoulders drop an inch.

Micah slots in beside Milo, completing the circle. The song changes to something faster, bass-driven, and Sage laughs as we all adjust our footing, suddenly too many limbs in too small a space.

“Knoxie,” she says, looking past my shoulder.

I turn. He’s standing at the edge of the light, massive and still, watching us in that way he does.

“Fury,” he says, not moving.

“Come here. You can’t watch on our wedding day.”

A grin tugs at the corner of his mouth, and he covers the distance in three strides and stops behind Sage, his hands settling on her shoulders. She tips her head back against his chest and smiles up at him, and his whole face softens into possession without jealousy.

“Okay,” Milo breathes. “This is happening. This is actually happening. All of us. Dancing. Together. In public.”

“Our backyard isn’t exactly public,” I say. “We all fucked in a room with more people than this watching.”

“True,” he says. “But we were wearing masks that day, so no one could tell who we were.”

Knox scoffs.

“Okay,” Milo admits. “Maybe you’re the one who gave us away, big guy.”

“Stop talking,” I tell him.

“Impossible. I’m documenting.”

He raises his phone again, arm extended until he finds the frame. The five of us press around Sage. Her face tipped up, laughing. My hand on her hip. Knox’s chin against her hair. Eli smiling. Micah’s arm thrown across Milo’s chest to keep us all together.

“Everyone look alive,” Milo says. “Or dead. Whatever, Knox, you do you.”

The flash goes off. Then he lowers the phone and stares at the screen, checking.

“Good?” Sage asks.

“Perfect,” he says, and his voice has gone strange—stripped of the comedy, just the truth underneath. “Fucking perfect.”

He pockets the phone and doesn’t let go of me. Doesn’t let go of any of us. The song builds toward something loud and celebratory, and we move together, six people who shouldn’t fit, who learned to fit anyway.

By the time we sit down to eat, Sage has lost her shoes, and Milo has sent the group photo to people who are standing twenty feet away.

Gloria waits until everyone has a plate before rising with her glass.

“I’ve already given one excellent speech today, so I won’t give another.”

“Thank God,” Milo mutters.

“I heard that, sweetheart.”

“Love you, Mom.”

“Yes, you do.” Her gaze travels along our table. “Today I gained a daughter and four sons. I’m delighted with all of you, although I would appreciate being consulted before anyone adds further to the numbers. Christmas is becoming expensive.”

Sage laughs into her glass.

“To my children,” Gloria says.

She looks straight at me when she says it.

I lift my bourbon and decline to think about Christmas at Gloria’s.

The dads stand before she’s finished sitting down.

“We thought we should offer some marriage advice,” Dennis says, lifting his champagne glass in our direction.

Gene leans in. “We agreed on a *simple* toast.”

“It can be both.”

Ray sets his mouth in a tight smile and just stands there.

“First,” Dennis says, “always listen to your wife.”

The yard starts laughing. Beside me, Milo leans forward, delighted.

“Second, always listen to your wife.”

The yard laughs harder.

“This was listening?” Gloria looks pointedly at Dennis’s Hawaiian shirt.

“What? The other shirt had a stain,” he tells her.

She just raises her brow in response.

“The trick,” he stage-whispers behind his hand, “is to always let her think she’s in charge.”

Dennis jolts.

“Fuck!”

Champagne flies over his shoulder, directly into Gene’s face.

Gene splutters. Sage makes a noise like she’s swallowed a squeaky toy. Milo folds forward, wheezing.

Dennis claps a hand over the collar beneath his turtleneck.

Gloria takes a delicate sip of her champagne.

“What were you saying, dear?” she asks.

Gene dries his face with a napkin and looks at Ray, who quickly jumps in. “What Dennis is trying to say is that we’re very happy for you.”

Dennis twitches again, an aftershock perhaps.

“To the six of you,” Gene announces. “May you always have each other.”

We drink to that and try not to notice the way Gloria dangles a little black remote at Dennis as he sits back down.

Odin rises next, buttoning his jacket with one hand.

“I had something prepared,” he says. “Loki read it and made me do it again.”

“You’re welcome,” Loki tells us.

Thor’s shoulders bounce.

Odin gives them both a look before returning his attention to our table.

“Apparently, congratulations shouldn’t sound like the opening of an annual meeting.”

“Apparently,” Loki agrees.

“So.” Odin lifts his glass. “I hope you continue to distract one another. I hope you keep finding excuses to celebrate. And I hope that, many years from now, you’re still making your guests wait for dinner because none of you wants to leave the dance floor.”

Sage squeezes my knee beneath the table.

“It’s been a pleasure watching you today,” he adds. “Thank you for inviting us. We can only hope to find the kind of love you all have one day.”

He sits, and Loki reaches over to straighten a lapel that doesn’t need straightening. Odin catches his hand before he can withdraw it.

Amy gets up last.

“Right. I’d like to address the husbands.”

We all straighten in our chairs.

“As the official best friend, there are a few ground rules to establish. One, I still get private conversations. Two, if she tells you she’s going out with me, that means me. It doesn’t mean me with five men at the next table wearing sunglasses.”

“That happened once,” Milo says.

I turn toward him.

Amy points at him with her glass. “Interesting. I made that up.”

“Then so did I.”

Sage drops her forehead against my shoulder, laughing.

Amy waits for her to look up again.

“I’ve been watching you all day,” she tells her. “And every time one of them calls you his wife, you get this little smile.”

Sage’s fingers tighten around mine.

“You’re doing it now.”

“Shut up, Ames.”

“Absolutely not. I’ve sat through enough conversations about these men. I’ve earned the right to stand here and embarrass you for thirty seconds.”

“Only thirty?”

“I’m being generous.” Amy’s smile trembles. “You look so happy, Sage. I love seeing you like this.”

Sage pushes back her chair.

“Wait. I haven’t done the toast.”

“Do it while I’m hugging you.”

Amy holds her glass out to the side as Sage reaches her.

“To my best friend,” she says, her voice muffled against Sage’s shoulder. “And her extremely distracting husbands.”

I lift my drink, but a movement farther down the table catches my eye.

Eli wipes beneath one eye with his thumb.

Milo sees it too.

“Got him,” he whispers.

“Drink your fucking champagne,” Eli says.

Micah kisses his cheek.

The night keeps going. Milo takes over the DJ booth. Eli groans. Micah laughs. Dennis and Gene teach Loki a card game he wins instantly and teaches back with modifications that are either genius or criminal. Thor leans over Loki’s shoulder to study his cards. Odin tells them that if they’re going to cheat, they could at least have the courtesy to be subtle. Ray is at the bar, nursing a beer, saying nothing.

Mars wakes up to eat cake off the ground, then passes out again.

I find Sage at the drinks table. I come up behind her. Slide both hands around her waist. Pull her back against my chest.

“Hello again,” she says.

I kiss her neck. The spot above the choker I locked into place the day she opened her birthday gifts, and that she only takes off to shower or sleep.

“Do you want to know a secret?” she asks, leaning into me.

“Always.”

She turns in my arms and leans up, lips against my ear. “Knox won the bowls, so he goes first. But I’m saving something special for last place. I have plans for you, Detective.”

My grip tightens on her waist.

“What kind of plans?”

“The kind that require your handcuffs and your full attention.”

I have never wanted to leave a party more in my life. And I’ve left a lot of parties. Usually because I wasn’t having fun. This time because I’m having too much of it and the fun is making promises to my body that I want to collect on immediately.

Sage pats my chest. “Patience.”

“I don’t have patience.”

“You’re a detective. Patience is literally your job.”

“Not tonight it isn’t.”

She laughs. Kisses my jaw. Slips away toward Amy, who is dancing with both twins in a way that suggests none of them have any idea what rhythm is but are committed to finding it through sheer enthusiasm.

I watch her go.

My wife. In a wedding dress with champagne on the bodice and grass stains on the hem, walking barefoot across a yard full of people who show up. In a world that has no business being this good to people like us.

“You’re staring at our wife’s ass,” Eli says, appearing beside me with two bourbons.

I take the bourbon he offers. “Your point?”

“No point.” He clinks his glass against mine. “Just coming over to join in.”

We drink. Watch the yard. Two men who’ve stood shoulder to shoulder in the darkness, watching worse things than a woman dance badly with her best friend.

I look at the yard. At the lights and the music and the people. At Milo trying to teach Knox to two-step, which is going exactly as well as you’d expect. At Gloria at her table with an expression that, in certain light, from certain angles, if you squinted, might almost be called happy. At Mars, still asleep, her little tutu askew.

Then I look at our wife.

And make my way across the yard of people who love her to grope her ass once more.

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# SIXTY
# MILO



The door to my room clicks shut behind us. Sage is still laughing at something Eli said on the stairs, gathering her skirt with one hand while she tries to remove an earring with the other. Micah takes it from her before it can disappear into the carpet.

Knox is fighting a cuff link.

“Give me your arm,” Eli says.

“I can do it.”

“Before breakfast would be nice.”

I catch Sage by the waist. “Ignore them. We offer a very professional service here.”

“Do you?”

“No. But we have excellent reviews—all from you and each other.”

She kisses me before I can get really into the bit. There’s champagne on her lips. Behind us, Eli wins the argument with Knox’s cuff link, and Holden drapes his jacket over a chair.

Micah finds the fastening at the back of Sage’s dress.

“Ready?”

She looks around at all of us and nods.

“More than ready.”

The dress pools at her feet, leaving her in lace panties, stockings and the garter belt that’s been taunting me all damn day. Her choker stays on.

Holden’s had the key to that thing around his wrist. Every night she holds her hand out and he unlocks it. Every morning she gives him her

throat and he locks it again. I think about that more than is probably healthy, usually at traffic lights.

“Fuck me,” I mutter, because priorities, and she arches a brow like she’s daring me to elaborate. Instead, I scoop her up and toss her onto the bed. She bounces once, laughing, and Knox moves closer. He kneels between her thighs and pops the seam of her panties like butter. She gasps and he spreads her wide with those huge hands, his mouth descending like he’s starving. I move closer, but Eli catches my arm.

“Winner’s privilege.”

“I know. I invented the stupid rules.”

I strip fast, suit hitting the floor in a heap, and stay beside the bed.

Sage’s eyes find mine in the mirror. Knox’s tongue works her over, and she moans as he pushes two fingers inside her, curling them until she’s bucking against him, coming hard with a cry that echoes off the walls.

The sound she makes undoes me.

I reach for her hand. She catches mine and holds on.

“Jesus,” I murmur against her temple. “Look at you.”

She turns her head enough to catch my mouth with hers, smiling into it, and I can feel the laugh trying to get out of her even now. “You’re already talking too much.”

“Rude. That’s literally my brand.”

“It’s one of them,” Holden says dryly.

I flip him off behind Sage’s shoulder.

He looks unimpressed, which only makes me want to fuck his mouth. Or vice versa.

Knox finally lifts his head and wipes his mouth with the back of his hand and looks at her like he wants to eat her all over again.

“Mine,” he says, voice low.

“Ours,” Micah corrects gently, already smiling as he crawls up the bed.

Knox’s mouth twitches. “Ours.”

“Better,” I say. “We literally just had a ceremony about this.”

Sage laughs and pushes her hair out of her face.

“Micah’s next.”

“Followed by me,” I add.

“I remember the scores, Milo. Then Eli. Then Holden.”

Holden raises an eyebrow.

She points at him. “And I remember what I promised you.”

“Handcuffs,” he says.

I look between them. “Oh? I love this idea.”

Micah takes Sage’s hand.

“Any requests?”

“Yes. Milo doesn’t get to provide commentary.”

I put a hand against my chest. “On our wedding night?”

“Especially on our wedding night.”

“You married me knowing this was a pre-existing condition.”

She kisses my cheek. “And I’m very brave.”

Micah laughs and draws her attention back to him.

We take our turns in order, and every moment I have to stand there makes me regret even starting this game. It’s way more fun when we’re all in this together, and you can’t figure out whose cum is on whom.

But Micah is already leaning over her, his mouth finding the hollow of her throat where the choker sits, and I watch his hands spread over her ribs with that gentleness he has, that knowing, like he’s reading her body for what it needs before she asks. She arches into him, her fingers threading into his curls, and the sound she makes is soft and grateful.

I adjust my position, pressing my palm against my own thigh to ground myself. Waiting is a skill I’ve cultivated in other contexts—surveillance, data recovery, the long game of building a digital trail that doesn’t exist—but this is different. This is wanting something I can see and smell and almost taste, and having to wait my turn like a civilized person.

Holden moves behind me, close enough that I feel his heat against my bare shoulder. “Suffering?” he murmurs.

“Artistically,” I reply.

He snorts, the sound barely there, and then his hand settles on my hip, thumb tracing the bone. I freeze for half a second, surprised by the contact, then relax into it, because this is what we do now. His hand stays, warm and present, and I realize he’s watching too, his breath coming slightly faster than his usual controlled pattern.

Sage cries out, her back lifting off the bed, and Micah murmurs something against her skin that I don’t catch but she clearly feels, her whole body responding to it. When he finally lifts his head, his mouth is wet, his eyes soft and wrecked, and he kisses her once, twice, before rolling to the side.

“My turn,” I say, and move before anyone can confirm or deny.

She’s flushed and open and laughing as I crawl up the bed toward her, her legs parting to make room for me between them. I settle there, my hips pressing against hers, and when she feels me hard against her thigh she makes a pleased sound.

“Hi, wifey,” I say, because I’m romantic like that.

“Hi, hubby.”

I kiss her, deep and messy, and she meets me with equal enthusiasm, her fingers digging into my shoulders. When I pull back, her eyes are bright, pupils blown wide, and I realize I’m grinning at her like an idiot.

“What’s so funny?”

“You,” I say. “Us. The fact that I have to wait my turn to fuck my wife on my wedding night.”

She laughs, the sound vibrating through both of us. “You started this.”

“Which I regret deeply.” I lean in and brush my nose alongside hers. “But honestly, watching you is its own reward.”

She lifts her hips against me, and I groan, pressing my forehead to hers. “Kitten, you’re going to break me before I even get inside you.”

“That sounds like a challenge.”

“Everything with you is a challenge.”

I kiss her again, slower this time, letting myself have this moment—the weight of her beneath me, the heat of her through the lace, the way her breath catches when I rock my hips just right.

I shift my weight and feel her heat against me, deliberate and teasing. “You’re dangerous,” I murmur against her jaw. “Someone should have warned me.”

“Several people did,” she says. “You ignored them.”

“Because I’m an optimist.”

She laughs, the sound catching in her throat as I rock against her again. Behind us, Eli clears his throat in that way he has—polite but pointed, a teacher managing a classroom of unruly instincts.

“Milo.”

“I know, I know. Winner’s privilege. Loser’s suffering.” I slide down her body and draw my tongue down the length of her, clit to asshole, tonguing the puckered bud.

I groan against her, the vibration traveling through both of us, and she makes a sound of pure need. I keep at it, eating her asshole while using my fingers to tease her clit until she’s trembling beneath me. The taste of her

fills my senses, and I lose myself in the rhythm of it, the way she arches and gasps and finally breaks apart with a hoarse cry.

When I lift my head, she's wrecked. Hair spread across the pillow, chest heaving, eyes glazed with pleasure. I crawl back up her body and kiss her, letting her taste herself on my tongue, and she moans into my mouth like she wants more, always more.

"Eli's turn," I whisper against her lips, and roll to the side. "You're gonna have to top the rim job I just gave her. Sorry, buddy."

Eli ignores me and moves in with barely contained hunger. He eases her panties off and settles between her thighs, taking his time as his hands map her body. When he pushes his fingers into her, they both exhale—long, shuddering breaths that sound like coming home. Then his mouth is on her, and her thighs close in around his head.

He works her slowly, worshipping her and punishing himself simultaneously, and I understand the impulse. She's glorious like this. And all ours.

When she comes, it's with his name breaking across her lips. He doesn't lift his head immediately. Presses a kiss to her thigh, her hip, her navel. Painting his gratitude across her skin.

"Got one more in you, wildcat?" Holden asks, a set of handcuffs dangling from his fingers.

"Fuck, yes."

Eli rolls to the side as Holden moves in. The metal catches the light as he closes one cuff around her wrist, passes the open cuff through the ring on the headboard—because when I built this bed, I prepared for these kinds of games—then closes it around her other wrist. She's stretched out before him, helpless and willing and utterly in command despite the restraint.

"Comfortable?" he asks.

"Fuck comfortable," she says. "Make me feel it."

He does. His mouth finds her, and she arches against the cuffs. I watch his hands grip her thighs, holding her exactly where he wants her, and I work my own shaft, wanting both of them.

She comes hard, body straining against the metal, and Holden doesn't stop. Keeps working her through it until she's making sounds that aren't even language, just pure response. When he finally lifts his head, his mouth is wet, his expression almost cruel with satisfaction.

"Ours," he says.

Sage laughs, breathless, the chain rattling as she tests her restraint. “Yours,” she agrees. “All of yours.”

I take the key from the nightstand and unlock the cuffs, kissing one wrist while Holden kisses the other.

“Turn over for us, baby girl,” Micah murmurs.

She does, boneless and trusting, rolling onto her stomach with a little help from Knox’s giant hand at her hip. I slide away just long enough to let her settle, then climb back onto the bed and kneel near her head, dragging my fingers down the line of her spine.

“Pretty,” I whisper. “So fucking pretty.”

Her eyes flutter half-shut as Eli moves in, one hand rubbing the back of his neck as he watches Sage laid out between us.

“We keeping the stockings on?” I ask, because some questions matter.

“Yes,” Holden says immediately.

“God, thank you.”

He’s already back in command mode, which on most people would be annoying and on Holden is unbearably hot. He slides one knee onto the mattress and reaches for Sage’s ankle, running his fingers up the sheer line of her stocking with a look on his face that could make a nun file a police report.

“Hands and knees,” he rasps.

Sage shivers and obeys.

Christ.

Her dark brown hair spills down her back. The white lace of her garter belt sits against her hips, the stockings still clipped in place. It feels like the room is full of nothing but her. Nothing but us wanting her.

I trail my hand up her spine again, slower this time, and feel the fine tremor that goes through her. Micah is at her side in an instant, one hand soothing over her waist, the other brushing hair off her shoulder so he can kiss the place where neck becomes shoulder.

“You okay, baby girl?” he asks quietly.

She turns her face toward him, eyes bright and soft. “I’m five orgasms in. I’m more than okay.”

Eli exhales roughly behind us. Knox settles one broad palm at the small of Sage’s back and just keeps it there, grounding, possessive, huge. Holden’s gaze stays on her turned face.

“Good,” he says. “Then let’s take our time.”

I grin. “Wow. Who replaced the detective with a seduction coordinator?”

“Keep talking,” Holden says, “and I’ll give you something to do with that mouth.”

“Promise?” I shoot back.

Sage laughs into the sheets.

The sound dies into a moan when Holden’s hand comes down between her shoulder blades and eases her lower, shaping her exactly how he wants her. It’s obscene how beautiful she is like this—our bride on all fours in white lace, hair tumbling, rings flashing, back arched.

I move around to face her and cup her jaw.

“Open for me, kitten.”

She parts her lips immediately, eyes finding mine through the curtain of her hair, and I swear I nearly come from that alone. I stroke my thumb over her lower lip, then feed her two fingers. She sucks them in with a slow little hum that goes straight to the root of me.

“Jesus,” Eli mutters.

“No,” I say. “Milo. Keep up.”

Sage bites my fingers lightly. I grin.

Behind her, Holden makes a low, impatient sound and slides his fingers through her slick heat. “Enough foreplay.”

“That is a deeply offensive thing to say while foreplay is actively happening,” I inform him.

Then Knox’s hand closes on the back of my neck and squeezes just enough to make me shut up.

Fair. Annoying, but fair.

I pull my fingers from Sage’s mouth and kiss her instead, hard and sloppy, while Holden positions himself against her pussy and pushes inside.

“Oh—”

Sage’s cry punches straight through me, cut sharp with pleasure as Holden sinks all the way in and stills for one brutal second like he needs to remember how to breathe.

“Fuck,” he says, low and wrecked behind her.

“Yeah, that seems right,” I mutter, because if I stop talking I might combust.

Then Micah slides in from the side, cups her face, and kisses her.

It starts tender for maybe half a heartbeat because he can’t help being who he is, and then something in him gives. His hand fists in her hair, his mouth opens over hers, and the sound that comes out of him is this helpless, hungry moan he pours right into her mouth like he’s feeding it to her.

I actually shudder.

“Oh, that is criminally hot,” I say.

Micah either doesn’t hear me or has chosen growth through ignoring me, because he just keeps kissing her harder. Sage melts into it with a muffled little sound, and then Eli drops to his knees beside him.

The second I clock what he’s doing, my entire brain lights up like Vegas.

“Well, hello, plot twist.”

Eli shoots me a look that says shut the fuck up, but his hand is already wrapping around Micah’s cock. One stroke. Two. Then he takes him in, and Micah jerks against Sage’s mouth with another groan that gets swallowed whole.

Jesus Christ.

Micah kisses like he’s trying to drown in her, and Eli sucks him off like he’s punishing him for being beautiful. It’s filthy and intimate and so offensively gorgeous. My mouth actually waters.

Holden’s hand is still braced between Sage’s shoulders, his hips starting that controlled, devastating roll into her that always looks restrained right up until it absolutely isn’t. Micah is wrecking her mouth. Eli is wrecking Micah. And suddenly I am violently, spiritually offended by the fact that I’m not currently involved in at least three more ways.

So I fix that.

I crawl around Sage’s side and catch Holden by the jaw mid-thrust. His eyes slice to mine—cold, bright, already blown dark at the edges—and I kiss him before he can say something cutting and annoyingly memorable.

He makes a rough sound into my mouth that goes straight to my cock. His mouth opens under mine with immediate, punishing intent, all bite and control and that banked violence he wears like a second skin. Behind the kiss, I feel the rhythm of him still driving into Sage—steady, deep, uncompromising—and the combination nearly shorts out what little remains of my executive function.

“Oh, fuck, that’s hot,” I breathe against his mouth.

“It could be hotter,” he says.

Well.

If you insist, Detective.

I straighten on my knees, making him lift his head to keep looking at me. Sage makes a beautiful broken sound beneath us when he thrusts harder.

Knox's big hand slides from her back to her hip. I glance down just in time to see his thick finger dipping into her ass.

Sage jerks under the touch, her whole body tightening in that gorgeous, helpless way that makes every atom in me sit up and beg for more.

"Jesus Christ," I say reverently.

"Fuck me," Holden grunts, already halfway gone.

He doesn't have to tell me twice.

I stroke myself once—twice—slicking lube where it's needed most and line up behind him, one hand braced on his hip. He looks back at me over his shoulder, ice-blue eyes cut razor-sharp with heat.

"Don't make me regret this," he says.

"Baby, regrettable is my baseline."

Then I push in.

Holden's mouth opens on a harsh inhale, his whole body locking. The angle drives him deeper into Sage and her cry punches right through the room, all high and wrecked and perfect. I nearly black out on the spot.

"Oh, that," I gasp. "That's—holy shit."

It's obscene. It's better than obscene. Holden is tight and hot around me, Sage is taking him in front of me, and for a second I can't find a single fucking word. My hand digs into his waist. His hand presses harder between Sage's shoulder blades to steady himself.

"Move," he grits out.

"Yes, sir."

I start slow because even I'm not enough of a menace to ruin this by rushing it, but every thrust sends a visible shudder through all three of us. Holden's control frays by the second. Sage is making these broken little sounds into the sheets that I want to bottle and sell on the black market.

She bucks her hips back, chasing more from Holden even as he takes from me, his body a taut wire strung between us, every muscle coiling tighter with each roll of my hips. The chain reaction is perfection—my thrust into him drives him deeper into her, and she arches like the whole thing was her idea, fingers clenched in the sheets.

Eli's still on Micah, his mouth working with that focused intensity he saves for executions and this, apparently. Micah braces a hand against the headboard as he kisses Sage.

"Baby girl," he gasps against her lips. "God, you're everything."

Knox growls low in his throat, his finger still buried in her ass, twisting just enough to make her whimper into Micah's mouth. "More?" he rumbles, like he's offering her the world or a wrecking ball, and she nods frantically, her eyes squeezing shut as he adds a second finger, stretching her with that careful brutality only he can pull off.

I'm losing it, my rhythm picking up because Holden feels too damn good, all resistance and surrender wrapped in one infuriating package. "You take it so well, Detective," I grit out, slamming home harder, and he answers by reaching back to grab my thigh, nails digging in like punishment or permission—I don't care which, as long as he doesn't stop the low, guttural sounds he's making every time I bottom out.

Sage's breath hitches, her body trembling under the assault from all sides, and I turn to watch us in the floor-to-ceiling mirror—she's flushed, lips parted, eyes glazed with that beautiful haze where pleasure blurs into overload. "Look at us, kitten," I grind out. "Your husbands, ruining you on our wedding night. How's it feel?"

She meets my gaze in the reflection, her smile wicked and shattered all at once. "Perfect," she manages, right before another moan rips from her throat as Knox crooks his fingers and Holden thrusts in time with mine, the three of us synced like some filthy machine built for her undoing.

Eli pulls off Micah with a wet pop, his lips swollen, and he surges up to claim Sage's mouth next, kissing her fierce and filthy while Micah pants beside them, stroking himself slow like he's savoring the view. "Little savage," Eli murmurs against her lips. "Ours. All fucking ours."

Holden clenches around me, his control fracturing, and I feel him tense, his hips stuttering as he buries himself in Sage one last time with a curse. He comes hard, spilling into her, and the sight of it—the way she gasps and shudders, pushing back for more—sends me right over the edge after him. Heat races up my spine, my vision narrowing to the curve of her back, the sweat on Holden's neck, and I empty into him with a groan that's half-laugh, half-snarl, my hands gripping his hips like I'll fall if I let go.

We collapse in a tangle, breaths heaving, bodies slick and spent, but Knox isn't done. He eases his fingers free and maneuvers Sage onto her

back like she’s precious cargo, his massive frame covering her as he notches himself against her pussy. “Fury,” he says, voice gravel and devotion. “Ready?”

“Always,” she whispers, wrapping her legs around him, and he slides home slow, filling her inch by inch until she’s arching off the bed again, nails raking down his back.

Micah and Eli flank her, hands roaming—Micah’s gentle on her breasts, Eli’s rougher at her throat—while Holden recovers beside me, his chest rising and falling like he’s run a marathon. I prop myself on an elbow, watching Knox fuck her with those deep, unhurried strokes that make her eyes roll back, and yeah, this is heaven. Or the hottest layer of hell. Either way, I’m staying.

She comes again with Knox buried inside her, crying out his name, and he follows with a rumble that shakes the bed, pulling out at the last second to paint her stomach in thick ropes. Eli’s there immediately, licking a stripe through the mess before kissing her, sharing the taste, and Micah joins in, his mouth on her neck, and between the two of them she starts making that sound again, the one I would sell state secrets for.

I slump back against the headboard, spent but still buzzing, watching the scene unfold with that post-orgasm clarity where everything feels sharper, more absurdly perfect. Sage’s eyes flutter open, finding mine through the tangle of bodies, and she reaches out a hand. I take it, threading our fingers together.

Eli pulls back from her mouth, his chest heaving, and growls something low to Micah that I can’t quite catch. Whatever it is, it makes Micah smile before he shifts, positioning himself behind Eli with a look I have never once seen on him. “I need you, husband,” Micah murmurs, and Eli’s eyes darken, his body tensing in anticipation as Micah slicks himself up and presses forward.

Eli’s groan is guttural, raw, as Micah slides in slow and steady, one hand braced on Eli’s hip, the other reaching around to stroke him. It’s mesmerizing—the way Eli’s control fractures, his head dropping forward, breaths coming sharp while Micah sets a rhythm that’s gentle at first. Sage watches too, her lips parted, free hand trailing down Eli’s arm like she’s anchoring him through it.

Knox maneuvers Sage onto his lap now, facing away from him, her back to his chest. He spreads her thighs wide over his, exposing her

completely, and I can’t help the way my gaze locks there, even as my body screams that recovery time is a myth.

“Come here, little savage,” Eli rasps, shifting forward with Micah. He lines himself up with Sage, thrusting into her with a hiss that turns into a moan when Micah follows the movement, driving deeper.

The chain forms again—Micah fucking Eli into Sage, who’s seated on Knox like a throne of muscle and heat, his hands roaming her body, one dipping between her legs to circle her clit while the other bands around her waist, holding her steady. Holden recovers enough to kneel beside them, capturing Sage’s mouth in a kiss that’s all possession, his fingers tweaking her nipple until she whimpers into him.

Somewhere in here I lose track of whose hand is on me. I decide this is the correct number of husbands.

I lean in to whisper against her ear, “You’re a vision, kitten. Look how they fall apart for you.” She turns her head, capturing my lips in a sloppy, desperate kiss, her body rocking with the force of Eli’s thrusts, amplified by Micah’s. The room fills with the sounds of them—skin on skin, ragged breaths, low curses—and it’s so much input my brain files the whole thing under *later* and quits.

Sage breaks first, her cry muffled against my shoulder as she comes undone, clenching around Eli, her nails digging into my hand. It sets off a domino effect—Eli follows with a shattered groan, spilling into her while Micah grips his hips harder, thrusting a few more times before he stills, head thrown back in silent ecstasy. Knox doesn’t move, just holds her through it, his low rumble of approval vibrating against her back.

By the time we’ve cleaned up, the water bottle has made two trips around the bed and nobody agrees about where the pillows belong.

“That one’s mine,” I tell Knox.

He lifts his arm so I can retrieve it.

“Thank you.”

“Stop talking.”

“You’re welcome.”

Sage laughs as I settle between her and Holden. Across the bed, Micah pulls the sheet over Eli’s shoulder, then gives it a harder tug when he discovers Knox is lying on the other end.

We get there eventually.

Holden finds my hand beneath the sheet and folds it against his chest.

“This was a good day,” I say. “I’m keeping this one. Every hour of it, somewhere the permissions don’t reset.”

Sage presses a kiss to my shoulder. “It really was.”

“We should have an anniversary.”

“That’s generally how marriage works,” Holden says.

“I’m appreciating things.”

“Appreciate them quietly.”

He kisses my knuckles, which substantially undermines the delivery.

I’m still smiling when he reaches over me and switches off the lamp.

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# SIXTY-ONE
# SAGE



"This isn't the way to the cabin."

Knox is driving. I'm in the passenger seat of the new SUV—the insurance payout on the first one came through two months ago and Milo immediately ordered an identical replacement, same bulletproof glass, same custom sound system, same everything except the personalized plate, which this time reads ADMS FAM because the DMV still wouldn't approve any version of MURDER KITTEN. Eli and Holden are in the middle row. Milo and Micah are in the back, Milo buried under a mountain of luggage that defies both physics and the concept of a two-week trip.

The road we're on is familiar. Industrial. The kind of neighborhood where every building was designed by someone who hated windows and the concept of curb appeal.

"Knox."

He doesn't answer. Just drives.

I turn to look behind me. Eli is watching the road with a stillness that means he knows exactly where we're going. Holden's jaw is set. In the back, Micah catches my eye and gives me a look I can't quite read. Milo has stopped talking. Something's off.

"We passed the highway turn-off ten minutes ago."

Knox's hand moves from the wheel to my thigh and settles there.

"Trust me," he says.

"Okay."

I sit back and watch the buildings pass and try not to think about why my stomach just dropped, because my body knows this route even if my brain is still catching up.

We pull into a gravel lot I've been in before.

Hank's Quality Meats. It all looks the same—the faded red letters that were probably bright once, the refrigerated van parked at the loading dock, the steel door that leads to a corridor lined with hooks. The last time I was here, Micah and I learned to break down a pig carcass while Milo narrated like a cooking show and Hank told us not to puncture the organs.

That was before the noose. Before the wall. Before the barn.

Knox parks. Kills the engine.

Nobody moves to get out.

"Why are we at Hank's?" Milo says from the back, but his voice is wrong—too careful and measured, performing confusion he doesn't feel. "I thought we were going to the cabin. Did someone change the itinerary without consulting me? I need twenty-four hours' notice for itinerary changes. This is in the group chat rules—"

"Milo," Eli says from the middle row, using the tone he reserves for rambunctious students who won't sit still.

"Oh." Milo stops. "So I don't need to keep pretending anymore?"

"What's going on?" I ask.

Knox gets out first and opens my door, offering his hand. I take it and step out onto the gravel.

The others pile out, and Holden moves to the steel door, holding it open. The corridor beyond is lit in that blue-white fluorescent way that makes everything look like a morgue, which isn't far off given what happens in the rooms at the end of it.

"Someone needs to explain what's happening," I say, looking around at them all instead of stepping inside.

"Wedding gift," Eli says. He's beside me now, his hand at the small of my back. "We talked about it. All five of us. And we agreed."

"Agreed on what?"

"To get you something you need." Micah is on my other side. "Something we should have given you a long time ago."

My pulse climbs as we walk the corridor. Hooks on the walls. Tile floor scrubbed pink from years of what Hank euphemistically calls "processing."

The industrial smell—cold metal, bleach, the faint organic undertone that never fully leaves a space where things are taken apart.

Hank is at the far end, standing outside a closed door. Arms folded. He nods at Knox, at me, and steps aside without a word.

Knox stops at the door and turns to me.

“We found him six weeks ago,” he says. “Milo ran the trace. Holden confirmed the ID. I picked him up three days ago from a motel in Bridgeport.”

The floor tilts.

“Knox.”

“He’s been in this room ever since. Hank’s been keeping him fed and quiet. He doesn’t know who took him or why.”

My blood goes cold. Then hot. My hands start shaking and don’t stop.

“You didn’t,” I whisper.

“We did.” Eli’s voice is behind me, rough. “This is the name on the top of your list.”

My mouth goes dry.

There are names that never stop living under your skin. Names that don’t need to be spoken to make your body remember. Mine remembers before my mind catches up fully—my lungs going tight, and that split second of being fifteen and small and unable to get enough air.

My hand presses to my chest.

Micah’s fingers close gently around my wrist. “Breathe, baby girl.”

I try.

The first breath is shit. Too sharp, too shallow.

The second gets a little farther.

Knox is still standing in front of the door, massive and immovable, but his eyes are on me, waiting.

“You found my uncle?” I ask, and my voice doesn’t sound like mine.

Knox doesn’t look away. “Yes.”

Six weeks. Milo ran the trace, Holden confirmed it, Knox drove to Bridgeport three days ago and put a man in a room. And in between, all five of them planned a wedding with me and never said a word.

I stare at the door.

Behind it is the first monster.

I haven’t seen him in years.

But I’ve seen his face everywhere.

In nightmares. On the street. Behind every locked door.

“You don’t have to go in,” Holden says. He’s behind the group, leaning against the corridor wall, arms folded, watching me. “We can handle it. Hank can handle it. You never have to see his face.”

“But we thought you should choose,” Knox says.

I could turn around. Let them handle it. Leave for the cabin without ever seeing his face again.

Brock was reactive. Stine was desperate. Freely was deliberate. Stephen was earned.

I look at the door.

“Kitten.” Milo is beside me, his hand finding mine. “Whatever you decide. We’re here.”

I look at our joined hands. My rings catch the light as I loosen my fingers.

I turn to Knox. “Give me my knife.”

He pulls my folded knife from the sheath at his hip and opens it. The blade catches the fluorescent light.

He holds it out. Handle first. The way you offer a key.

I take it.

Hank opens the door for me. The man who taught me how to take a body apart, holding the door.

The room is cold. Concrete floor. A single light. A drain in the center. And in a chair, zip-tied and gagged, my uncle.

He’s older. Smaller than I remember. The body that once filled every doorway is just a body now. Ordinary. Breakable.

His eyes find me in the doorway. They widen.

He knows me.

Of course he does.

I step inside. The door stays open behind me. My husbands stand in the corridor, giving me the room the way they gave me the room at Freely’s—positioned at the edges, out of the way, because this isn’t their kill.

It’s mine.

I walk to the chair and stop in front of him.

This is the man who built the first locked room inside me.

He can’t even lift his hands now.

“Normally, I give a speech,” I say to my uncle. “I tell them what they did. I make them understand why this is happening.”

He stares at me, eyes wet and desperate above the gag. I can smell him from here—sweat, fear, the sourness of a man who hasn't bathed properly.

The man who once filled my childhood with shadows smells like any other trapped animal.

"But you already know why you're here, don't you?" I crouch in front of him, bringing us eye to eye. The knife rests against my thigh, blade catching the light. "You knew the second you saw me in the doorway."

His head moves—almost a nod, but it's more of a plea.

I stand, and he fights his restraints, crying behind the gag. The chair scrapes against concrete as I circle him, and I let my fingers trail across his shoulder, light enough to make him flinch. He can't tell if I'm going to comfort him or cut him. That uncertainty is its own small revenge.

"I used to dream about this," I continue, coming back around to face him. "Standing over you. Making you feel what I felt. Small. Helpless. Waiting for someone to decide what happens next."

His eyes track the knife.

"But I realized something." I tilt my head. "You're not special. You're not powerful. You're just a man who found a child who couldn't fight back, and you mistook that for strength."

I step closer. The knife rises, and he squeezes his eyes shut, breath whistling through his nose.

"Open your eyes."

He doesn't.

"Open your eyes," I repeat, and something in my tone makes them fly open. "Look at me. I'm not fifteen anymore. I'm not trapped. I'm not alone."

I glance toward the doorway. Knox's massive frame blocks most of the light, but I can see Eli's hand at the doorframe, Micah's shoulder pressed to his, Milo's restless energy contained for once, Holden's stillness.

"This is my family," I tell my uncle. "They found you. They brought you here. They gave me a choice. You never gave me one. So I'm returning the favor."

I raise the knife and plunge it into his chest.

He screams behind the gag, thrashing, crying.

*Don't scream.* A hand over my mouth, his voice at my ear, the TV still going in the other room.

I tear the blade free.

“Save your tears, dear uncle,” I say, putting it back in and twisting. “Mine didn’t save me.”

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# EPILOGUE 1 – SAGE



*Four months later.*

The cabin smells like pine and cold air and whatever Milo is attempting in the kitchen, which, based on the smoke alarm going off twice in ten minutes, is either French toast or a cry for help.

I come down the stairs wrapped in a flannel shirt that belongs to Knox and a pair of knee socks. The living room is a mess—Holden's files spread across the coffee table because he can't stop working even when the nearest jurisdiction is forty miles away, Milo's laptop open on the couch with seven browser tabs visible from the doorway, Micah's book face down on the armrest, Knox's boots by the door, and Eli's jacket thrown over the back of a chair.

Evidence. All of it. That these people are mine and I am theirs. Even the mailbox at home says ADAMS now.

Through the kitchen window, I can see Knox outside splitting wood. Shirtless. On a freezing autumn morning. Because Knox runs hot and has a personal vendetta against the cold and I suspect he knows I watch him through this window every morning and has calibrated his schedule accordingly.

Holden is at the table reading something on his phone with focused displeasure—meaning Odin has probably sent a new brief. We've run three operations since the wedding. Last month, Eli and I took a target in Oregon. Milo still calls the assignment before that "the wettest Tuesday in recorded history" for reasons I'm choosing not to revisit.

Micah passes the kitchen window with an armful of split wood. Knox says something I can't hear, and Micah laughs before heading back for another load.

Eli is still in bed. I left him there twenty minutes ago, sprawled across the mattress with one arm flung over the space where I was, mouth slightly open as he snored the morning away. I kissed his forehead on my way out. He didn't stir.

"Morning, kitten." Milo is at the stove, wearing an apron that says KISS THE COOK OR I'LL HACK YOUR BANK ACCOUNT—a gift from Gloria, who insists that "women belong on top of everything." I've decided she's an icon.

"Go sit," Milo says, pressing a slice of bread into the pan with the back of a spatula. "We have French toast. Maple syrup. Side of bacon. And before you ask, yes, I know how to make French toast. I've watched seven videos and I'm choosing to interpret the smoke alarm as applause."

"It went off twice."

"Standing ovation."

I sit at the kitchen table. Holden lowers his coffee, his free hand finding my knee under the table. "Wildcat."

I lean over and kiss him, loving the firm press of his lips. "You sleep okay?"

He runs a thumb along my jaw, his eyes soft as they look into mine. "Always."

Smiling against his mouth, I kiss him again. I like that answer. Months ago, he barely slept at all. But ever since the barn and that final night on the beach, Holden sleeps like a baby. We all do.

Well, except Milo. But that's his normal.

"Breakfast is served!" Milo slides a plate in front of me. The French toast looks . . . fine. It looks fine. Golden, mostly even, the bacon crisp. There's a strawberry on top that he's cut into a heart shape because he's incapable of not being extra about everything at all times.

I lean over my plate and inhale, and as soon as the smell hits me, my stomach does a full rotation, my mouth floods with saliva, and every cell in my body says *absolutely not.*

I push back from the table. "Oh my God. I can't—sorry, I just—"

I make it to the bathroom in time. Barely. The door slams behind me, and I'm on my knees on the tile, retching into the toilet while wondering

why my body has suddenly decided that French toast is a war crime.

When it passes, I sit back on my heels, wipe my mouth, and stare at the ceiling.

*What the hell.*

I flush. Rinse my mouth. Walk back to the kitchen where Milo and Holden are staring at me with expressions ranging from concern to curiosity. I sink back into my chair.

Milo is the first to speak.

"Okay," he says carefully. "On a scale from one to food poisoning, how insulted by my breakfast are you?"

"I don't know." My voice sounds weirdly thin to my own ears. "It smelled good for like half a second and then suddenly I wanted to die."

Micah comes in from outside at that exact moment, cold air slipping in with him. He's got an armful of split wood against his chest, curls wind-tossed, cheeks pink from the cold. He takes one look at my face and sets the wood down with a clatter.

"Baby girl?"

"I'm fine," I say automatically.

All three men make identical expressions that clearly communicate "liar."

Holden's eyes sweep over me. "How long?"

I blink at him. "How long what?"

"Have you felt sick?"

"I don't know. I haven't." I think about it. "Not like this. Maybe a little off the last few mornings? But I thought I was just tired."

Milo and Micah stare at me.

Holden goes utterly still.

And then from outside, Knox opens the door, steps in shirtless and carrying more wood, and the entire room turns toward him with such synchronized intensity that even he pauses.

His gaze lands on me first.

"Fury?"

I open my mouth and hesitate before saying, "I threw up because of French toast."

Knox sets the wood down slowly.

"I'm fine." My voice pitches on the last word, and even I don't believe it.

Knox crosses the room and presses the back of his hand to my forehead. “You don’t feel warm.”

“Could be a stomach bug,” Micah says. “There’s one going around. You should go back to bed. I’ll bring you something bland—crackers, maybe some broth.”

“I’m fine, seriously. I’m probably just—”

“Pregnant,” Milo says with a solemn nod.

Holden spits coffee across the table, a full, pressurized spray that hits his phone, the salt shaker, and the strawberry French toast heart in a wide arc of caffeinated panic. He coughs, wipes his mouth with the back of his hand, and stares at Milo like he’s announced the building is on fire.

“The fuck, Milo?”

“What? I’m just stating the obvious.”

“But she’s on birth control,” Eli says from the doorway, still looking half asleep. He rubs a hand over his already messy hair, and even with my stomach staging a revolt, I still take a moment to appreciate him in nothing but gray sweatpants. “She’s been on birth control since—”

“Doesn’t mean it always works,” Milo says.

“He’s right,” Micah says quietly. “No method is a hundred percent. If she’s nauseous in the morning, especially with food aversion—”

“That doesn’t mean she’s pregnant,” Holden says. “That means she’s nauseous. It could be anything. Food poisoning. A virus. Stress.”

“When was her last period?” Eli asks, looking at Milo because we all know he tracks my cycle in his custom app.

“It’s been irregular all year,” Milo says matter-of-factly. “We went to the gyno and she said stress can—”

“When, Fury?” Knox asks gently.

I count backward. Do the math. Count again because the first number doesn’t make sense.

“Seven weeks,” I say. “Maybe eight.”

The kitchen goes very, very quiet.

Knox’s hand moves to my shoulder and tightens like he’s recalibrating.

“It’s okay,” Milo says. “I’ve prepared for this.”

“What do you mean, you’ve prepared?” Holden calls after him as he walks out of the kitchen. “Milo!”

The only answer we get is the sound of his footsteps on the stairs, the creak of a door, rummaging, a drawer opening and closing. He comes back

carrying a giant paper pharmacy bag.

He sets it on the table.

“What is that?” Holden asks.

Milo opens the bag and begins removing boxes. Seven different brands of pregnancy tests, lined up across the kitchen table like soldiers at inspection.

“You’ve got to be kidding me,” Eli says.

“I’m never kidding about reproductive logistics.” Milo reaches into the bag again and produces a bottle of prenatal vitamins, which he sets at the end of the line. “I’ve had this bag packed since month two. In my go-bag. Behind my backup laptop. Next to the bleach wipes, the plastic sheeting, and the Capri Suns.”

“You packed pregnancy tests in your go-bag,” Holden says flatly.

“And prenatal vitamins. And a pamphlet about midwives and doulas. And a list of baby names sorted by linguistic origin, cultural significance, and compatibility with the surname Adams. Truthfully, I tried to find a way to combine all of our names into a brand new name at first. But that list got an update after the wedding.” He looks at me and gestures to the boxes like a game show host. “Pick one, kitten.”

I stare at the table. Seven boxes of possibility stare back at me.

I look up slowly. “This is insane.”

“Correct,” Holden says.

“Affectionately insane,” Micah adds.

Knox hooks a finger under my chin. “Fury.”

I look at him.

His face doesn’t move. His eyes are too dark. Too focused. Too alive. “What do you need?”

*What do I need?*

A normal answer would probably be privacy. Water. Time. A complete rewiring of the universe. Instead I hear myself say, “I need everyone to stop looking at me like I’m either dying or about to hatch.”

Milo raises one finger. “In fairness, if you are pregnant, there is a third option that includes both.”

“Not helping.”

“Never my intention. Occasionally my outcome.”

Eli comes up beside me and kisses my temple. “You don’t have to do anything right this second, little savage.”

“I need to know.” I lean against him and point at the boxes. “One test.”

Milo immediately picks up three.

“How about one cup of pee?” he suggests, taking a paper cup from his magic bag. “One urination event. Then we dip all these bad boys inside. We’re not leaving this to the blue-dye demons.”

“Milo.”

“Statistically responsible, kitten.”

Holden drags a hand over his face. “I hate that he’s probably right.”

“I’m always right. People just resent the packaging.”

Micah reaches out and squeezes my hand once. “Do you want to go alone?”

I look at him, and a possibility I haven’t let myself consider catches up with me.

What if I’m not pregnant—and I’m disappointed?

Am I ready for this?

“Um . . . Will you come with me?”

His face softens. “Yeah, baby girl. Of course.”

Milo presses three boxes and the cup into Micah’s chest like a quartermaster arming a landing party. “Digital, pink dye, and early detection. Covering all our bases.”

“You packed them in order of accuracy, didn’t you?” Holden asks.

Milo lifts his chin. “Obviously.”

Micah takes the tests. I stand on legs that feel weirdly remote, like they belong to somebody else, and Eli’s hand slides down my back as I pass him, brief and grounding.

“Breathe,” he murmurs.

“You say that like I’m not already doing it.”

“You’re doing it badly,” Holden says.

I point at him without looking back. “If I’m pregnant, I’m making you read every baby book out loud as punishment.”

“Happy to,” he says immediately, which makes my heart swell.

Micah walks beside me down the short hall, quiet in that way he gets when he’s giving me room without actually leaving me alone. The bathroom door clicks shut behind us. For one second we stand there—me staring at the sink, him holding three boxes of possible life changes like they’re explosives.

“This is surreal,” I say.

“Yeah.” His voice is soft. “It is.”

I laugh once. It sounds thin, weird. “I keep a list of the men I’ve killed. I can say it in order.” I look at the counter. “Somehow this is scarier.”

Micah sets the tests and the cup on the counter. Then he comes up behind me, his hands landing at my hips, warm through the flannel, and he rests his chin lightly on my shoulder.

“You don’t have to be brave for this,” he murmurs.

“That’s unfortunate, because I don’t know how to be anything else when I’m panicking.”

His mouth brushes my temple. “Then panic. I’ll stay.”

My eyes sting for no reason I’m interested in discussing. I swallow hard and nod at the counter. “Okay. Hand me the cup. I’ll pee while you read about the tiny sticks that’ll determine my fate.”

He passes me the cup, then opens the boxes, checking the instructions while I watch him in the mirror.

“I hate that this is the thing that finally defeats me.”

He glances up. “French toast?”

“The concept of possibility.”

“That one’s a menace.”

I laugh, although my eyes are still wet. He kisses my forehead and steps back.

I pee in the cup.

There is no dignified way to fill a cup with pee and dip three different pregnancy tests in while your husband hovers near the towel rack trying very hard not to act like he’s hovering. There’s definitely no dignified way to then set those tests on the counter and become immediately, irrationally convinced that if I breathe too hard I’ll alter the result.

Micah caps the last one for me and lines all three up on the counter.

Now we wait.

“How long?” I ask.

“Three minutes.”

“Three minutes is an act of terrorism.”

He checks the instruction sheets. “Digital says up to five.”

“It’s four minutes if you stare at it,” I mutter.

Micah smiles despite the tension. “That is not how time works.”

“Prove it.”

He leans against the counter beside me, close enough that our arms touch. I cross mine over my stomach and immediately uncross them because that feels weirdly loaded now. Everything feels loaded now. My own body feels like suspicious luggage.

The bathroom is too small for this kind of existential crisis.

The cabin plumbing ticks in the walls. Someone out in the kitchen drops something metal, and Milo says, “I meant to do that,” in a voice pitched loud enough to carry through the door. Holden says something too low to make out. Knox’s footsteps pass once in the hall, heavy and measured, then stop. He’s probably standing guard outside the bathroom like I’m in labor instead of waiting on a plastic stick.

I stare at the tests.

Nothing yet.

*Still nothing.*

I hate them.

“Say something distracting,” I tell Micah.

“Eli is going to be unbearable.”

“I need you to be more specific.”

“If this is positive, we’ll have a nursery reading list before lunch. He’ll start arguing about the illustrations.”

“That bear should be wearing a seatbelt.”

“Exactly.”

I laugh, then press my lips together because my chin has started wobbling.

“What about you?”

He looks down at our hands. “I was thinking about breakfast.”

“Brave, considering.”

“A high chair at the table.” His thumb strokes my knuckles. “Someone else stealing the strawberries off my plate.”

“You’d give them every one.”

“Yeah.” He looks at me. “I would.”

I glance at the counter again. The digital test flickers a little hourglass.

The line test is . . . Something.

I go cold from the scalp down.

“Micah, I can’t look.”

“Then I’ll do it.” He waits a second, like he’s giving me a moment to change my mind, and when I don’t he picks up the pink-line test and flips it

toward him.

He's silent.

I'm honestly not sure I'm breathing at all anymore.

"Is it broken?"

He turns the plastic stick so I can see.

There's a line.

No, *two* lines.

Micah looks at me. His mouth opens, but for a moment nothing comes out. "Baby girl."

My knees go a little weak. "Micah?"

His hand comes up, fingers shaking. "You're—we're—"

"Oh my God." I grab the stick from him and stare at it, like seeing it myself will change anything. But there's no ambiguity or trick of the light. Not even a maybe. I laugh-sob. "We're . . . ?"

My brain is oatmeal. He laughs and kisses my face, quick and hard, and I wrap my arms around his neck. We're both shaking.

"Husbands!" I call.

Knox fills the doorway. Milo peers around his arm, with Eli and Holden crowding the hall behind them.

"Kitchen," Micah says, laughing. "Give us room."

He gathers the other two tests while I keep hold of the one with pink lines. Knox steps back, and Micah takes my hand as we follow the others down the hall.

Milo barely waits until we reach the table before taking the tests from Micah. He checks the digital screen, makes a strangled whoop, and picks up the other.

"She's pregnant," he says. "She's so, so pregnant." Then every bit of the performance drops out of him at once. "There's a baby, kitten."

Holden loses an entire octave from his voice. "Oh, fuck."

Eli's eyes go soft, then immediately glassy. "You're sure?" he asks, voice hushed in the way you only get when the thing you want most shows up in the middle of an ordinary morning.

Micah nods, still holding on to me tight, and I have a death grip on him, and Milo is hopping up and down on the spot.

"A hundred percent," Micah says, turning to the others. "She's really having our baby."

Micah lets go of my hand as Knox reaches for me, his arms closing around my waist. He lifts me right off the floor, spinning me while he buries his face in my neck and makes a sound so deep and raw I feel it shudder through both of us. When my feet hit the tile again, he just stands there for a second, holding me close, heart hammering wild and unguarded against mine.

"Is that . . . are you okay?" I whisper.

He pulls back, his eyes wet. "I'm so fucking okay." He kisses me, quick. "You're incredible, Fury."

Milo launches himself at us both, arms slinging around my back and squeezing until my ribs protest. "Congratulations, parental unit! Does this make me the fun dad?" he asks, looking between the other men with absolutely no chill.

"You're going to be the most embarrassing," Holden mutters. His hand settles against my back, and when I turn toward him, he's smiling. "Congratulations, wildcat." He kisses my temple and stays there for a moment.

He's the one who said it was probably food poisoning.

"You told me you bought that house thinking you'd have kids by thirty," I say.

"I did." His thumb moves once against my spine. "Might as well fill it until it bursts."

Knox eases his hold as Eli comes closer. Micah settles beside me again, and Eli wraps his arms around us both. His hand opens and closes against my back before he speaks.

"You're sure you're okay with this?" he asks, words breathed into my hair.

I lift my head and look at him, at all of them—Milo grinning so hard it looks like his face might split, Knox's hand steady on my back, Micah with the heel of his hand pressed under one eye, and Holden's smile sharp and shaken at the same time.

"Yeah," I say, voice breaking on the word and then reforming stronger. "I'm sure."

Eli's mouth finds mine, and he kisses me with this wild, trembling devotion, like if he kisses me hard enough he can brand his name into the baby at a cellular level.

Holden moves closer, his hand warm between my shoulder blades. “She’s going to need rest,” he says. “And fluids. And less French toast, apparently.”

Milo immediately salutes. “Switching to pancakes! Or eggs! Or bagels! Sweet or savory, kitten, your wish is my command. Also, we need a family photo with the sticks. Right now.”

Milo gathers all three tests, then hands them to me and fishes his phone out of his apron pocket. I lift the tests beside my face as he stretches his arm to fit us all into the shot. Micah presses close on my left, Eli beside him, and Holden leans in behind Milo. Knox ducks over my right shoulder, grinning like he’s forgotten how to stop. He presses his mouth to the top of my head.

“Ours,” he murmurs against my hair as Milo snaps the picture.

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# EPILOGUE 2 – ODIN



The lawyers leave at three in the morning.

Two are from the firm. The third is an independent specialist whose hourly rate could fund a small country. He pauses at the door as though there might be one more thing to say.

There isn't. My mind is made up.

"You have my number," he settles on.

"And you have my instructions."

His gaze shifts to Thor, who's standing beside the door, holding it open. The man leaves without looking back.

Loki waits until their footsteps fade before stretching out on the sofa.

"I liked the little one."

"You frightened the little one," Thor says.

"I asked him a question."

"You asked whether his wife knew he charged that much to disappoint people."

"A perfectly reasonable concern. She might be getting disappointed for free."

Thor closes the door and turns the lock, moving to take a seat next to Loki. I look down at the document on my desk. Six weeks of preparation, reduced to expensive paper and language three highly paid people have spent the evening arguing over.

I close the cover and make my way to the drinks cart. I tug my tie loose and shrug off my jacket, laying it over the chair beside me as I survey the

cart’s contents and carefully fold back my sleeves until they reach my elbows.

Whiskey.

I lift a bottle of sixty-year-old malt from the cart, pour two fingers into a crystal glass, and add two ice cubes. Loki has told me twice that this is a crime against the distillery. I want it cold.

“Did you seriously pour yourself a drink without offering one to us?” Loki asks from the sofa.

“You’re welcome to pour one for yourself.”

I don’t drink often. Tonight, I’ll make an exception.

Loki huffs and crosses the room, muttering loud enough for me to hear. “Jesus, you’d think he was the only one of us this affects.”

He makes a show of being pissed by the way he clatters the glasses together on the cart and carries one over to Thor.

I ignore his theatrics, taking the glass to the window and staring out at the buildings below.

The club is closed now—silent. Lilith’s staff have cleared the private rooms. It’s not my building but I’ve never been asked to leave. Perks of being a silent investor.

Somewhere below me, the cleaning crew moves through the main floor, readying it for use once more.

The town sprawls below me in scatters of light, streetlamps tracing the grid of downtown, the boardwalk a faint amber ribbon along the coast, and beyond it the ocean, black and restless. I’ve stood at this window more nights than I can count, watching the water eat the shoreline one grain at a time.

A container ship sits on the horizon, waiting for a berth. Farther up the coast, the bluffs are black against a sky that holds no stars tonight—just cloud cover, low and heavy, pressing the town flat under its weight.

I take a sip. The whiskey is viscous and oily, incredibly dense. It tastes of toffee and dark chocolate, stewed black fruits, and smoked oak.

I turn away from the window and take a seat at my desk, leaning back in my chair.

The navy folder sits on the desk, mocking me.

I take another long draw of the liquid, set my glass aside, and open the file.

Thor and Loki have the decency to sit quietly while I study it.

The photograph inside is recent—taken three weeks ago by one of my people. The woman is walking down a street, caught in profile. The light catches the side of her face, highlighting the curve of her neck, the fullness of her cheek.

She's not smiling.

I lift the photo and turn my head to bring it into better focus. It's a habit I developed after losing my eye. Neither Loki or Thor has ever mentioned it.

There's a beauty mark high on her right cheek, and the streetlamp has found it. She looks tired—not the tired of one bad night, but the soul-deep exhaustion of a woman working four jobs and still working out of she can afford bread in the checkout line.

"What are you thinking?" Thor asks.

"That we can't leave her alone anymore."

I don't like the reason we're bringing her here. I dislike how easily I can use this situation to justify what I wanted long before the lawyers became involved.

I look from her photograph to the agreement underneath.

Loki slides off the sofa and comes to my side. "We left her for as long as we could."

I look at him. "Don't try and make it sound noble."

His fingers settle against my wrist. "I wasn't."

I set the photo on top of the contract, my eyes scanning over the names in bold print.

"She's going to hate this," Thor says, coming over to join us.

"I know."

"But we also need her," Loki points out.

"I know that too." I lean back in my chair and finish my drink.

Loki's hand leaves my wrist. Thor straightens, waiting.

"Well?" Thor says.

I meet his gaze.

"Bring her to me."

Dying to talk to other readers about the Hangmen Trilogy? Head to Eve Riche's Sinners and look for the spoiler thread.

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# ALSO BY EVE RICHE



**THE HANGMEN TRILOGY**

What We Bury

What We Burn

What We Become

**GODS OF CORRUPTION**

What We Ruin

What We Reap

What We Rule



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# ABOUT THE AUTHOR

***Two voices. One heartbeat.***

Eve Riche is two USA Today bestselling authors writing under one pen name. They write dark why-choose romance about people who kill together, love fiercely, and refuse to apologize for either.

Their books are explicit, darkly humorous, and emotionally unflinching. If you want morally black characters and chaotic murder puppies — they're your girls.

They won't confess their names. Snitches get stitches...

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