

The Family Business

By sodium-amytal @ tumblr

For hot-tempered New York mafia boss Evan Chandler, the death of his wife June in an accidental shooting is devastating. Lost in his grief, he's left to maintain his crime empire and care for his twelve-year-old son Jordan. Evan's at his wit's end until Joseph Jackson—don of the prestigious Jackson clan on the West Coast—sends his son Michael to live with Evan and run the Chandlers' bar. Michael's set to inherit the family business, but he'd rather eschew the seedy underworld of the mob and instead settle into a nice suburban life.

Romance sparks between Evan and Michael as Michael's warmth and upbeat positivity slowly heal the deep chasm in the family. That's when their picture-perfect life begins to unravel—Joseph wants Michael back home, but Michael's not going: he's in love. This love puts Evan, Jordan, and Michael's lives at risk as they're hunted down by Michael's own family, who will stop at nothing to bring him home. How far is Michael willing to go to protect the people he loves?

Nobody—no best friend, no business associate, no person on the planet—nobody at all can hurt you, truly hurt you, the way a member of your own family can.
~ Joseph Jackson

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1. Cosmic

Evan

“I can’t believe George Lucas made this,” Jordan complains around a yawn, leaning against my shoulder while we’re on the couch watching the cinematic abomination that is *Howard the Duck*. “How can the guy who made Star Wars go so horribly wrong?”

“At least he didn’t write it. That should count for something.”

“He was still involved.” He frowns at the screen. “Why is this even on TV?”

“Well, it’s midnight. I guess they assume no one’s watching.”

“Except us.” He sounds irritated and amused by this at the same time. “I mean, c’mon, if you’ve got George Lucas involved in your movie, you can at least afford better special effects.”

“When did you get to be such a snob?” I ask with a laugh.

Jordan sort of glares at me, folding his arms over his chest. “You’re the snob.”

“I am not.”

“You totally are! Remember when you spent the whole time watching *Jaws 4* just yelling at the TV about how awful it was?”

“How is a shark supposed to carry out a revenge plot?” I ask in a way that implies I really want an answer to this question.

He rolls his eyes. “And the time I had some friends over watching *Mac and Me*, and you stayed in the basement with us the whole time making fun of it?”

“They thought my comments were funnier than the movie.”

“Yeah, ‘cause that’s saying a lot.” I think I’m being mocked. “Face it, Dad, you’re a snob.”

“Okay, maybe just a little.” I shrug in defeat, because can you really blame me? Those movies are terrible, audience-insulting pieces of crap; I could write better screenplays, and I like to think that I have. If my son is a film snob, maybe June and are I raising him right.

Were.

I shove the thought away. I don't have the strength yet to remember my wife June without my emotions bleeding into a mix of grief and anger. Grief over losing her. Anger at the son of a bitch who shot her. Anger that I had caused it all.

Jordan looks like he wants to argue with me, but he yawns instead.

"C'mon, kid, it's midnight. You should be in bed."

"Aww, c'mon, it's Friday night."

I raise an eyebrow, glancing back at the television screen. "Don't tell me you're actually enjoying this?"

He laughs a sound that's an echo of his mother. I feel a squeeze around my heart. "No, I just—I'm not tired."

"You're yawning."

"Yawning just means you're not getting enough oxygen to your brain. Doesn't mean you're tired."

"How do you know this?"

"School," he answers simply. He's about to say something else, but the phone rings in the kitchen. He visibly wilts at the sound, and his face does a complicated scrunching thing. One more echo of June. One more stab at my heart in a house full of them.

I get up to answer the phone, thankful for any excuse not to watch this piss-poor movie. "Yeah?"

"He didn't show," my brother Ray says without preamble. The "he" in question is my best friend and sort-of neighbor Dave Schwartz, who's reneged on payments he owes me for "protecting" his rent-a-wreck. After a few weeks of missed payments, I figured it was apropos to send Ray over there to give Dave a little *reminder* why he needs our protection.

Ray's next words are not pleasant ones: "But, y'know, forget about it. We got this. You ain't gotta bother comin' down."

The heat of rage prickles over my skin. Ray works as my underboss, so naturally he's in competition with me to take over the business—even though Dad passed it down to me when he died three years ago. But my brother sees my spiral of grief as the perfect excuse to shut me out of business matters. He can slowly take charge of the organization, and he gets bonus points for appearing to be a concerned, loving brother.

I know your game, you spineless weasel.

“Alright,” I say, forcing my voice to sound even. “Thanks.” I hang up and turn the corner to see Jordan looking at me with pleading eyes.

“Dad, don’t go.”

I never know what to do when he looks at me like this. I usually find myself caving to his demands and buying him something expensive. “I gotta go, Jord’. You know the drill.”

He heaves a dramatic sigh. “Can’t Uncle Ray do it?”

“He’s already there. He needs me.”

“I need you more,” he argues, and it’s not just hyperbole from a scared twelve-year-old. Since I buried his mother three weeks ago, I’m the only parent he’s got left.

I swallow hard, guilt sloshing in my stomach. “You’ll be fine. Nothin’s gonna happen to you.” When he’s climbed the stairs and crawled into bed, I press a quick kiss to his forehead. “Most kids throw parties when they’re home alone,” I say, trying humor. “Or at least smuggle some junk food up to their room.” He doesn’t laugh, too scared to find any of my dumb jokes funny. “C’mon, kid, I won’t be gone long. You’re safe. I promised I’d always keep you safe, remember?”

Like I promised I’d keep June safe.

He looks like he wants to say something, but stops, tries again. “I—I’m not... I’m not scared to be by myself. I’m scared you’ll leave and not come back, like Mom did.”

My throat locks up tight, my heart cleaved in two. “That’s not gonna happen. I won’t let it. Just like I won’t let anything happen to you.” He doesn’t seem to be comforted by this. June was always the one who knew just what to say. I push down the swell of regret building in my chest and flick off his bedroom light. “You gotta be strong for me, okay? I promise, I’ll be back in an hour. Maybe less than that.”

“You always say that,” he argues, “and it’s always wrong.”

I give him an expression that’s supposed to look stern and fatherly, but it’s worn around the edges. “Jordie.”

“Why can’t you get someone to stay here ‘til you get back? What about Dave? He wouldn’t mind—”

“Jordan, go to sleep.” My voice is hard, impassive stone.

He drops his pleading gaze and settles into bed. “G’nite, Dad.”

“Good night, kiddo.”

Dave's rent-a-wreck is tucked between Concord and Arrochar, so I've got about a thirty minute scenic drive through Staten Island ahead of me. The sky is a thick, black blanket over the cityscape with tiny points of light dotting its surface. I'd moved here with June in '80 after throwing myself into my father's business—overseeing rackets, collecting payoffs and protection payments. In a few short years, I'd managed to earn enough money to buy our humble home in the suburbs.

My car phone rings, and Sheriff Williams barks out, "I got a call about a rent-a-wreck off'a Hylan. That one of yours?"

"Yeah, I'm on my way. Lose the paperwork."

When I pull up to the lot, there's no lights on. My headlights cut through the darkness, and I see Ray and one of his henchmen, who looks like a brick wall trying to pass for a human being. My brother's got about a good twenty pounds on me, but he's pear-shaped, his hair greying, and he has to look up to make eye contact with anyone over the age of thirteen, so I think I won the genetic lottery in this family. When I look at my brother I see my father staring back at me.

Ray watches me shut the door of my Mercedes and makes a production out of gesticulating wildly. "The fuck are you doin' here? I told you not to bother."

"Fuck you, alright? I'm in charge; I can show up if I want."

Ray scowls at me. "I was tryin' to be considerate."

"I'm not a delicate flower, Ray. Let me handle my business myself." He glares wickedly but says nothing. "So, what'd you guys do?"

"For starters, this dumb motherfucker doesn't know how to count." Ray gestures to Brick Wall, who sort of curls into himself like he's trying to hide from our scrutiny.

I survey the damage in the line of cars behind them. Five vehicles are completely smashed—my orders were only for four. But looking at the busted windows, the punctured tires, the frames bent and mangled by swings from tire irons and baseball bats, the destruction feels cathartic somehow. "Looks like it's your lucky day, big man."

Ray gives me a perplexed look. "You ain't gonna do nothin'?"

"Why should I? Shit, keep going."

"Keep going?" he sputters out. "The fuck are you talking about? It's just a couple'a missed payments. No big deal."

"It's more than that. I want him to know he can't get away with screwing us."

“C’mon, Ev, he’s your friend. There’s no need to get hostile.”

“I don’t care who he is; no one fucks with Evan Chandler.” I fix a stare on him that would make a lesser man wither. “I’m in charge, so I say we fuck this place up.”

Ray takes a step back as if he’s trying to distance himself from my anger. “We sent the message already. No need to put the screws to ‘im.”

“Fine. I’ll do it myself,” I snarl, the sound a burning grate of noise in the back of my throat. I snatch the tire iron out of Brick Wall’s oversized hands and swing a perfect arc into the windshield of a Honda Civic. “You guys are fuckin’ worthless.” Glass shatters into tiny pieces. The rest of the windows follow suit, each swing deliberate and fueled by rage. I want to destroy something the way my life’s been destroyed, demolished beyond recognition. Wrecking cars in a rental parking lot isn’t the most ideal way of expressing my anger, but it’s a start.

Nobody says anything while I bust the windows and dent the hoods of three more cars. And why the hell should they? To protect Dave’s investments? Screw him. What the fuck does he know about losing someone he loves? What does he know about this kind of life and its burden of responsibilities? Not a goddamned thing. Dave Schwartz lives a life of luxury, of never having to watch his back or worry that his family will be sent to him in pieces because he fucked up at work. So what if he loses a few cars? I lost something more precious, something I can never get back.

I trade out the tire iron for a sledgehammer. Ray looks like he wants to say something to stop me, but he keeps his mouth shut and lets me have my wreckage.

#

The next morning, walking is agony. I stumble my way down the staircase, a dizzy pounding in my head and a constant soreness in my body. I’d taken longer than an hour to get home last night. I know this because Jordan timed me, having stayed awake until he’d heard the key turn in the lock and my heavy footsteps on the floor. I spent the remainder of the night with a bottle of whiskey before climbing up the stairs and letting my misery have its way with me.

Since I lost June, most of my mornings begin with a hangover. It doesn’t help that Jordan’s used to this sort of reckless behavior. If I came down the stairs one morning energized and sober, he’d probably think he was in a bad episode of *The Twilight Zone*.

My eyes clearly cannot handle the amount of bright lights in the living room. I snap the curtains shut as I make my way across the room and into the kitchen. Jordan’s in the middle of microwaving a Pop-Tart when he sees me. “Hi, Dad.” He’s quiet, demure, unsure of how readily I’ll respond to enthusiasm.

“G’morning.” I need some orange juice. Or water. Or anything that won’t make me feel like a dried-out sponge. I pull open the refrigerator door, trying not to remember the reason why it’s so blank and empty.

“How come you were late last night?” he asks cautiously.

“Didn’t know I was gonna be so busy.”

He nods, accepting my answer, and I can see him steeling himself to ask another question. “What did you—what did you do? I mean, what did Uncle Ray need help with?”

I take a long swig of orange juice straight from the carton, because June isn’t here to call me an uncivilized pig for doing so.

God, I miss her.

It takes me a moment to switch gears and answer him. “Car trouble.”

Jordan’s old enough to know when I’m bullshitting him, but he doesn’t argue the point, shrugging simply and carrying his breakfast over to the couch.

My brain still throbs in my skull, so I draw the shades on the tall glass doors leading out to the backyard. The sunlight really needs to go away, because it’s making my eyeballs hurt. There’s still too many little shafts of light seeping through, even with all of the curtains shut. I’m beginning to realize this house has way too many windows. I swallow some aspirin with the rest of the orange juice and sit beside Jordan on the couch. Looking at the television with both eyes open is not the smartest idea I’ve ever had.

“Leonardo is obviously the coolest Ninja Turtle,” Jordan says without preamble, oblivious to my suffering while he watches cartoon turtles fight crime.

“There’s such a thing as ‘coolest Ninja Turtle’? Aren’t they all sort of the same?”

He looks at me as if I’ve personally insulted him. “They are *not* the same! You gonna tell me Spider-Man and Ant-Man are the same just ‘cause they’re both insect-like superheroes?”

“Spiders aren’t insects,” I say, dragging a hand over my face. “Jordie, everything hurts right now. Even talking hurts. Please don’t make me.”

He looks wounded and goes back to his Pop-Tarts. I feel like the world’s biggest asshole. We sit together for a while without saying another word to each other. I’m trying to will away the thunderous drumming in my head. I can literally feel my heartbeat pulsing in my brain. That is not okay, and thinking about it makes me want to throw up a little.

Jordan turns his head to look out the window before he realizes the curtains are drawn. “I think Dave’s here.”

So that's what that obnoxious rumbling sound is: Dave Schwartz's goddamn ancient pickup truck. The doorbell rings, and I let out a pained groan. I find my footing and accomplish the trek to the front door with minimal difficulty. Even though most things I'm seeing right now are just blurry shapes, this blurry shape in particular pisses me off, because it's Dave. "I could hear your fuckin' truck pull into the driveway. Can't you see that it wants to die? Let it go."

He ignores me, looking at me with a pitiful expression I can still decipher through the blurriness. "Whoa, you've seen better days."

"You're so hung up on appearances, Dave. That's why you dye your hair, isn't it?"

He just ignores my jab at his ego, probably remembering that it's rude to be a dick to someone in mourning. "Can I come in?" I really want to say no, considering that I'm barely capable of handling a conversation with my own son, but I shrug and let him inside anyway. Dave smiles at me and waves at Jordan. "Hey, Jordie."

Jordan mumbles a greeting through a mouthful of Pop-Tarts.

"All right, Dave, c'mon, I know you didn't stop over just for a friendly chat. What do you want?"

Dave glances at Jordan, then back to me, and leads me around the corner and down the east hallway into the laundry room. I stare blankly at the piles of unwashed clothes stacked on top of the washing machine. Once we're out of earshot—though I doubt Jordan would even give enough of a shit to listen to our conversation—Dave speaks up. "Um, so there's been some, uh, *damage* to my shop, and I—I remembered that I owe you something, so I came by to pay it—with interest, of course." He reaches into his pocket and places a thick wad of cash in my hand.

"Oh," I say lamely, pocketing the money. "Pleasure doin' business with you."

"Yeah, you okay, Ev? You look like hell, no offense."

I must look worse than I imagine. "Rough night."

"No shit." He looks around the room, taking in how life has ceased for us since June lost hers. "You seem like you might need some help with stuff around here and the bar..."

Guilt and anxiety coil in my stomach. June had operated the local bar I own, and that's where she was the night my world was torn open like a gutted calf. I haven't set foot in there since. It remains locked up like a relic on display in a museum.

"If you want, I could take Jordie off your hands for a couple of days."

I wince at the accusation that I can't take care of what's left of my family.

Dave seems to notice my immediate reaction to his words and draws back. “I’m just sayin’, you’ll let me know if you need anything, right?”

“Yeah, sure, thanks.” It comes out like a reflex, honed after three weeks of forced condolences and pitying looks. I’m about to ask him to leave when the phone rings, giving me a socially-acceptable excuse to do just that. “Good seein’ you,” I tell him as I walk away to answer the phone. He says goodbye to Jordan and takes his leave.

Ray’s on the other end of the phone, not one for introductions. “I talked to Joseph.”

My teeth grind together in blind rage, and anger churns in my stomach. “Joseph” is Joseph Jackson, the head of the Jackson family in California. He has six sons, each one a force to be reckoned with in their various areas of expertise. Joseph had grown up on the streets of a small town in Indiana, poor from birth until his family grew and he worked his way into the business alongside the Gordy family, keeping big-time casinos under his thumb and a plethora of cops, prosecutors, and judges in his pocket.

I had a great deal of respect for the man until one of his sons shot my wife.

“Enlighten me.”

“He wants to avoid a war between the families. He thinks we can negotiate, cut a deal. I think we should take ‘im up on it and head out there.”

“Cut a deal?” The words taste sour in my mouth. “I don’t want his goddamned money.” I turn away, keeping my voice low so Jordan won’t hear my threats. “I don’t want to see him unless he’s willing to ‘fess up which one of those sons of his is responsible for destroying my world, and then I’ll fuckin’ kill him.”

Ray sighs the sigh of a tired man who’s heard it all before. “Ev’, I know, but the Jackson family has too much power. They control the entire West Coast. Starting an all-out war will earn us enemies, and we don’t have enough allies now to even hope to match his manpower.”

“Easy for you to say,” I grind out through my teeth, “it’s not your wife they killed.”

“Don’t make it personal. You gotta look at this like a business opportunity. We could end up with the Jacksons owing us a huge favor. You can’t buy that kind of good fortune.” I sigh an angry sound into the phone but say nothing else. “C’mon, at least we can go out there and meet the guy. He’s paying.”

I roll my eyes. “How considerate of him.” I suppose it wouldn’t hurt to pay him a visit, advantageous even. I can’t see this ending in a way where I lose more than I already have. “All right, but it’s gotta be Monday while Jordie’s at school.”

“Sure thing. I’ll call you back.”

This is an awful idea. It wouldn't be the worst I've ever had, but it's on the list. I'm not sure anything could ever be enough for stealing away my wife and the mother of my child.

But if June's death truly was an accident, Joseph must be riddled with guilt. And if there's one thing I know, it's guilt.

#

Michael

"Move it a little to the left."

"Like this?"

My youngest sister Janet smiles a wide smile. "Perfect."

I hammer the nail into the wall, balancing precariously on the top step of a ladder inside my sister's fashion boutique, *The Velvet Rope*. She'd recently gotten in a large shipment of clothes from her newest line—*True You*, she calls it—and had requested my assistance in stocking and putting some of the items on display. The store is the epitome of 90's chic, though its name leaves the shopper poorly prepared for the vast amount of leather housed inside its walls. I can't remember seeing anything velvet in Janet's clothing lines.

Janet hands me the headless torso of a mannequin who's dressed to the nines in a periwinkle-blue vinyl jacket. The attention to detail in Janet's designs have never failed to impress me; this one's reflective with orange and yellow and green sparkles glittering throughout the material like twinkling stars. I hang the mannequin on the nail and admire our handiwork. "Is it even?"

"Yep. Now get down from there and help me with the rest," she says with a teasing grin. I climb down from the ladder and follow her to an opened box of sleek, black leather jackets waiting to be priced and mounted on hangers. When Janet's finished counting, I pull up a chair and begin to attach the price tags.

The atmosphere is what I like the most about Janet's shop; it's understated and relaxed, a constant stream of artists like Tevin Campbell, Bobby Brown, and En Vogue on the radio. The glass doors let the sunlight illuminate the inside, and the store itself is located in a nouveau-riche Bel-Air shopping center.

"I've been thinking about asking Joseph today," I begin, "y'know, about the house."

Janet's tabulating something on a calculator. "Oh, jeez, Mike, you really wanna go there?" She doesn't even look up, just shakes her head like a teacher disenchanted with a favorite pupil.

"If not now, when?"

The house in question is featured in a Greensheet ad I've had dog-eared for about a week, highlighted over and over in green and pink and yellow until the colors blur and blend. The listing is for a twenty-seven-hundred acre property in Los Olivos called Sycamore Valley Ranch.

I've been periodically sneaking the magazine out from beneath my mattress for the past week or so to glance at the ad, hoping that the flood of adrenaline might give me the courage to present my father with the reality that I plan on moving out. It shouldn't be too difficult. Teenagers do this all the time, and their parents are ecstatic about it. But I'm thirty-four years old now, and those teenagers didn't have to answer to my father—Joseph Jackson, Mafia chief of practically the entire West Coast.

Janet shrugs simply, her fingers tapping numbers on the calculator while her other hand writes figures in the notebook on the counter. "You realize the odds of you leaving that conversation are slim to none."

"If I don't at least mention it, Joseph will just keep usin' me as an asset. You know that's not the life I see for myself." All eight of us kids call our father "Joseph," as per his request—never "Dad" or "Father."

Janet nods. "Oh, believe me, I know. You're quite the revolutionary. Joseph doesn't know what to do with you half the time."

"He should just let me go. It'd be easier for everyone."

"He already made that mistake once," she says quietly.

She's referring to my sister LaToya, who's married to a brute of a man named Jack Gordon. Jack Gordon has mob ties in New York, and he'd managed to get Joseph's permission to marry her if she could perpetuate our family name around the East Coast. Joseph realized his mistake too late when Gordon ended up isolating LaToya from her family. We haven't heard from her in years. Understandably, Joseph tightened his reins on the matter of letting his children leave home.

"He should know I'm different. I'm not runnin' off with anybody."

Janet nods. "He knows. But he's still a father."

We fall into a comfortable silence while we work. Janet's shop is urban and youthful, with Top 40 radio piped through the speakers. Most of her clientele consists of young, rich kids spending their parents' money on clothes that proudly announce their financial privilege. I briefly wonder what it's like to be born rich, to never have to do without. Must be nice.

Joseph grills me like a member of the KGB when I walk through the front door of our expansive Encino mansion on Hayvenhurst Avenue. "Where've you been?" he asks, rough and demanding.

Panic and horror twist my stomach into knots. “I was at Janet’s place helping her with the store. I told you that’s where I was gonna be before I left this morning.”

Joseph frowns, giving me a skeptical look before his eyes lose their fury.

“I, um, I wanted to ask you something,” I say, my voice barely a whisper in my throat.

“Well, what a coincidence. I have somethin’ I wanna talk to you about too.” I feel like the ground’s dropped out from below me. My brain’s running a quick scan of everything I’ve ever done in my life to find what I could possibly be in trouble for. Joseph leads me up the winding staircase and into his private office. When we get inside, he sits behind his desk. A classic power move. You’d think his small stature would make him look even less intimidating when he’s sitting down—you’d be wrong. “What can I do for you, son?”

I swallow thickly. “Well, I was just thinking...maybe it’s time I go out on my own and make a name for myself.” I keep my wording vague, hoping to pique his interest. “Y’know, like Janet.”

Joseph nods, but I can see some trepidation there. Might as well hit him with the worst of it.

I reach into the back pocket of my jeans and place the ad on his desk. “I could do a lot with this place. It’s secluded, but it’s pretty big—bigger than here. It’d give me room to raise a family, build a career.”

Joseph examines the ad, his eyebrow arching inquisitively. “Thirty-five million’s a lot of money.”

“I could probably haggle the price down a bit, but even then, I’ve got the money.”

“I know you do. What kind of business you goin’ into?”

A sick, lurching feeling builds in my gut. I haven’t really planned this out all the way. I just really want to get out of this house before I go crazy. “Somethin’ like Janet’s doing.” Implying that I want to break away from the family.

Joseph sets the flimsy paper back down on his desk, his face without a glimpse of sympathy. “You’re gonna spend thirty-five million just buyin’ a house, plus the cost of settin’ up a business.” It’s not a question—well, maybe a question of my intelligence.

“I have the money.”

“I know, but just ‘cause you got something doesn’t mean you piss it away. What happens when you run outta money?”

“That’s not gonna happen.” Every Jackson family bank account holds more wealth than the GDP of most countries—and that’s not even counting our liquid assets.

He sighs, exasperated, but collects himself. “Are you planning on branching out with this property? I know guys in Santa Barbara. You could expand the business, lead it yourself.”

“That’s not...exactly where I was going with this.”

“Then where? What do you have planned for yourself, Michael?” He waits for my answer that never comes. “If you don’t have a plan, then listen to mine. I think you ought’a start taking on some of my responsibilities. I ain’t gettin’ any younger. Your brothers respect you, and they’ll listen to you. You got the best head on your shoulders for business. I know you can keep the family afloat.”

I swallow back a choked noise of distress. “You want me to take over?”

“Not right now, God willing, but when I’m gone you’ll be the only one who can keep order. Doesn’t mean you can’t start learnin’, though.”

“Have Jackie do it!” I protest. “He’s the oldest!”

Joseph shakes his head wearily. “He’s a liability. I’m puttin’ out too many of his fires this month.” Does that mean Jackie was responsible for the accident in New York? Everyone’s still pretty tight-lipped about that, but then again I haven’t been prying to find out.

“Why does it have to be me? What about Tito? He’d love to be the head of the family.”

“He’s got kids to raise, and he’s got his hands full with the cars anyway.” Tito, uh, “repossesses” cars and sells the parts for extra cash, sometimes hawking the entire car if he’s desperate enough.

“Jermaine?”

“He gets distracted too easily, doesn’t think with his brain enough.” Joseph’s polite way of calling Jermaine a womanizer.

It’s not worth it to keep going; I know what Joseph’s excuses will be for the rest of my brothers: Randy’s too young, and Marlon is horrible with money. “This isn’t fair! How come Janet gets to do what she wants?”

“Cause Janet came to me with a plan. She knew exactly what she wanted to do. You’re just wantin’ to move out and hopin’ a good opportunity will fall in your lap. What sense does it make to struggle on your own when you could just stay here?”

I try a different angle. “What happens when I have a family of my own? I can’t expect them to live here, and I refuse to bring children into this life.”

Joseph gives me a glare that I feel in my bones. “I did.”

“That’s different. You needed the money.”

“In order to start a family, you might need to find a *wife* first. And it doesn’t seem like you’re tryin’ to make that happen.”

I wonder what part of my ego he’s hoping to bruise here—the part of me that enjoys unaccompanied, indoor hobbies, or the part of me that’s attracted to men moreso than women. Maybe it’s both. I wouldn’t put it past him. “Say that I do. What happens then?”

Joseph shrugs and slides the ad over to me; I grab it back from him—I want to keep this small shred of hope close to me. “We’ll cross that bridge when we come to it. You bring home a girl you’re serious about, and maybe another piece of property’ll be up for sale by then.”

Why do I let myself get into these things with him? Joseph is completely missing my point. I’m probably doomed to stay here forever, and on top of that, now I’m supposed to take over the family business and find a wife.

“Oh, by the way,” Joseph speaks up as I’m storming out of his office, “the Chandlers are comin’ down from New York on Monday, so be on your best behavior.”

My hand freezes around the doorknob, my teeth grinding together in fury. There is no way he’s asking me what I think he’s asking me. “I am *not* clearing any more debts for you.”

Joseph looks at me as if I’ve just insulted him. “That’s not what I meant.”

“Of course it wasn’t.”

“Evan Chandler just lost his wife, Michael. I don’t think your services will be of any help.”

“Yeah, whatever,” I mumble as I slam the door behind me.

#

Evan

“I still say you ought’a call Barry.”

“No.”

I sigh and grunt in a way that says nothing at all. I stare blankly out the window at the rolling expanse of Encino as Ray drives us through the San Fernando Valley. “He’ll destroy them, Ray. Just one phone call, and he’ll take ‘em down in any devious, nasty, cruel way he can

do it.” I’m talking about Barry Rothman, a civil attorney out of Chicago. Ray had worked with him on a few jobs in the past. I’ve never met him, but from the stories Ray’s told me he sounds exactly like the type of guy I’d want on a job like this.

“Isn’t it more beneficial to us if they’re in our debt rather than dead?” Ray asks.

I give him a glare, but it’s guilty around the edges—which Ray is absolutely accustomed to by now. “Did I say ‘dead’ or ‘kill’ or anything even implying bodily harm?”

“Don’t pretend like you don’t have a need to inflict terrible pain on other people,” Ray says with a scowl.

“I don’t *need* to.” I might actually be pouting.

“I realize that blackmail and violence are your main methods of communication, but why don’t we give them a chance to work things out first?”

I scoff, grumbling an insult under my breath and staring out the window, my thoughts fixed on the life and love I’ve lost.

June is dead. One of those miserable, trigger-happy Jackson brothers shot her in *my* bar in one of their backroom deals gone wrong. I know I should hate them, despise the entire family with everything I’ve got, right down to the marrow in my bones. But when the guilt settles in and erodes the hate, all I’m left with is regret that I couldn’t do better, be better. Regret that it hadn’t been me instead of her.

The lawn of the Jacksons’ grand, two-acre mansion stretches out for a bit with low-hanging orange trees in the front yard. Ray pulls the car into the driveway and sees Joseph Jackson standing in the doorway of the house, anticipating our arrival. “It’s not too late to call Barry,” I say casually.

Ray just furrows his brow and gets out of the car.

Joseph Jackson stands tall despite his short stature; looks like Ray will have no trouble making eye contact with this guy. He’s wearing a perfectly tailored dark suit and shoes so shiny they’re an optical hazard. He greets us with solemn head nods and handshakes. “My deepest condolences for your loss.” To his credit, he does sound sorry, though probably for his own purposes rather than out of any sort of compassion.

Joseph leads us inside the house and into the front foyer. The interior is bright and open, one of the far walls replaced with glass to display the large swimming pool in the backyard. The carpet is a shade of burgundy best left in the seventies. The décor is simply an avenue of flaunting their wealth—expensive rugs, paintings, furniture. Everything’s organized and immaculate in a way that’s sort of unsettling.

Perched single-file at the top of the small staircase on the west side of the room are Joseph's sons. Jackie, the oldest, stands at the top of the stairs, and the rest of the boys form a line down the staircase by age—Tito, Jermaine, Marlon, and Randy. They all have the same brown eyes, the same dark complexion, their features so different yet so similar. I wonder which one of them took my wife from me.

"You know my boys," Joseph says to me. I do; every so often, the Jackson brothers have business in Staten Island, and I have the pleasure of giving them a safe meeting place at the bar. Or at least I did...

They ascend up the stairs and lead us into Joseph's private office. It's a magnificent and grand thing, Oriental rugs laid neatly on the hardwood floor and crisp, oak furniture adorning the room. There's two wide French doors leading out to a balcony overlooking the front lawn. Joseph opens the blinds a little bit to give us some light. The brothers stand almost statuesque at the back near a large bookcase along the wall.

"Sit, please," Joseph says. We do as he asks. "I understand my family has caused you great misfortune," he begins, seated at his exquisite oak desk. "If we can help in any way, all you have to do is ask."

"You can start by telling us which one of your sons killed my wife," I snap, harsh and cruel. Ray gives me a nasty look but offers no other objection. He's curious about that too.

Joseph shuts his eyes, as if my words wound him deeply. "That I cannot do. I don't know who is responsible for this tragic accident. But if I did, what would you have me do? Put a bullet through his head? Even the courts would not call that justice."

I shift uncomfortably in my chair. I'm out of my league here. I've never had to fan the flames of a potential mob war. Ray is much better suited for that; he's always been more cerebral. My first instinct when something goes wrong is to destroy or maim the person responsible.

"My father respected you, Joseph." I'm desperately trying to stay on Joseph's good side, because I feel like Ray is reconsidering bringing me along on any more business ventures. "I'm sure we can come to an agreement."

After a pause, Ray says to Joseph, "What do you say to five million per year for four years?"

I look straight at my brother, my teeth clenched in fury. "What?"

Joseph sets his jaw. "I say you're outta your damn mind."

Ray shakes his head. "Joseph, Joseph, Joseph, what have we ever done to you to make you treat us so disrespectfully?"

"What are you doing?" I hiss, grabbing Ray's arm and squeezing with all of my strength.

Ray keeps his attention fixed on Joseph. “You would put this man’s loss on such a low-end scale?” He gestures to me; I’m still gripping Ray’s arm with enough force to bruise. Ray neatly pries my fingers off and extricates himself from my grip. “Surely the mother of his child is worth more than that.”

Joseph watches the two of us, his eyebrows drawn low as he measures his words. “Do you have a more reasonable figure?”

“Three hundred and fifty thousand, then,” Ray says calmly, as if we’re discussing an everyday legal dispute and not bargaining the worth of my deceased wife. I seethe in furious silence, anger coming off of me in waves.

“That’s outrageous.”

Ray shrugs. “That’s our offer. Your son’s recklessness has left my brother to raise his son alone. Not to mention the funeral expenses, lost business revenue, emotional distress—”

“Can I speak with you in private?” I grab Ray’s arm again and stand up, pulling him along as I storm out of the office. I shut the door behind us and unbottle my fury in a harsh whisper. “What the fuck are you doing?”

Ray lifts an eyebrow. “Negotiating,” he says like it should be obvious. He doesn’t say “duh” afterwards like Jordan would, but I hear it loud and clear anyway.

“You really think this is a ‘negotiating’ matter? This is June’s life we’re talking about!”

“Oh, that’s fuckin’ rich coming from you, Evan. Weren’t you the one trying to collect when Dad died?”

“Because he left me in charge, and he had debts to pay!”

“What is your justice, then?” Ray asks.

“We find the piece of shit that killed June and kill him,” I say in a low voice in case anyone’s listening; not only does Joseph have six sons, but he’s also got a wife and three daughters. I imagine they’re lurking around the house somewhere, and the last thing I need is someone eavesdropping.

“Nothing’s gonna bring her back. And you know what? Fuck you! You’re always the one getting up my ass when one of my guys goes too far, but oh—shock and surprise—the first thing you turn to when you’re upset is terrible rage!”

My muscles tense in quiet fury. “The need to bruise people is justifiable when someone you love is murdered! Not when you lose at a poker game or get stuck behind someone in the fifteen-items-or-less line who clearly can’t count.”

Ray lets out an exasperated sigh. “Oh, like I’m not supposed to notice that?” I can actually feel my rage building to critical mass. I pinch the bridge of my nose and shut my eyes, trying to calm myself. “Look, think about what this money could do for Jordie,” Ray says, jabbing at the frayed edges of my guilt. “He’d be set for the rest of his life. You could even finance those screenplays you wrote. Don’t be a fuckin’ moron, Evan. This is business. A damn shame, but it ain’t personal. So don’t make it that way.”

Irritation twitches at the corner of my mouth. I hate it when Ray is right. It’s a rare thing, but when it happens it feels like the entire universe is going to collapse on itself.

Ray drops his voice to a near-whisper. “Believe me, they know money ain’t enough. And that’s right where we want ‘em. No matter how much they pay, they’re always gonna be in our debt. Then we can call them for a service in return.”

Ray is right about two things on the same day. In a row. There is no God.

I huff in annoyance. “All right. You win this time. But I want a higher figure and a trust fund for Jordie.” If we weren’t brothers, I might actually hate Ray right about now. Okay, so maybe I hate him a little. I’m working on that.

We make our way back into Joseph’s office. “My apologies. My brother and I had to have a little discussion.”

Joseph waves a hand as if to say “no problem” and smiles. “Did you reach an agreement?”

“As a matter of fact, we did. What do you think of five million dollars?” Ray says. “We also ask that fifty percent of that figure be deposited into a trust fund for my brother’s son, and if our family needs a favor in the future we might be able to call upon you personally.”

I keep my mouth shut and let him negotiate. I’m still not happy that my wife’s worth has been reduced to monetary figures, but it’s not as if anything we say here might bring her back to me.

Joseph steepled his thick, short fingers, displaying the gold bands wrapped around them. “You’re asking for quite a lot, Mr. Chandler.”

“It’s Charmatz, sir,” Ray corrects politely. “My brother’s the one who wanted something ‘less Jewish-sounding.” He rolls his eyes at me before directing his attention back to Joseph. “All we’re asking for is recompense to prevent a big war that’ll only hurt everyone involved. We don’t need the cops or the papers getting into this.”

Joseph is unmoved. Big shocker. He’s practically got every officer in Los Angeles and Santa Barbara on his payroll. “Maybe you don’t, but my family and I are well protected.”

Of course you are. No one came into your business and shot your wife.

Ray nods, understanding, and tries another tactic. “Joe—can I call you Joe?—I can tell you’re a smart guy, a businessman, just tryin’ to look out for his own. We both know what happened to my brother’s wife was an unfortunate accident.” I resist the urge to challenge that. Do we, *really*? If Joseph wanted to take control of the East Coast, what better way for him to do it than destroy its strongest family from the inside? “Nothin’ personal. But some of the New York families might not see it that way. June was a civilian, and if we come home empty-handed, what’s gonna stop them from trying to retaliate?”

I hadn’t thought of it from that angle. Apparently, neither had Joseph. He sits back, stares at his tented hands for a moment. “This is a very big decision. Will you give me a moment to consult with my family?”

Ray agrees.

“Jackie, bring Katherine. I want her opinion on this matter as well.”

Jackie bends to his father’s will and leaves.

Joseph turns to us. “Evan, Ray, take a walk. Enjoy the grounds while we discuss this.”

I guess that’s his way of telling us to get lost. Ray nods again, all enthusiasm with the potential of a settlement waving in his face, and we exit the room.

“What’d I tell ya?” Ray slaps me on the back, giving a self-satisfied chuckle. “I got this. If he was gonna say no, he would’ve done so by now. He’s just trying to make us sweat.”

“Those positive affirmation tapes are doin’ wonders for you.” Joseph’s office is situated in the west wing of the house, and there’s another set of glass doors that leads out to a second-floor credenza. Ray pulls open the doors, and we stand outside to bake in the August heat. The balcony overlooks the pristinely-manicured lawn and the pool. “Joseph has six sons, right?” I ask.

“Yeah.” Ray gives me a look.

“How come there were only five in there?”

He shrugs. “Hell if I know. Why does it matter?”

“What if the missing son is the one who killed June?”

“Again, Evan, why does it matter?”

“Well, if you’re not going to look out for our safety, then I guess I have to.” Ray glares at me, and I sort of buckle under the weight of it. “Look, all I’m saying is that it’d be really helpful to know which of these assholes did it so I know whether or not he’s secretly plotting to kill the rest of us.”

Ray snorts angrily, jutting his thumb out behind him at something below us. “Maybe it was the pool boy. I don’t fuckin’ know.”

I look in the direction he’s pointing to see thin, white legs sticking out underneath the awning by the pool. I would have guessed our mystery loungeur was a woman upon first glance, but the size of the feet tells me, nope, definitely a guy. Or maybe it’s a woman with big feet. Whatever. I really don’t care. “Don’t be a grump,” I mutter to Ray.

“Me? You’re the fuckin’ grump! Can’t you at least pretend like you’re happy about my offer?” I love getting my brother riled up because he kind of looks like Joe Pesci, even moreso when he’s angry. When I had introduced June to Ray, she’d exclaimed, “I didn’t know you knew Joe Pesci!” and asked him for an autograph. It was then I knew that we were meant for each other.

I miss my wife.

“You should be thanking me, y’know,” Ray says, oblivious to my moment of melancholy. “I don’t drive such a hard bargain for just anybody.”

I’m really tempted to bring up the time he spent fifteen minutes arguing down the price of an oil change, but I don’t want to spend the ride home listening to him trying to justify that. So I say nothing. I stare straight ahead, but I can feel his eyes on me, looking for any signs of instability. Looking for any fissures in my defenses. Looking for weakness.

“Ev, if there’s anything you wanna talk about—”

“Oh God, don’t. Just don’t, all right? I’m fine.”

He shrugs. “It’s been three weeks and you’ve barely mentioned her. I’m just—”

“You’re just being a pain in my ass. What do you want me to do?”

“I want you to be honest with yourself.”

I’m about to verbally tear into him when I see a blur of activity out of the corner of my eye. Joseph, his sons, and a woman I presume is his wife walk out into the backyard and stand beneath the awning. “Looks like Pool Boy’s in trouble,” Ray quips.

We’re too far away to hear anything, but it doesn’t seem like a hostile conversation. After a minute or so, Joseph looks up and motions for us to come join him. Ray leads the way downstairs and out to the backyard.

A temptation of a man lays out by the pool, beneath the awning along the far side of the house. His skin and hair glisten with a wet sheen; considering the heat, it’s likely that he just got

out of the pool. The footsteps leading from the pool to the chair also give credence to that theory. But that's not what catches my attention.

His skin is a chalky pale, almost devoid of color. His nose is thin, narrow and pixie-like, and his jet black hair hangs in impossibly tight curls just past his collarbones.

It's there, in the backyard of the Jacksons' Encino home, that a foreign hum of electricity rips through me, and I feel alive for the first time in what seems like an eternity.

I must be gawking, because Ray nudges me in the ribs with his elbow as we cross the yard. "Quit staring. You go for guys now?" The disgust in his voice is palpable. "Does this sudden 'switch' have anything to do with June?"

I take the verbal jab in silence. I know it isn't right, that it's too soon to even look at anyone else. So I don't lash out at Ray for the comment because, really, I deserve it.

"I want you to meet my son Michael," Joseph says, "and, God willing, my successor."

That's enough to stop us in our tracks and exchange glances. Son? There's no way. Michael's got to be adopted, because he doesn't share the rich mahogany of his brothers' skin or their broad, wide features.

He's scrambling for the robe by his chair when he realizes he has an audience. "You didn't tell me they were here!" Michael pulls the robe tightly around himself, suddenly ashamed of his body. But now I can't look away for an entirely different reason: Michael's face is truly a sight to behold. His features are soft and feminine, with perfectly plucked and arched eyebrows and sensual pink lips. Even his eyes have a hint of girlishness to them, his eyelashes like thick, black wings.

Michael looks at us nervously, his gaze flickering to mine and lingering there for a fraction of a second before he looks away in embarrassment.

"Yes, I did!" Joseph snaps back contemptuously. "I told you the Chandler brothers were comin' here from Staten Island!"

Michael gasps before he recognizes the name. "That was today?" Sorrow washes over him like a wave, and he looks at me and Ray with unbearably sad eyes. "I'm so sorry for your loss," he says, and I believe him. Michael's soft-spoken and delicate in a way his brothers aren't, as if simply knowing about my pain means that he has to shoulder it too.

"The least our family can do is offer you assistance with your business," Joseph says to me. "Isn't that what your wife did?" I nod. "My son Michael is a savvy businessman. I think he would be a valuable asset to you in your time of need. He'll help you get back on your feet. Take him for six, seven months? A year at the most, then you can send him back to us."

I stare at Joseph in total disbelief. "You're giving me a person?"

“I’m loaning his services to you,” Joseph says, but it still sounds sketchy as hell because, seriously, he’s giving me a *person*.

“And he’s okay with this?”

Joseph nods. “It was partly his idea.”

“Really?”

Michael opens his mouth, closes it. His eyebrows knit together in a way that makes a little “v” on his forehead. “You have a son, don’t you?” I nod again. “You’ll be able to spend more time with him if you don’t have to worry about running the bar.” I was not ready for that angle. Michael is a bottomless pit of surprises, apparently. “How old is he?”

“Twelve.”

He smiles, and it lights up his face. I feel my heart thrum erratically. “That’s a fun age. Are you two close?”

I find myself regretting the truth as it spills out. “Not as close as we could be.” I’ve put too much on Jordan’s shoulders since June died. For the most part, he’s been taking care of me, and I hate that I’ve done this to him. He needs a normal life—or at least as close to normal as he can have.

With the interest Michael’s shown in Jordan, I’m expecting him to chastise me or look incredibly disappointed by my answer. But he doesn’t. He looks sad, but there’s an edge of hope to it. “I can change that, if you’ll let me.”

I nod again, closing off that door of conversation. No sense in flaunting a weakness that’s still recovering.

“We got a deal?” Joseph asks, looking at me pointedly.

“Yeah.”

“I’ll make arrangements; he should be yours by the end of the week,” Joseph says. An electric current creeps up my spine at his words, and if it wasn’t for the guilt lashing at me like a whip I would have indulged in thoughts of Michael splayed beneath me on satin sheets.

“We’re still getting the money, right?” Ray asks. Joseph’s wearing an expression that says he is taking absolutely none of Ray’s shit today. “At least give me your word that we can renegotiate if this doesn’t work out.”

Joseph may have nodded.

I still don't know how to process this; Joseph Jackson's just given me an actual human being who will be living with me in a week. The fact that Michael is frustratingly, mysteriously attractive is just a bonus.

The mood changes as my brother and I get back to the car, because my nerves feel taut, ready to be plucked by the next new stressor. "Why did you even bring me along if you were just gonna make googly eyes at the girly-lookin' adopted Jackson son?" Ray complains. "All that work and you just throw it away. Does your dick control all of your decisions or just the really important ones?"

"Fuck you." I probably could have worded that in a way that didn't prove Ray's point. He stares at me, probably very aware of how my face is heating up under interrogation. "Look, I was just trying to figure out how he's related to the others when he doesn't look like them. That's all. Are you seriously telling me that didn't surprise you?"

"I wasn't the one looking at him like I want to put my dick in his ass." Ray makes a face. "What would June say? It's barely been a month since she died, and all of a sudden you're playing for the other team?"

"I'm not playing for any team," I grate out stiffly. "Sex or love or whatever the fuck you think I'm looking for is not even on the table, okay?"

"Well, I don't think your erection got that memo."

I'm going to ignore the fact that, in order to make that joke, my brother had to look at my crotch. "This conversation is over. Why am I even talking to you anyway?"

Ray tuts at me. I think he's getting some kind of perverse pleasure out of this. "Ev, you're always the one goin' on about how communication is vital. Now you're gonna clam up? That doesn't seem like you."

"You're a manipulative bastard. This is why Dad didn't trust you."

That seems to hit him in a sore spot, because he bristles at the comment. Ray had been so certain his law degree would secure him as our father's successor, but Ray was always too conniving, too greedy and untrustworthy. In the event that it might be profitable for Ray to testify against the family, Dad feared Ray would turn traitor.

His mouth slants into an amused smirk. "Yeah, 'cause you were always Dad's favorite," he says in a way that implies the exact opposite. "Evan, you spent your entire life fightin' with that man, so I don't know where all this sudden loyalty is coming from. Christ, I thought I knew you."

"Knock off the melodrama and just drive."

“What would June think if she knew you’re popping a boner over some guy only weeks after she’s gone?”

I reach over and slam Ray’s head into the steering wheel, just hard enough to show that I’m pissed and that he needs to stop talking right now. “You don’t get to talk for the rest of the day.”

Ray rubs his forehead and pulls out into the street. I switch on the radio so we don’t have to stew in silence. The Pet Shop Boys tell a tale of East End boys and West End girls, and I chuckle darkly to myself. How apropos.

2. Of All the G'n Joints In All the Towns In All the World

Michael

“I still can’t believe you’re actually letting me do this.”

Joseph rolls his eyes, as if displaying an emotion other than gruff indifference might cause him physical harm. “I don’t like it, and if it wasn’t for your mother, I wouldn’t have even considered it.” God bless my mother. She knows my strengths.

“Well, I know, but I’m surprised that you went along with it.”

We’re standing in Los Angeles International Airport before I get on my plane to New York. My father is notoriously bad at goodbyes or any sort of engagement where he might be required to shed tears. I can see him struggling with the emotions.

Our deal with the Chandlers requires me to relocate from the home and comfort of Encino, California to Staten Island, New York. I’ll miss the sun the most. I know, there’s sun in New York too, but it just feels different when you’ve got the rolling expanse of the countryside to look at. In New York, buildings are crammed together like bad orthodontic work, with little room for greenery or scenic views. Or so I assume from what I’ve seen of it on television. I’ve never actually been there. Maybe this will be a lesson in never assuming things.

Joseph scratches the back of his neck with a lazy hand. “Yeah, well, just help him out, y’know? Do whatever he wants. Make him happy. You’ll be protecting the family, and you don’t have to do any of the shit you protest all the time.” I hide a smile; Joseph is well aware of my vocal dislike for the violence and unethical behavior upon which my family built their name. This sheds absolutely no light on why he thinks I might be a fitting successor.

I look at my father, hoping to commit every wrinkle and laugh line to memory. As if sensing my distress, Joseph speaks up. “I promised Mr. Chandler at least six months of your service, so after that you can come home if he’ll let you.” I pick up on the key words: *let you*. He’s still playing it safe after what happened with LaToya. Joseph hands me my bags. “Go on, now. Get outta here.” He gives me a quick hug, which is sort of shocking considering that my father’s never been big on showing affection.

I get on the plane and leave my old life behind.

The flight from California to New York takes an excruciating amount of time which I try to pass by engrossing myself in the books I’d brought for this very reason. I manage to breeze through one novel before dozing off for the remainder of the flight. The plane ride is boring, but I’m more worried about the subsequent car ride “home” with Evan Chandler. I met him briefly, but I have no idea if we’re going to get along at all. From what I’ve heard, he’s got a bit of a temper, and he’s recently lost his wife, so he’s just going to be a big ol’ ray of sunshine. Hopefully, his son will be friendlier.

When I get off of the plane and into the chill of the air outside, Evan's waiting for me beside a glossy, dark sportscar. He's leaning against the side of the vehicle, wearing a smirk and dark jeans. The collar and cuffs of his perfectly-ironed black shirt I fear might put out an eye; the top buttons are unlatched enough to flaunt a gold chain that dangles over the barrel of his chest. His dark hair is disheveled in a way that looks pretentiously normal. His skin is a golden tan, his features rugged and almost too perfect to be natural. His stubble must be a permanent thing; he'd had it when I met him last week.

Evan Chandler looks pretty much what you'd picture a Mafia kingpin to look like—smug, self-absorbed, hairy, and greasy.

“Well, now we know where all the gold in California went,” he says, gesturing with his chin to my flamboyant leather jacket, which is adorned with gilded baubles and insignia. I suppose my belt isn't helping matters either—it's probably made out of enough metal to make a set of hubcaps.

My mouth screws up into a frown, but it's probably more of a pout. I feel ostentatious and overdressed now. How did the guy with the hundred-thousand dollar car end up looking like less of a show-off?

“Your father's told me a lot about you, Michael.” The curve of his mouth tells me that whatever information Joseph may have shared is probably embarrassing or intensely personal.

He opens the car door for me. A real gentleman, I think to myself as I slide inside. “Wish I could say the same about you.”

“Did he ever tell you not to get into cars with strangers?” He grins at me, and I can instantly tell this guy's got an irritating sense of humor. I feel the tug of a smile at the corner of my lips. No, I'm not going to encourage him by laughing at his terrible jokes.

“Maybe if you introduced yourself, you wouldn't be a stranger.”

“But you know who I am.”

“Hard not to.” Everyone in this business knows the Chandler family. Where my father controls the West Coast, Evan controls the East. Power and wealth emanate off of him like a bad cologne.

“And you're still unimpressed?” He looks at me expectantly. I shrug. “Guess I'm not surprised. Most people don't come from obscene wealth.” He toys with one of the thick golden rings on his fingers as if illustrating his point. My eye catches the silver band around his third finger before his hand drops out of sight. I can't help but feel bad for him.

“If you're so rich, why didn't you just send someone to pick me up?” I ask when he sits beside me. I should probably stop talking, because I don't want him to think that I'm rude and ungrateful.

Evan smirks and starts the engine. "That would just make me look like an asshole."

"Well, the truth is usually best," I tease.

He laughs at that, and, wow, he's actually really attractive when he's not looking like the cover model for Smug Weekly. Is arrogant and aggressively masculine a thing I go for now?

I find myself staring intently out the passenger-side window as the city rolls by, captivated by the new scenery. Every building here practically pierces the sky like they're in some sort of contest as to which can reach the heavens first. The sky is three different colors at once: pink, purple, and orange vying for dominance while the sun sets. It's majestically beautiful. Maybe living here won't be so bad.

"You didn't actually want to come here, did you?" Evan asks after a moment of comfortable silence. "All that shit you said about giving me time to be with my son was just an act. You're not as altruistic as you appear to be." He doesn't sound accusatory, so I'm not offended by his impression of me. I'm used to it. A legitimately benevolent person in this business is either a rarity or a fraud. Most people are quick to assume kind acts are done for manipulation or underhanded gain.

"Well, you're right; it wasn't the only reason. It's a good excuse to break away from my family." I wish I could pull the words back, because I don't actually know where he stands on the subject of my family, considering we were responsible for his wife's death. But it's safe to assume that we're not exactly on his Christmas card list.

Evan looks slightly fascinated by this for some reason. "You're not close with them?"

"I am, but..." I squirm in my seat. I don't want to tell him I'm not fond of the whole violence thing; I doubt his family built its reputation on rainbows and smiles. "I'm better suited for business than I am anything else."

He glances over at me, his dark eyes questioning, and I'm glad we're stopped at a light or else I'd be nagging him to watch the road instead of my face. "And they don't respect that?"

I have no idea why he's so interested, but maybe he's trying to figure out whether or not to like me. "It's complicated."

"Try me."

I watch the light turn green, stalling for time. I don't want to pour out my heart to, in essence, a perfect stranger, but the blood on my family's hands almost requires that I distance myself from them to ensure that Evan and I can peacefully co-exist. I glance out the window at the rush of buildings that goes on for miles. "We get along, but...I've always felt out of step with them, never quite fitting in. Like we're living on two different wavelengths."

“You think you’ll fit in better with me?” His smile is sad, self-deprecating, and ridiculously beautiful.

“I like to be optimistic,” I tell him, hoping to inject some positive vibes into this conversation, but it doesn’t seem to help. Evan’s all frowny faces and intense eyebrows. My first instinct is to reach over and switch on the radio to fill the awkward silence inside the car, but that won’t bolster conversation. I want to get him talking, but I don’t want to trip an emotional landmine either. It’s a hard line to walk.

Neither of us say anything else until we make it to Evan’s house on Staten Island. He lives in a lavish, two-story home that reminds me of my own if it were slightly smaller. “Wow, nice place,” I say while we unload my stuff from the trunk.

His face closes off ever so slightly. “Yeah. Real spacious.” It doesn’t look like I can go five minutes without upsetting him. This is not a good start.

My room is upstairs in a bedroom facing out over the backyard. It’s nice and quaint with just a hint of generic guestroom; I’ve got a pretty big walk-in closet and my own bathroom, so I consider this a victory. The cream-colored walls are rather plain, but I might be able to spruce those up.

“You’ll start work tomorrow,” Evan says, lingering awkwardly in the doorway, like he’s uncomfortable being in his own house. And maybe he is. It’s only been about a month since his wife was killed. Walking through this place must be torment for him. “For now just...relax, I guess.”

I nod and place my bags on the floor, sitting on the edge of the bed to unpack. “Thank you.”

“Yeah, sure.” He scratches the back of his neck. “You, uh, you live here now, so don’t be afraid to come downstairs if you need something.” I smile, encouraging his hospitality. I know this can’t be easy for him. I thank him again, and he nods, vanishing down the hall. “Just one more thing.” Evan reappears in the doorway. “I gotta know. It—it wasn’t you, right?”

It takes me a moment to realize what he’s referring to. “No, of course not.” I hope that he hears the sincerity bleeding through my voice.

His face slips through anger and frustration before swinging back to misery. He nods again and walks away.

I listen to his fading footsteps and berate myself for being such a jackass. He’d seemed positively jovial today before I’d opened my big, fat mouth and started talking about my family. Then his mood had plummeted further and further, every other word out of my mouth a hot knife in his side.

I sit there on the bed, staring at one of my open suitcases, and I wonder why I'm doomed to depress this poor man even worse than he already is. I haven't even been here twenty-four hours, and I'm already contemplating going home. I should just cut my losses and leave. There's no reason for me to be here as a constant reminder of everything he's lost. It's horrible and unfair to live under his roof and continually pick at his wounds. What the hell was my father thinking? What the hell was *I* thinking?

After a few moments of silent agony, I stand up and move over to the window, gazing out dejectedly at the last few rays of sunlight being swallowed up by the darkness. There's something poignant about this, I'm sure.

"You don't like it here, do you?" a small voice asks from behind me. I turn to see a young boy standing in the doorway; with the striking resemblance to Evan in his face, I'm willing to bet that this is Evan's son Jordan.

"N—no, you have a lovely home, I just...don't think I belong here."

"Why not?" He sits on the edge of the bed, curiously watching my expression. "Is it 'cause of my dad?" My split-second of hesitation gives him my answer. "No, dude, don't worry about him. He hasn't been the same since Mom..." He trails off, looks away. "But he's usually better. He can be really nice sometimes."

"Really?" I guess it's not that unbelievable; Evan did allow me to live here.

"Yeah, we used to write movies together. He wanted to try sending scripts out, but..." The pained lilt in his voice clues me in that his father hadn't simply lost interest in the endeavor.

Why do I keep doing this? It's bad enough that I have to rub Evan's face in his own misery, but to do it to a child? What kind of sick monster am I?

"Underneath all the grumpiness, he's glad you're here," Jordan says. "And so am I. It's nice not to be alone."

I move to sit beside him. Jordan seems much more gentle than his father, so I don't worry that he might shove me away or reject my comfort. "I'm so sorry..." I wish I could apologize for everything, for the way my family gutted these two and left them to bleed out. I don't understand how they can still live in this house, how they can walk around it with misery as a constant companion that trails their every step. I don't even know these people, and the house still feels haunted. "You don't have to deal with this alone, y'know. Do you have any relatives you could call?"

"There's my uncle Ray, but...he's not a very good influence on my dad." He sighs and frowns. I can definitely see the family resemblance now.

I wonder what he means by that. "Well, you've got me now, right? I'm sure your dad will feel a little better knowing the bar is taken care of."

He nods. “Yeah, that’s—that’s actually a really big help.”

“Hey, do you like comic books?” I reach into my bag and pull out a handful of thin volumes. “I brought some of mine from home, but maybe you’d enjoy ‘em more.”

Jordan sorts through the comics, looking pleased at my selection. “Oh dude, sweet! Thanks! Ah, you even have Batman!”

“I was never a huge Batman fan. I’ve always liked Spider-Man more.”

“Spider-Man’s cool, but Batman has that lone wolf thing going.”

“Do you like Captain America?”

“Yes! He’s awesome.” I had a feeling he would.

“What about Iron Man?”

“Oh my God, Iron Man is amazing! Do you have any of him?” He looks through the stack. I smile at his enthusiasm.

“Sadly, no. But I seem to be pretty good at determining your taste in superheroes.”

“You can borrow some of mine if you want. I don’t think I can be friends with someone who doesn’t like Iron Man.”

I laugh and graciously accept his offer. I start unpacking my bag while Jordan sits on the bed flipping through the comics. “So, what kind of movies do you and your dad write?”

“Mostly dumb comedies,” he says, trying to sound modest. “I think I have the screenplays somewhere in my room if you wanna read ‘em sometime.”

“Yes, of course! I think it’s really sweet that he nurtures your creativity like that. I wish my father was more supportive of my dreams.”

“Well, actually, movies are more of his thing than mine,” Jordan corrects.

“Oh?”

“Yeah, he’s always wanted to make movies. So I guess I’m the one nurturing his creativity.” He snorts a laugh.

I’m about to say something supportive when I hear Evan’s voice down the hall. “Jord’, you wanna come downstairs for dinner—” He peers into my room and observes us talking. “Oh, I see you’ve met Jordie. I hope he’s not bothering you, Michael.”

“No, not at all! I love kids.”

Something changes in Evan’s expression, though I can’t identify it. He shifts his gaze over to Jordan. “Come help me with dinner and let Michael get situated.”

“I can cook,” I volunteer a little too ardently. “Ih—if you want, I mean.”

“You don’t have to do that,” Evan says.

“But I want to. I’m here to help, right?”

Evan looks like he wants to argue, but he gives in and lets me and Jordan take over the kitchen when we get downstairs. I hadn’t really gotten a good look at the rest of the house when I first arrived; it’s very homey and lived-in. While my family’s house seems like it’s more for display than habitation, this one has a warm, cozy feel to it.

“Where’s all the food?” I ask as I’m staring into the refrigerator.

Jordan shrugs. “I guess we ate it all? I dunno, I don’t remember the last time we went to the store.”

“Well, then I’ll do that soon. Can’t have you guys starving.”

“We do pretty well on take-out and pizza,” Jordan says.

“Oh, you poor things.”

We end up making spaghetti. Not the most creative dish, but I didn’t have much to work with. Over dinner, I learn a lot about Jordan because he doesn’t stop talking. He’s quiet at first, but once he feels comfortable with me we’re debating the victor in a battle between Freddy Krueger and Jason Voorhees, and which teams might end up in next year’s Super Bowl. Evan’s not talking though, instead choosing to eat in silence and stare at me with an intense expression. I can’t exactly blame him for being suspicious, because that sort of thing tends to serve you pretty well in this business.

Evan keeps up the angry and gloomy looks until he goes upstairs after dinner. “I don’t think your dad likes me very much,” I mutter to Jordan when we’re cleaning up. “I think he might actually hate me.”

Jordan laughs weakly. “He doesn’t hate you. That’s just how he is now. He hasn’t been taking his medication either, so there’s that too.” I’m curious before I remember that it’s none of my business. “I gotta start reminding him.”

“You think it’s your responsibility to take care of him?”

“Well, yeah.” He gives me a confused look. “It’s not like he *can*’t take care of himself, he just...doesn’t. When Mom was here”—I hear the slight hitch in his voice—“he was okay. He didn’t drink as much. He took his pills. But now...I dunno, it just sucks that he’s sad all the time. I try to do what I can, but I don’t know if it helps.”

I wonder how deeply Jordan had to bury his own pain to help Evan cope with his. “He needs you now more than ever. But he wants his son, not a caretaker.” Jordan nods, and we resume our playful banter until the dishes are done.

“You wanna check out my awesome basement?” he asks, holding the door open for me. “We can play Super Nintendo or just watch TV—if you want.”

“I’d love to, but I’m getting tired.”

He gives me a judging look. “It’s, like, nine on a Friday night. How are you tired?”

“Jet lag.”

“Oh, right.” He starts down the stairs to the basement. “Well, see ya.”

I flick the lights off in the kitchen and check the locks on the glass doors leading out into the backyard. I peer out to look, but I can’t see much in the darkness. A hall light catches my eye, and I tiptoe down the corridor to my right to switch it off. That’s when I notice the piles of laundry in the room at the end of the hall.

I toss a load into the washing machine and go upstairs for a quick shower. By the time I’m done, the clothes are ready to be dried. I put them in the dryer before I go back upstairs for bed. Jordan’s room is across the hall from mine, which I’ll probably come to appreciate as time goes by. I unpack a few more of my things, and Jordan pops in to say goodnight. His t-shirt is oversized, bearing the image of Bart Simpson on the front.

“Where’s your dad?”

He shrugs. “In his room. I guess he’s asleep.”

“Do you usually say goodnight to him?”

“We used to, but...he gets busy at night.” I hand him the stack of comics on my bed, and he smiles. “Thanks. I’ll let you borrow mine later.”

“Get some sleep, Jordie.”

“Yeah, g’nite, Mike.”

When I lay my head against the pillow to sleep, I wonder what Evan’s wife June was like. I wonder if she was beautiful, what her hobbies were, whether or not she knew what Evan did for

a living. I think about the ways in which she might have been like my own mother. Then I think about losing her, and my heart breaks anew.

#

The next morning, peaceful sunlight streams in through the spaces in the curtains. I'm a little worried that I woke up of my own accord; Evan did say I'd be working today, right? Shouldn't he be here violently shaking me awake?

I stick my head out the door and look down the hallway at what I presume is Evan's bedroom door. It's closed. Well, that's wonderful.

"Hey, Mike," Jordan pipes up from his room. He's laying on his bed reading one of my Captain America comics. His bedroom floor is just about as messy as you'd expect it to be. There's books everywhere, along with the occasional action figure and Hot Wheels car. "What's up?"

"I was just wondering if your dad was awake or not. I'm supposed to work today, but I don't know where his bar is or how to get there." In hindsight, I probably should have asked him these questions at dinner, but he was all frowny faces and angry eyebrows.

"I think he's still asleep. It's generally not a good idea to wake him up." I definitely wasn't planning on that. "But I can show you where it is."

I'm about to ask him if he has school today before I remember it's Saturday. "Oh, well, thank you! I'd appreciate that."

There isn't much to work with for breakfast—only Pop-Tarts and stale bagels—so we're out the door relatively quickly after leaving a note for Evan. "You sure your dad's okay with this?" I ask Jordan as he walks in front of me. I try to take note of where we're going in the event that I need to make the journey alone.

"Yeah, I've been there a bunch'a times with Mom. I dunno why he'd be mad about it."

"I don't want to get you in trouble."

He gives a casual hand wave. "You won't."

The walk to the bar takes about ten minutes, and I would have walked right past the place if Jordan hadn't been leading the way. From the outside, it blends right into the scenery despite being on the street corner. The front windows are pitch-black and would probably be illuminated by neon beer signs on an average night.

"You don't happen to have a key, do you?" I ask Jordan.

"Sorry, dude."

Damn it. I try the knob, just in case today's my lucky day. Locked.

I really don't want Jordan to see me breaking into his father's bar within less than forty-eight hours of knowing me. But it doesn't look like I have much of a choice. I reach into my pocket and take out my handy multi-tool—sort of a Swiss Army knife for unscrupulous activities. I'd fashioned it myself one night after digging around for a lock pick had almost gotten me and Randy killed.

“What's that?” Jordan asks, angling his head to get a better look. Sticking the lock-pick tool into the lock answers his question. “Oh. You're breaking in?”

“Well, it's not like either of us has a key. This'll just be our little secret.” I hear the lock click. Bingo! I lead us inside and flip on the light switch on the wall. An elaborate chandelier flickers to life, bathing the room in a calming, yellow glow.

I'd been expecting the interior to look cheap and dirty, but I'm actually surprised at how classy it is. The walls are a soft beige color with the texture of stone. The tables and chairs don't take up much space, so there's plenty of them adorning the carpeted floor. Along the back wall is the bar and a magnificent display case of wines, whiskey, and vodka. There are two closed doors at the back, one on either side of the bar, the frames lined with a red and blue checker pattern.

“You know who my dad is, right?” Jordan says with a laugh. “Trust me, I'm not shocked.”

I'm trying to ignore the implications in that sentence. “I'm well aware of your father's”—I search for the word—“reputation.”

“So you're a friend of his?” He's looking at me like he suspects I have ulterior motives.

“I guess you could say that. He works with my family on occasion.”

“And what family is that?”

I wonder why he knows about the families, but Jordan's the sole heir of Evan's business, so he's probably being groomed for this life. I'm not sure how I feel about that. “The Jacksons.”

That gets his attention. He straightens up and fixes me with an awed stare more appropriate for a pile of presents on Christmas morning than a gangster's son. “Seriously?” Then his expression slips back into skepticism. “You're, like, their housekeeper, right? 'Cause, well, y'know, you're white and they're...not.”

“I have a skin disease that lightens my skin,” I tell him, chagrined at the admission. “My grandfather has it too.” I can see that he's suspicious of me now that he knows I'm in the same business his father is; Evan's probably taught him—inadvertently or otherwise—not to trust people. I'm gonna have to show him proof of my condition to fully earn his trust. “See?” I

unbutton a shirt cuff and push up my sleeve, displaying the brown splotches on my arm. His face softens. "I use make-up to cover it up when I go out."

"Oh, okay." He nods, understanding now, and we're back to our usual ease of conversation. Why don't adults grasp the subject this easily? Most of them remain skeptical even after they've seen the uneven patches of color and make snide remarks about how I must bleach my skin or want to deny my heritage. Then again, this isn't exactly the most racially-welcoming culture. It's nothing short of a miracle that my family is as prominent as they are.

"So, would you mind helping me fix this place up?" I swipe a finger over the marble countertop of the bar and pick up a thin film of dust. "Yeesh, how long's this place been closed?"

Jordan shrugs. "A month or so, I guess."

Since his mother died.

I try to ignore the ache in my chest at the thought. "Well, I think your dad will appreciate it if we clean up."

He eagerly pitches in, helping me dust the tables and countertops before we move into the back room on the left to clean the dishes in the sink. The work goes fairly quickly with two people, and by noon we've managed to do a pretty decent job on clean-up.

Jordan's finishing the task of washing the windows when he asks me, "So, what did you do in your family? Were you, like, the maid, or did you actually do stuff?"

I chuckle at his irreverence, scrubbing out a very persistent stain in the carpet. "I did stuff like what you saw earlier."

"You mean you broke into places?"

"For lack of a better term, yes."

"Is that why you had that thing to break in with?" I nod. "So if my dad hides my birthday presents in a safe or somethin', you could get 'em out?"

"Hypothetically, yes. But patience is a virtue, Jordie." He sighs the exasperated sigh of a twelve-year-old. "I also...persuaded powerful men to clear their debts or make alliances with my family...and I made incendiary devices."

"What's that mean?"

I'm making some progress on this stain, though not without effort. "I make stuff blow up."

"For real? That's so cool!"

“No, it’s really not.” I’m about to launch into a full-scale lecture on the evils of this business when the front door swings open. Evan’s standing in the doorway, glaring at me with a hostile, furious expression.

Jordan looks over his shoulder and stands up. “Hey, Dad, me and Michael cleaned up. What do you think?”

Evan storms across the room to where we’re gathered. “Yes, I see that,” he says through his teeth. He glances down at the spot I’m cleaning, and his reaction is immediate. His eyes shut, and he breathes out sharply, as if he’s just been punched in the stomach. When he looks at me again, his gaze pierces through me like a hot blade. Fear creeps up my spine and paralyzes me. “Jordan, get in the car.”

“Am I in trouble?”

Evan doesn’t even look away from me when he answers Jordan. “No, you’re not in trouble. Just do as I say.”

“Fine.” Jordan huffs a sigh and heads for the open door. “See you at home, Michael.”

When Jordan’s safely seated in Evan’s idling car, Evan turns the full fury of his gaze onto me again. “What the fuck do you think you’re doing?”

I have no idea how to answer that, so I go with the truth. “Cleaning up the bar. I thought you wanted...” I trail off, still pinned by the fury in his eyes.

“How dare you bring Jordie here, you sick bastard,” he growls. “He’s only a kid, goddamn it! This isn’t his world!”

“I didn’t know how to get here. He offered to show me, and he said he wanted to help, so...” I can’t figure out why he’s so murderously angry; hadn’t Jordan said he’s been here plenty of times?

Oh. Maybe Evan doesn’t know that. Maybe I just got Jordan into big trouble. Oops.

Evan grabs the collar of my shirt and pulls me up, his face within an inch of mine. My feet sort of dangle in the air. “Don’t bring him here again. Ever.” He lets go of me and stalks out, trailing heat and anger in his wake before he slams the door behind him.

3. How to Win Friends and Influence Mobsters

Evan

I'm trying to control my anger, but thinking about how Michael brought my son to the spot where his mother died—had him walk over it, even—makes my hands curl around the steering wheel like I might bend the metal. Jordan risks a few glances in my direction during the short drive home, but otherwise we share no words or meaningful looks.

It's only when we reach the house that he speaks up. "Dad, will you just tell me what I did wrong?" he says after I slam the front door particularly hard.

"You didn't do anything."

"Then why do I feel like I'm in trouble?"

"You're not, but I don't want you going there again."

"How come? I went there with Mom all the time." His eyebrows pull together in anxiety.

"Well, I don't want you to go."

Jordan frowns. "So how was Michael supposed to get there if he didn't know where it was?"

"He could have asked me."

"You were asleep! And you get pissed at *me* when I wake you up, so of course you're gonna yell at him if he did." He looks like he wants to say something more but stops himself. "Will you—will you just start taking your meds again? Please, Dad?"

"If you promise not to go back there again."

"But I wanna help fix it up with Michael."

I grit my teeth. Michael's part of the reason June's gone in the first place, and Jordan wants to spend time with him? "No."

He fixes me with a glare. "Well, you can't stop me."

"I said you're not going!"

"Is this about my safety? I'll be fine; I always leave when it's still light out like Mom said."

"Well, your mom's not here anymore, so you have to listen to me now." It comes out brutal and vicious, but it's too late to take the words back once they've left my mouth and

cleaved through both our hearts. Lately, it seems like I'm always angry at him, and it's always wrong and misplaced.

Jordan takes the hit surprisingly well, but I can see the poorly masked devastation on his face. He hadn't expected me to aim so low. Even I didn't know I could possibly hurt my own son like that. He stalks across the living room and throws open the door to the basement, slamming it behind him as he stomps down the stairs.

My fist shoots forward into the wall, bruising my knuckles and venting some of the pent-up anger inside of me. I'd said it myself to Michael: Jordan's just a kid. This isn't his world. He's got enough to deal with, but here I am adding to his burden. I can't ask him to do the things I should be doing. It isn't fair to him. I'm supposed to be his father.

Some fucking father I am.

I lose my last shred of composure and collapse in misery, my chest hitching with angry, silent sobs.

#

When I'm able to breathe a little more evenly, I stand up, wipe my eyes with the back of my hand and climb the stairs. I'm numb to the empty spaces on the bedroom walls by now, having forced myself to forget what had once filled those voids. I still haven't taken the sheet off of the full-length mirror by the window. Or the towel draped over the bathroom mirror.

Jordan's right—I'm not getting any better. It's cruel and unfair to put him through this. He's already lost one parent. I can't let him lose another in a way that's more agonizing to watch than the most brutal murder.

I pick up the phone on the night table and dial my brother's number. Ray answers without tact, as usual. "What?"

"I need a favor."

"Evan, whoa, you sound like shit. What happened?"

An image of the bloodstain in the bar flashes in my mind's eye. I shove it away. "Nothing. Look, I need someone to keep an eye on Michael."

"'Bout fuckin' time. I was wondering when you'd start getting suspicious."

"Yeah, look, don't hurt him or nothin'. Just watch where he goes, make sure he doesn't do anything squirrely, y'know? Why don't you put JD on it?" JD Shapiro serves as caporegime for our Family. He's good at jobs like this because he's awful at anything involving violence. It's almost comical how bad he is with a gun, so I know Michael won't be in any danger.

“Sure, sure. “You know where Michael is now?”

“He’s at the bar.”

“I’ll send a car out.” There’s a short pause, then Ray says, “You wanna talk about it?”

I know he’s not referring to my order to keep watch on Michael. “No, I don’t.”

“You’re gonna have to talk about this shit sometime, Ev.”

“What are you, my grief counselor?”

Ray doesn’t take the hint; this is a running theme with him. “No, I’m your brother. I thought we had an honesty thing goin’, y’know, keep the lines of communication open.”

“They’re open, I’m just choosing not to use them.” My knuckles throb, and I can see a dark, nasty bruise beginning to form.

“Bad choice. You gotta talk about this shit or it just eats you up inside, y’know.”

Do I ever. But my brother’s never had a meaningful connection with anyone in his life; what the hell would he know about what I’m going through? “Just send a car out and quit yappin’.”

“Fine.” He hangs up abruptly.

Gee, that went well.

#

Michael

I leave the bar when the sun begins to set, figuring it doesn’t matter much what time I close up if the place isn’t actually open. I make a mental tabulation of the changes I want to implement to the interior—that carpet’s gotta go. I spent a good thirty minutes trying to get that stain out, and it still wouldn’t come up. The bathrooms could stand to be repainted too. And better locks, because it took me all of five seconds to break in.

I walk back the way I came, glancing around and noticing landmarks I’d observed on my way here. I’m not entirely sure if I’m heading in the right direction. I feel like I am, but I’ve been wrong before.

I hear a crunching sound behind me, something akin to leaves rustling. Probably just the wind or some sort of animal. Or maybe a trash bag. It’s not until I hear the sound again that I snap my head around to look behind me. A shadowy figure ducks out of sight behind a building as I turn. I feel a chill that has nothing to do with the weather.

I know enough to defend myself if I'm being followed, but if that's the case I doubt they're going to get too close. But who would be following me? The only enemies I can think of that my family might have made are the Chandlers, and considering that Evan's letting me live in his house, I doubt they're going to want me dead. Unless my father managed to piss someone else off in such a short amount of time, if I'm being followed it's for petty thievery.

And I can handle a thief. The average thief is stupid and clumsy; career criminals are the ones you have to watch out for.

I pass by a small thicket of trees and hear the crunching again. Okay, that's it. I'm getting to the bottom of this. I keep my pace steady, heading intently for the convenience store on the corner of the street up ahead. There's a four-way intersection there, and I can sneak around the corner and grab my pursuer without tipping him—or her—off that I'm aware I'm being followed.

I duck behind the 7-11 when I reach the corner, taking refuge back behind the garbage bins near the fence. The footfalls grow closer, closer still, until I see a man of average build walk by my hiding spot. He's wearing a pinstripe suit and a fedora—a fedora, for cryin' out loud—like he just stepped off the set of *The Godfather*. Jesus Christmas.

“Looking for me?” I step out from behind the building.

Fedora lets out a shriek and stumbles backwards, startled by my sudden appearance. He falls on his ass and tries to scramble away. “Oh God, please don't hurt me!”

I'm actually embarrassed for him. “Is that really a fedora?”

He looks terrified for a second before realizing I just insulted his fashion sense. “Shut up, fedoras are cool.”

“Yeah, if you're Al Pacino.”

He picks himself up and dusts himself off. “M—maybe I am. You don't know my life.”

Obviously, my father didn't send this doofus. “Who are you working for?”

“None of your business, that's who.”

“Oh, that's original.” I roll my eyes. “I'll ask one more time: who are you working for?”

Fedora glances around surreptitiously. “I'm not supposed to tell you that.”

“Yeah, well, you're not supposed to get caught by the guy you're tailin' either, so you're breakin' all the rules today.”

He scrunches up his face into an appraising frown. “Just who are you, anyway?”

“You were sent to follow me, but they didn’t tell you who I am?” I feel sort of insulted by this lack of professionalism. “Tell your boss he better not send amateurs next time if he wants to get the drop on me.”

“Oh, he knows.”

“So my father sent you?” Fedora gives me a quizzical look. I try another avenue. “Then it was Evan?” Fedora tries to keep his face even, but I notice a flicker of recognition at the name. So Evan sent this joker, trying to keep an eye on me.

This poses two interesting theories. One, either Evan thought his spy would go unnoticed, in which case he’s severely underestimating me, or two, he knows I’d catch his tail and he wants me to know I’m under surveillance. Neither option fills me with much optimism.

“Okay, then it *was* Evan.”

“I didn’t say nothin’!” Fedora protests.

I sigh and push past him. “I’m going home. You can keep following me or not. I really don’t care.”

This turn of events gives me something to think about on the walk home. Evan doesn’t trust me. Can’t say I’m surprised. He may very well suspect that I’m some sort of spy sent by my family to infiltrate and gather information on the Chandler family, in a “keep your friends close, keep your enemies closer” sort of thing. Bringing Jordan to the bar probably didn’t do much to bolster Evan’s trust in me either.

To save face, Fedora won’t tell anyone that I caught him following me, so I can choose to pretend that I’m blissfully ignorant of the surveillance. After all, I’m not doing anything secretive here, but it might be advantageous to let Evan think he has the upper hand for now.

#

Evan’s locked in his bedroom by the time I get home. Over a paltry dinner of mashed potatoes, Jordan reassures me that I didn’t get him in trouble; I don’t get the impression that he’s lying to me about that. We decide to go to the supermarket tomorrow to stock up on food. Before the night’s end, I finish more laundry in the slowly-diminishing pile.

The next morning, Jordan and I play rock-paper-scissors after breakfast to see who’s tasked with asking Evan for the car keys and money for shopping. Jordan loses. I’m not too worried, because if anyone’s gonna be able to sweet-talk Evan it’s not gonna be the guy who just moved in two days ago.

When we cross the Verrazano Bridge and get into Brooklyn, it still amazes me how big the buildings are. Everything’s so gigantic and ostentatious, yet somehow it all fits together. And maybe it helps that I’m out of that coffin of a house.

Jordan points out various stores to me on the way to the supermarket—a comic shop that “has, like, literally everything,” the coffee shop that serves the best doughnuts, a pizza place. I’m eager to absorb all of the city’s offerings that I can. The air is scented with car exhaust fumes and fried grease from the street vendor carts selling hot dogs and sausage and pepper sandwiches.

The grocery store is a bit of a drive from the house, but Jordan had insisted we go into Brooklyn because the supermarket there is bigger and has a better selection than the one he usually goes to. Plus, he wants to show me the big city since I’ve never been here before; I might as well do some sight-seeing while running errands.

We’re about to go inside the store when I spot a suspicious figure across the street. Fedora’s back, his nose buried in a newspaper, looking about as inconspicuous as a forest fire. He might as well cut eyeholes in the damn paper as long as he’s being subtle about it. “You see that guy over there?” I mutter to Jordan. “Fedora, hiding behind the newspaper?”

Jordan does a subtle head turn to follow my line of sight. “Oh, that’s JD, one of my dad’s friends.”

“You know him?”

“Yeah, he’s”—Jordan’s trying to find a polite way to phrase his next few words—“a little weird, I guess, and his jokes are terrible, but yeah.”

“What’s he doing here?”

Jordan shrugs. “I guess my dad was worried about us.”

Curious and curiouiser.

When we get inside the store, it feels nice to do something “normal” for a change. I did most of the shopping back home, so I’m glad to have a familiar task. Jordan helps me navigate the labyrinth of aisles, grateful that I’m here to reach all the things on the high shelves for him. I’m trying not to think about the fact that the last time Jordan went shopping he was probably with his mother.

“I’ve never bought groceries for such a small group before,” I tell him as we’re lingering among the produce.

Jordan sneaks a couple of grapes. “How many people are in your family? Like, twenty?”

“Not exactly. There’s me, my five brothers, my parents, and my three sisters.”

“Wow, the holidays must be crazy at your house.”

I chuckle. “Well, my mother is a Jehovah’s Witness, so we don’t celebrate holidays like most people do.”

His brow creases in confusion. “Really? So, you don’t have Christmas?”

“Definitely not.”

“Aw, man, that’s gotta suck!” He’s looking at me in awe. “Every kid’s gotta have Christmas or Hanukkah or something! How do you live without getting presents?”

“Well, I don’t practice the faith anymore, so maybe this year we can do something for the holidays, if it’s okay with your dad.”

“I hope so. He was super pissed at you yesterday, by the way.” We round the next aisle, and Jordan loads the cart with boxes of macaroni and cheese and cans of Chef Boyardee.

“Yeah, I, uh, I noticed that. Any particular reason?”

“I dunno. I guess he was worried about me walking home alone or something.”

“Be honest with me. Did you used to sneak out and go to the bar so your dad wouldn’t know?”

He looks puzzled. “No. Why?”

“Just curious.” I glance down at the contents of the cart. “Jordie, I don’t think you can live off of macaroni and cheese and Oreos.”

“I know, I’m gonna put more stuff in. We haven’t got to the Bagel Bites and Hot Pockets yet.”

I sigh. “Do your parents ever cook?”

“Sometimes. I dunno, my mom and dad worked at different times, so we weren’t all home together very much.”

I wonder if it means anything that he used past tense. I should stop wondering about these things. “Well, my family is all about home-cooked meals, so that’s mostly what we’re going to have.”

He shrugs in way that says he’s completely okay with this. “Yeah, that’s cool. I love food. I’m not picky. It’s my dad you gotta worry about.”

“Oh?” I’m envisioning Evan glaring at a plate of food like he blames it for everything. That’s pretty much what he did Friday night, so it’s not hard to imagine.

“Yeah, he’s super-picky about food. And it’s not for any, like, real reason like it’s not kosher or he’s allergic or whatever. He’s just picky.” That’s sort of adorable and probably really irritating. “And my uncle Ray will basically eat anything, so most of our family get-togethers involve my dad being totally grossed out by my uncle.”

I’m laughing now, because just imagining this scenario playing out is hilarious to me. “Well, is there anything your dad actually likes?”

“He loves anything sugary. Like candy and cookies and stuff.”

“Oh, me too!” I feel my conniving smile grow like a vine on my face; I imagine I look like the Grinch when he came up with the plan to steal Christmas.

Jordan notices my grin when he comes back from tossing boxes of Cocoa Pebbles and Nintendo Cereal into the cart. “Mike, are you plotting something?”

“‘Plotting’ makes it sound devious. I just had an idea how to get your dad to talk to me.”

“He thinks he’s the Godfather; you gonna make him an offer he can’t refuse?”

I smirk. “In a manner of speaking.”

Fedora’s still reading that newspaper when we’re done shopping.

Evan finally comes home later that evening while I’m making dinner; I’m a little surprised to see that he’s been out of the house instead of locked away in his room all afternoon. He shows up at the dinner table, fresh out of the shower, with damp hair and sweats and an old t-shirt; I try not to let my mind stray into the gutter at the sight.

Tonight is more of the same, with me and Jordan supplying most of the conversation and Evan supplying the frowny faces and angry glares. To his credit, he doesn’t look as angry tonight. He’s sort of staring at his plate of half-eaten stuffed mushrooms, occasionally poking them with his fork while making an inquisitive expression. Jordan doesn’t seem to notice anything awry, just reaches for another slice of garlic bread.

I have no clue how I could have offended Evan today. I didn’t even talk to him this morning, and he’s only been home about thirty minutes now. I’d showered when I got home, so I don’t think I smell particularly offensive. Is this just another one of his picky eating tantrums, or does he just not like my cooking at all?

It hits me like a punch to the chest. I’m cooking for the family, like a good little housekeeper...or a wife.

“Hey, Michael, you like video games, right?” Jordan asks, oblivious to my moment of angsting. “‘Cause I wanna show you this really awesome arcade in the city sometime. They’ve got Mortal Kombat.”

“If—if it’s okay with your dad.”

Evan grunts an okay that does not make me the least bit reassured.

Jordan helps me with the dishes before heading downstairs to the basement. “Mike, you wanna play Street Fighter with me? I’ll let you be Blanka.”

“Don’t stay up too late,” Evan says from the couch, having overeaten a bit. “You got school in the morning.”

“I know,” Jordan says with a small sigh before turning back to me. “So, you in?”

“Maybe later. I’m gonna make dessert.” I wink at him conspiratorially. Jordan grins and gives me a thumbs-up. “I can use some of your Oreos, right?”

“Go ahead. Just save some for me,” he says before he goes downstairs.

I’m in the middle of gathering the supplies I need and setting up my space in the kitchen when Evan asks, “What are you making?”

“Cookie cups.”

There’s a short pause, then: “Tell me you’re not making cookie muffins and putting Oreos inside them.”

“There’s a possibility I’m doing that.” I grin to myself when that gets him off of the couch and casually walking over to the kitchen, trying his best to look disinterested in my baking endeavor. Evan Chandler, you actual child. “Y’know, it’s funny to think of you as this picky eater who judges other people’s food choices,” I say, trying to lighten the mood as I mix the cookie dough. At his perplexed expression, I add, “Jordan told me. Apparently, your brother earns a lot of your dietary scorn?”

“He puts guacamole on hamburgers,” he says after a moment, glaring at the countertop like even thinking about this is offending him in the worst way possible.

“Are you one of those people that appreciates the way TV dinners separate everything so nothing touches that’s not supposed to?”

“I’m not *that* picky.” He frowns a little and steals a chocolate chip. “I’ve never really been good at cooking,” he admits after a moment.

“For me, it was a way to help the family without actually...*helping* the family. Came in handy when my sisters moved out.” I expect him to scowl at me for bringing up my family or reinforcing his loss, but he doesn’t, just pilfers another morsel or two from the bag of chocolate chips before I grab it away to fold them into the mix.

I feel his eyes on me, watching me vigilantly before he speaks again. “Why don’t you like your family, Michael?” Hearing him say my name with no traces of scorn makes my stomach drop. “I mean, my brother’s the biggest pain in my ass, but aside from Jordie he’s all I got now.”

I wonder how to explain this to the man my family stole so much from. “I guess I just don’t want to be like them.”

“Meaning what? You don’t like the whole business?” I fight a smile when he reaches over and plucks a small ball of cookie dough out of the mixing bowl.

“In this life, you’re never a child. I never was.” I start putting the dough and the Oreos into the muffin pan. Evan doesn’t prod for more, just watches me with a patient expression. “When I was Jordie’s age, I was helping my older brothers break into safes and locked rooms so they could steal. When I was twenty”—I keep my head down—“I was helping my father clear debts with men more powerful than him.” I’m not saying this right. I try again. “I was happy before we moved to California. Yeah, maybe our house was a little too small, and maybe we had to struggle a lot, but I think we were happy. I never asked for any of this, but my father looks at his sacrifices as some sort of bill that I have to pay back.” I look over at Evan to find that he’s still watching me. “You know what most dads are when their kids want to move out? Happy.”

Evan gives me a weak smirk. “Believe me, I’m a big expert on dead-beat dads. Been there, done that.”

I hear the unspoken guilt in his words. “Jordie’s a good kid.”

His shoulders slump a bit, and he looks away. “He must get that from his mother.”

I scramble to steer the conversation away from Evan’s guilt complex and world of grief. Too much too soon. “I wanted to ask you something,” I begin after putting the cookies into the oven.

“About?”

“About the bar.” I let him eat the rest of the dough out of the bowl. Maybe it’ll make him more agreeable to what I’m about to suggest. “I was wondering if you’d let me make a few changes.”

“Like what?”

He’s full of questions tonight. “Nothing major. Just things like repainting the bathrooms, upgrading the locks, putting in hardwood floors...” I watch his face carefully, waiting to see which suggestion sets off his anger. But he doesn’t react the way I’m expecting. It takes him a moment to answer, but when he does his face is eerily calm.

“Yeah, sure, do whatever you want,” Evan says with a shrug. “Just don’t draw attention to yourself.”

Well, that went well. Now for the hard part. “Okay, well...how do you want to fund this? You wanna do cash, or should we get a business credit card, or—”

The sudden flash of misery in his eyes shuts off my verbal spillage. I wonder what I said that cut him so deep, because Evan looks like the most fragile thing in the world right now. “I’ll get it. Don’t worry,” he murmurs, motioning for me to stay here while he leaves the kitchen to head upstairs. I wait for him to return. Time stretches on for what seems like years, but the oven timer tells me it’s only been about ten minutes. When he comes back, his eyes are red-rimmed as he places three thick wads of bills on the counter, each one tied with a blue or green rubber band and bearing a hundred-dollar note on top. I pocket the cash immediately, not wanting to drag out the agony. I notice dark bruising over his knuckles but say nothing of it.

Scrambling for a lighter subject change, I blurt out, “Hey, you should go with Jordie to the arcade instead of me. He’d like that.”

Evan rakes a hand through his hair. “I doubt it. You get along with him much better.”

“I’ve known him for two days, Evan,” I say around a laugh. He takes a deep breath and blows it out, his mouth a hard line. “Jordie will appreciate you spending time with him. I love my father, but I don’t *know* him. If he’d spent time with me doing things I liked to do, maybe I’d actually know him and not feel sick when we’re in the same room.”

He’s mulling over my words when the timer dings, shaking me out of my thoughts. I linger there for a moment before rushing over to the oven to save the cookies, and I end up burning myself a little trying to take them out of the pan. Evan sort of chuckles when I swear under my breath, a hint of a smile on his face. Maybe my clumsiness was worth it.

I manage to break one of the cookies open to cool, and I pop a piece into my mouth. “It’s good,” I mumble around the treat, setting the remaining pieces in front of him. He tests my theory by nibbling on half a cookie before breaking off a piece and devouring it, theory confirmed.

“Very good,” he says before eating the remaining half. I feel a swell of pride at the compliment, and he swipes away the crumbs at the corner of his mouth; a brazen fantasy of licking them from his skin flickers in my head before my gaze is pulled to the silver band around his ring finger. Evan doesn’t seem to notice, too engrossed in my sweets. He plucks another cookie from the pan and bites into it. It feels good to make him happy, even if it’s just for a fleeting moment. It’s progress.

4. A Friend of Mine

Evan

I really don't want to be here.

Michael's been living with me and Jordan for about a week now, and while he's extraordinarily gifted at bringing order to our chaotic home, he's still unable to take my place at Jordan's parent-teacher conference. Jordan had assured me that he "probably" wasn't in trouble, and the meetings were compulsory for the parents of every kid, regardless of the child's behavior or academic performance. But Jordan couldn't properly read the worry in my expression; I wasn't nervous about finding out he might be failing a class or that he'd acted out. I was nervous about reappearing in the public eye since the funeral.

Also, no one seems to really know what I do for a living. Todt Hill isn't a exactly small town where everybody knows everyone else's business, but the ambiguous nature of my work and the whispered rumors that I'm "mobbed up" have earned me a reputation among practically everyone in a ten-mile radius of our house. I'm sure I've tossed around the phrases "garbage business" or "waste management" at some point, but some people have probably figured out that my line of work involves things that toe the line of the law and, in some cases, completely step over said line.

June, somewhat of a socialite, had been much more involved with Jordan's school functions and playdates than I had been, so she was on a first-name basis with most of his friends' parents. I, on the other hand, stayed confined to my umbrella of social contacts.

Ray had volunteered to accompany me to the meeting, an offer that I took him up on. I knew I would need his presence to ground me. So while Jordan stayed home to help Michael with the chores around the house, I went with Ray to Jordan's school to meet with his teacher.

The conference is a simple thing, a one-on-one meeting where I'm told my son is an "exceptionally gifted student" and well-behaved, but that his grades have taken an "understandable decline" due to his family issues; the week I'd pulled him out of school after June died might have something to do with that. His teacher—Ms. Joyce, I believe—is considerate of my trauma, not lingering on the issue or pressing for details.

But it's not her I'm worried about seeing. It's the other parents. Some of them I know, some of them I don't. It's a weekend, so the meetings are spaced out as to not make anyone wait. But there's still a handful of parents roaming the halls, and, like sharks swimming in the ocean, they smell blood as soon as they see me. I know they're judging me, their eyes raking over me with condescending disdain or, worse, pity. My name has practically become synonymous with "poor thing," spoken in hushed, sympathetic whispers. The neighbors and folks I'd known before the accident have been supportive in the best of ways, never patronizing, but I seem to remain almost a social pariah amongst those I don't know. Though I'm sure my reclusive behavior has more to do with that than the circumstances.

“Try not to look like you’re going to cry,” Ray mumbles to me as we’re leaving the classroom.

“I can’t help it; that’s just how my face looks.”

“Well, you know what Ma always said about your face stickin’ that way.”

I manage a light chuckle under my breath. I feel like I’m navigating a minefield. I need to get out of this place before—

“Evan Chandler?”

God. Fucking. Damn it.

A woman I don’t recognize approaches me, sort of nudging Ray off to the side as she squeezes in between us. Her hair is golden blonde and teased more than a bedwetter. She’s wearing more jewelry than I’ve ever seen on one person, myself included.

“Have we met?”

“Gloria. I was a friend of June’s,” she says somberly.

I try to ignore the tearing at the fault line in my chest. “Oh.”

Gloria places a hand on my arm. “I’m very sorry for your loss. When I lost my husband, I was a wreck too.” It’s like I’m at the funeral again; phony sympathy is the horror movie monster that won’t die. “If you or Jordie ever need anything, just let me know.”

I nod absently. “We have a”—I search for the word—“housekeeper of sorts. But thank you for offering.”

Ray moves in after Gloria says her goodbyes and leaves us. “Jeez, Ev, just shut her down, why don’t ya?”

“What?”

“She was tryin’ to flirt with you, you idiot. You didn’t notice that subtle hint when she mentioned she was a widow?” He makes a sound of disgust. “How disrespectful.”

My brow creases to a point where it sort of hurts. “Wait, really? That’s what that was?”

Ray rolls his eyes. “C’mon, think about it. You’re a rich, widowed father; every straight, single woman here is practically salivating.”

I guess that makes sense. I'd never noticed attention from anyone but June. Unless a woman sits in my lap and shoves her breasts in my face, I can't tell if she's flirting with me or just being polite.

Ray looks at my perplexed expression and shrugs. "Hey, I gotta look out for ya. Keep the gold diggers away."

I watch the parents surreptitiously as we pass through the halls, surveying the mothers and fathers with their children, all the families that haven't been broken by tragedy. Families where the fathers work normal jobs and their sons and daughters can bring them into class for Career Day and tell everyone what Dad does for a living. Families where the children have no concept of losing a parent. Families where the mothers are alive and well.

I wonder what it might be like to share these kind of experiences with Michael. Would it bring us closer together? Could I grow to love him in the same way I love June?

Whoa.

Holy shit.

What made me think about Michael? Do I *like* him, and not just in the "I'd like to stick my dick in you" way? I think I might.

Oh Christ.

I come to a stop in the nearly-empty hallway, stunned by the thoughts in my head. My momentary pause gives another parent the chance to ambush me. "Evan?"

Damn it, why does this keep happening to me?

I turn to see a familiar-looking woman approaching me. She has shoulder-length black hair and a strong, Roman nose. It looks good on her, I suppose. "How are you? How's Jordie?" she asks.

I glance behind me at Ray, hoping he might save me from this horrifying unpleasantness, but he's leaning against a row of lockers and looking at me as if to say, "You're on your own, bub."

"We're, uh, we're doing okay, I guess," I answer. She nods and smiles in that way that funeral directors and rabbis do, that "I acknowledge your pain" thing that I'm absolutely sick of. "Um, I'm sorry, I don't really remember if I've seen you around..."

"I'm Monique, Cody's mother," she offers without a trace of scorn for my forgetfulness; I wonder if she would find it as endearing if the tables were turned and I was a mother who'd lost her husband.

“Oh, right, right, okay, I remember now.”

“If you need me to take Jordie to school one day or pick him up—”

“He takes the bus,” I say, slowly beginning to see the logic in Ray’s earlier theory of the single mothers being drawn to my male helplessness. “But thank you.”

“What exactly is it you do again?” It doesn’t sound like a probing question, but I have a feeling she’s either trying to verify the rumors about me or find out how much money I make.

“I work in construction.”

Monique just nods, but I can see the flicker in her eyes that says “stop drilling, you hit oil.” There’s a reason they call cement “Italian gold.” In New York, bid-rigging is huge in the construction industry, and there’s an old saying about how dirt doesn’t get moved without the Mafia behind it. “Well, it was nice to see you again. Remember to call if you or Jordie need anything.”

“Yeah, thanks.”

When she disappears down a corridor on the right, I go find Ray. “Construction,” he says with a scoff of a laugh. “Nice.”

“Oh, shut up.”

We walk outside, and the world feels different beneath my feet somehow, as if the earth has shifted. My revelation about Michael still gives me pause. Have I ever liked a guy in more than a friendly way? I really doubt it. I’m actually going to go with no, I haven’t.

What the hell do I do with this?

Do I have a crush on him because I miss June? Because I can kind of see why that might happen. The need to feel something for a living, breathing human and not a ghost. There’s nothing wrong with liking Michael because I’m lonely. I need something to feel good right now, and this feels good. What’s the harm?

But Michael is nothing like June. Michael is all hard angles and soft-spoken words, subtlety and suggestion in a business where those things are all too uncommon. June had a curious fascination with the darker side of my lifestyle, where Michael wants nothing to do with it. Michael would protect Jordan from this life instead of raising him into it.

Maybe...

Ray gives me a skeptical look now that we’re in the car, as if he can read my mind and see the deplorable wants there.

Guilt sinks its claws into me. There is no good reason for me to want Michael this way.

#

Michael

My first two weeks in New York pass by in a blur of activity. By the end of week one I managed to get the bar open again, and by the end of the second week I'd gotten used to the work schedule. Most of the people who come in are obvious wiseguys, but they don't cause any trouble—for the most part. There was one incident where a short loudmouth with something to prove kept harrasing me; the guys he came in with seemed to know who I was, or at the very least that I had connections to Evan, because they tried to stop him from making a drunken ass out of himself. When I refused him another drink, he reached for his gun.

My palm strike to the solar plexus was quicker, and my subsequent elbow lock ensured that he never bothered me again. His friends even tipped me extra.

My friendship with Jordan continued to blossom, but I couldn't suppress the worry that our rapport was responsible for Evan's continued gruff demeanor toward me. I'd tried to nudge him in the direction of spending more time with Jordan, but it didn't seem to matter; Jordan preferred my company. He wanted to show me the sights around Brooklyn, he wanted to play video games with me, he wanted to go to the movies with me. I loved hanging out with him, but I felt that he should be spending more time with his father.

Tonight finds us lounging on the couch, lazily flipping through channels. It's past midnight, so there's nothing on that catches his interest. His head is leaning against my shoulder while he struggles not to fall asleep. Evan's not home yet, probably out on business with Ray.

"Jordie, it's time for bed."

Jordan sighs a sound of frustration. "No, I have to wait for my dad."

I feel a pow and try to withstand the blow. I didn't understand Jordan's insistence on staying up until now, assuming he was just trying to push the limits of bedtime like any kid would. How to approach this delicately? "He'll be home. I promise."

"I wanna make sure."

"Jordie..."

"Please? Just one more hour."

"That's what you said two hours ago," I say with a laugh. "When your dad comes back, he's gonna be pretty upset that I let you stay up this late."

"I don't care if he gets mad at me."

“He’ll get mad at *me*.”

His hopeful expression falls flat. “Oh.”

“C’mon, it’s bedtime. You got school in the morning.” He frowns, clearly displeased with this decision. “You won’t be by yourself. I’ll be here.” That seems to ease his worries, if only a little bit, because he drags himself up the stairs, albeit at an almost snail-like pace. When he finally gets into bed, I tell him, “Don’t worry, if I’m up when your dad gets back, I’ll tell him to come in and let you know he’s home.”

Jordan nods, giving me his trust. It’s a fragile thing, and I haven’t been around long enough to break it yet.

I switch off his bedroom light and go back downstairs. I don’t remember at what point I dozed off, but I must have fallen asleep on the couch, because I wake up to the sounds of someone jiggling the doorknob and trying to shove the key into the lock.

Instantly, I panic, fearing the worst. The door opens. Ray staggers inside the foyer, sort of carrying Evan along with him. Panic sets in again for an entirely different reason. “Oh my God, what happened?”

“He’s fine,” Ray says, handing Evan over to me. I struggle with the weight of him. “Just drunk.”

I see now what Jordan meant when he said that Ray isn’t a very good influence on Evan. “Uh-huh, I can see that. Should you have let him drink so much?”

“C’mon, Michael, we both know you don’t ‘let’ Evan do anything.”

“You’re his brother. He’ll listen to you.”

He gives me a wide, fake smile. “I’m going to say this as politely as I can: piss off.”

“That wasn’t very polite, Ray.”

“You’re the housekeeper, okay? Keep your nose outta shit that ain’t your business.”

I bite back another sarcastic remark, instead letting him leave without any argument from me. Evan stumbles over to the couch and flops down in my spot. “Are you just gonna sleep there?”

“Mhmm,” he sighs, lying face down on a pillow. One of his arms dangles off the side of the couch, his fingertips touching the carpet.

“Jordie will be glad to know you’re home...finally.” I mutter that last part under my breath, but Evan doesn’t seem to catch it. He makes another noise of agreement and says nothing else. It’s hard enough getting a good answer out of him when he’s sober. I try another question. “You wanna go upstairs and tell him you’re here?”

Evan grunts a no. “You tell ‘im.”

“I’m sure he’d rather hear it from you.” He doesn’t say anything after that, totally checked out. I suppose it’s up to me to inform Jordan that his father’s too drunk to say good night to him.

I’d been trying to circumvent that possibility. From what Jordan told me, Evan’s drinking is an unpleasant habit he’s all too familiar with, but I guess Jordan would rather know his father’s alive on the couch than worry over his whereabouts.

I sit on the edge of the bed. “Jordie?”

“What’s wrong?” He sits up groggily. “Is Dad—”

“Your dad’s fine. He just got home, but he doesn’t feel very good, so he asked me to check on you.”

Jordan immediately hears the lie on my tongue and knows the truth. His eyes tighten, a frown tugging at his mouth. “Thanks. At least he’s...” He doesn’t finish, but I know what he means. He looks away, embarrassed about the sentiment, and pulls the blankets back over his head. “Thanks, Mike.”

I nod and quietly close his bedroom door. The realization sinks in pretty quickly that I’m going to have to get Evan up the stairs and into his room so Jordan doesn’t see him like this in the morning. Maybe I shouldn’t have mouthed off to Ray; I could use his brute strength for this endeavor.

Of course, Evan’s still asleep on the couch when I get downstairs. I jostle his shoulder to wake him up. He lifts his head slowly and glares at me. “What?”

“You need to get up.”

“You need to *shut* up,” he mumbles.

I grab his arm that’s dangling off the side of the couch and tug gently, hoping to convey the message without dislocating his shoulder or something. “C’mon, you can’t let Jordie see you like this.”

He huffs an angry sound; I just know he’s scowling at me, but his face is pressed into the pillow so I can’t be certain. But with Evan there are only scowls, scowls that are directed at me just for existing. It’s very unfair.

Evan shakes his arm out of my grasp. “I can walk, okay?” It takes him a few false starts to get up from the couch. He remains upright for about two seconds before he begins to sway. I’m at his side, righting him, and he scoffs at my assistance. “I told you I can do it myself.”

“Just let me help you.” I’ve got one arm looped around his waist, and the other pressed against the hard muscle of his chest to keep him from tipping forward. We take the stairs slowly, and my limbs feel heavy and wrong at the warm press of his body against mine. I chastise myself for wanting, for enjoying. I have absolutely no business lusting after a widower.

We’re halfway up the stairs when he sways, stumbles, and grabs onto me. He pulls me sideways, slamming us against the wall. His hands are fisted in my shirt, his eyes oddly curious as he looks at the way my arms are planted against the wall on either side of him. When he’d grabbed me, I’d instinctively reached out to stop my fall and ended up blocking him in. Evan’s staring at me in a way that makes my throat tighten and my cheeks burn; it’s not so much angry as it is inquisitive, confused even. I almost want to touch it and memorize how it feels on his face. I bite my lip and drop my arms to my sides, mortified by the way my heartbeat thrums erratically in my chest. Then Evan’s back to looking all scowly again, and he shoves me away with a grunt, dropping his searing stare to the floor as he takes the rest of the staircase alone.

I’m still trying to calm the frantic pounding of my heart when he shuts himself in his room. He was so close, with his disheveled hair and his lazy stubble and his dark eyes.

Now I need someone to help *me* remain upright.

#

Evan

When I wake up, it feels like someone drove a railroad spike through my head. Although I’d slept soundly, distressing visions of chocolate eyes and rosy lips plagued the sightline of my internal cinema. I’d remembered the way he’d bit his lip and glanced away with nervous eyes, though I couldn’t place where I’d seen the gesture before. A vague memory of him, so close to me, had flickered in my subconscious throughout the night. I feel a sense of relief to be awake and freed from the clutches of the torturous nightmare.

I sit up in bed to find two aspirin and a glass of water on the nightstand; Jordan must have left them here for me before he went to school. After a quick shower, I swallow the pills and head out to the bar, the thought of Michael still tugging at my memory.

It doesn’t help me much that he’s there today, casually pouring drinks like he has no idea how he’s thrown my entire world off its axis. But Dave is there too, sitting at the far end of the bar, and his presence helps ground me to reality. To his credit, he looks happy to see me.

“You got a minute?” he asks around a mouthful of food. I’m curious as to what he’s eating, glancing down at the basket of triangle-shaped bread slices in front of him. Dave doesn’t

wait for an answer. Typical. “You need to try these.” He shoves the basket over to me. I’m not sure what the smell is doing to my stomach; I’d skipped breakfast, so I’m probably hungry, but I’m also sort of dealing with a hangover. Decisions, decisions.

“What is it?” I ask, poking at the cup of beige-colored dip with one of the bread slices.

“Pita with hummus. Just try it.”

I narrow my eyes. “Did you make it?” I find this very hard to believe, since Dave’s practically incapable of cooking anything without burning it; this does not, however, stop him from holding yearly cook-outs in his backyard, but most attendees know enough about his, uh, “prowess” to man the grill themselves.

“No, Michael did.” There’s a very good chance this is poisoned, then. “Just try it, it’s amazing.”

I do as he asks. It’s actually really good. I’m about to tell him this when a pale hand sets a glass of water over to me. “What do you think?” Michael asks, giving me a hopeful smile. “Good?” I make a sound that’s supposed to be a yes. “I was thinking about maybe offering food here. Real food, not crappy peanuts or pretzels, y’know?” He shrugs. “I know you’re picky, but Dave is very supportive.” Dave beams proudly at the compliment.

“Let me guess, your childhood dream was to open a restaurant?” I tease him before eating another slice.

That makes him chuckle. “I’m sorry, I get carried away sometimes when I have an idea.”

“Hey, do whatever you want.” I might be slowly devouring the entire basket. “Just don’t draw too much attention to the joint.”

Michael nods and scurries off to tend to the tables. Dave turns on his barstool to face me. “Man, y’know, Michael’s done a great job with this place. It looks brand new.”

I hadn’t really noticed the subtle changes Michael had made here until Dave pointed it out. The floors are hardwood, the walls repainted and retextured. The display case behind the bar is bigger now, filled with more colorful bottles and decanters. But more than that is the change in atmosphere; Michael seems to really enjoy working here, for some reason unbeknownst to me. His enthusiasm is reminiscent of that one kid in school who always went the extra mile on his assignments and projects even if they didn’t require that much effort. The overachiever, basically.

“If he starts serving food here, you guys might actually make a profit this month,” Dave says, stealing the bread basket back from me and frowning when he looks down to see I’ve left him barely anything.

He opens his mouth to scold me for this when a familiar voice sounds behind me and the speaker takes a seat beside me: “Oh good, you’re here.”

The voice belongs to Larry Feldman, our Family's consigliere. Ray has a law degree, but he doesn't practice anymore since his job as underboss monopolizes his time, so Larry handles our legal work and advisement. Larry slips me an envelope with what I'm sure is a wad of bills inside. I pocket the tribute unceremoniously. "So I got a call from Ray," he begins.

I give Dave a look and he makes himself scarce. One of the things I like best about Dave is that he doesn't hover.

"Two of the Jackson brothers—Jermaine and Randy—are coming up, and they'll be here later tonight."

I grit my teeth. The last time those bastards came here... "Why the hell didn't anyone tell me about this?"

Larry gives me an animated shrug. "I don't know, Ray just told me he's making JD go pick 'em up and bring 'em here tonight."

"What business they got here?"

"Something about fencing diamonds?" Larry shrugs again, gives me a "what can you do" face.

"I'm glad you paid such strict attention," I mutter, lost in the new mysteries springing up around me. One, what were the Jacksons doing in New York again? And two, why hadn't Ray told me about this? Come to think of it, why hadn't Michael mentioned it? Surely one of them would have contacted him to tell him they were coming into town. Even with all of Michael's posturing that he doesn't like what his family does, I'm sure at least one of his siblings would have dropped him a line about this.

I stand up and head into the back room, the one reserved for, uh, persuasion—though most of the time we just use it for gambling. I pick up the phone, dialing the familiar number. "Ray, what the fuck? We keepin' secrets now?"

"What are you talking about?"

"The Jacksons. You think I wouldn't hear about that?"

"Ev, I told you that last night," he says with absolutely no enthusiasm.

That stops me. "You did?"

"Yeah."

"You wanna tell me why you're getting these calls and not me?"

He sighs, as if we've been over this before. "I told you that last night too."

"Well, maybe you ought'a repeat it for me since I wouldn't be talkin' to you if I remembered."

"Obviously," he says dryly. "The Jackson family decided to arrange business through me so they wouldn't bother you. They're trying to be considerate, Ev, and give you some space."

I snort a humorless laugh. "A total suck-up move."

"You might wanna cool it with the binge drinking; you'll remember things better."

"Fuck off, Ray. Maybe you shouldn't try to talk me into emptying the bottle."

I can almost see him rolling his eyes at me right now. "You got any more questions? I got shit to do."

I tell him no and hang up. Well, that solves one mystery. When I return to the main room, I look around for Michael. I'm eager to know if one of his brothers notified him about this little trip. However, I don't see him anywhere. I spot Dave and ask him if he's seen Michael. He tells me Michael went into the back room. Since I was in the other back room and Michael was not there, Michael must be in the storage room. It's deductions like these that put me at the head of the family business.

I head into the back and see Michael at the far end of the room. His back is turned, and he's struggling with the door to the storage closet, trying to get it to close. It keeps popping open on him, and his growing frustration is entertaining to watch. He straightens up and huffs out an agitated breath, blowing loose tendrils of hair out of his face, and tries again. No luck. I can hear him muttering curses in a low voice while he fights with the door. The door is winning.

It's only when he kicks the steel door, thinking that no one's looking, do I admit to myself that, yeah, I actually like this guy more than I think.

"Don't let it out-smart you," I say with a laugh.

Michael jumps, caught off-guard by my presence, and I sidle up beside him to show him how it's done. The scent of his cologne makes my heart race; I'm not sure how to feel about this. "How long were you standing there?" he asks, looking up at me. His long, thin fingers are still wrapped around the door handle.

"Long enough." Blood pools beneath his cheeks, and he tears his gaze away from me, focusing instead on the way my hands come to grip the handle. He lets his hands slip down, and I shiver when the tips of his fingers brush over the back of my hand. The touch is menial, but it burns me nonetheless, reminding me of how I should not want to be touched by this man. "Watch, I'll show you." I force the door closed, making sure the suction between the rubber and

the frame holds it in place. The task is performed on auto-pilot, as my brain is occupied with Michael's proximity to me and the sweet scent wafting off of him.

"Oh, I see," he says softly, making my knees a little weak. "I never had my brothers' upper arm strength." He laughs an angel's laugh, and my stomach likes the sound of it a little too much, twisting and coiling in tense waves.

I smirk at him and watch the way his expression changes, the reddening of his cheeks and the way he ducks his head. "I'm sure you made up for that in other ways." I shove my hands into my pockets, resisting the urge to hook a finger beneath his chin so he'll look at me, or tuck a stray curl behind his ear. Acknowledging my attraction to him is enough; I can't go any further. I step away from him to give myself the opportunity to think rationally. "So, what's this about your brothers coming here tonight?"

"Here as in New York?" he sputters out, his brow creased in confusion.

"Here as in the bar."

"Oh no." His shoulders slump as he lets out a sigh, leaning against the cold metal of the storage closet.

"You didn't know?" Detective Obvious.

Michael shakes his head. "Are all of them coming?"

"Just two," I answer, hoping that might ease his worries. "Jermaine and Randy."

"Oh *no*," he groans. His entire body gets into the act this time and slumps against the door.

"Is this a problem?" Does he know if one of them killed June? Or is he worrying about something completely unrelated to my situation?

He licks his lips before he speaks; I wonder what it might be like to lick them for him. "They're very *opinionated* about me not having a wife." He frowns like the words taste sour in his mouth.

"So, what, you think they're gonna take you out or something?"

"Oh yeah, unless they already have someone in mind." He grimaces. "But I doubt that."

"Well, hey, don't worry about it. If you don't wanna go, you can just blame it on me; I'll make you work while they're in town."

Michael stares at me with wide eyes that feel like they're peering into my soul. "You'd do that for me?" he asks, his lips parted in awe. For a moment, I'm lost in thoughts of what those perfect lips might look and feel like wrapped around my cock.

Guilt shakes me back to reality. "Y—yeah, why not?" I shrug. "It's the least I can do."

"Thank you so much!" It happens before I can properly comprehend it. Michael throws his arms around me and wraps me in a tight hug, squeezing me close to his body. The heat of him burns me through our clothes. I'm trying not to think about how the rigid muscle of his body is pressed against mine. My arms dangle limply at my sides, for I know if I return the embrace I won't be able to stop myself from raking my hands through his hair and shoving him against the wall, guilt be damned. "You have no idea how much I appreciate this!" he says as he breaks away before we're officially hugging too long.

I think I do. I feel the void where he was pressed against me. I miss it. "Yeah, well, it's nothin'. Forget about it," I tell him casually, clapping a friendly hand on his shoulder—one more excuse to touch him—as I begin to back out of the room.

"Do all New York gangsters speak in bad film clichés or is that just you?" Michael asks, his teasing laugh wrapped around the words.

"Just me."

Yeah, I definitely like him a little too much.

5. An Offer He Can't Refuse

Evan

Anxiety blooms in my chest that evening when Jermaine and Randy arrive at the bar. I don't think my presence there is required, but I want to make certain that nothing goes awry again.

There's a soft wash of orange light glowing from the chandelier, and aside from me, Ray, Larry, Michael, and his brothers, the tables are empty. Jordan wasn't too happy to hear that me and Michael wouldn't be home tonight; I sent Dave over to the house to keep a watchful eye on him, but I doubt that eased Jordan's worries. Ever since Michael showed up, I've been slowly losing my place in Jordan's life; Dave is a poor substitute for the person my son really wants.

I watch Jermaine and Randy interact with Michael, barely aware of my own surroundings. Jermaine is obviously the joker of the bunch, cajoling Michael and slapping him on the back at random intervals. To his credit, Michael seems to be enjoying himself, but I can see distress creep onto his face when the brothers' conversation slides into relationship territory. Jermaine's babbling on about some new girl of his, and Randy's waxing poetic about his wife and kids. Michael flashes me a brief, worried look, his forehead crumpled in pain, before directing his attention back to his brothers. I feel a powerful urge to go to his side and offer some sort of comfort, but what can I do? Instead I stay seated, listening intently—not like that's hard, considering the bar is practically empty, and Jermaine and Randy don't exactly share Michael's soft-spoken nature.

“What about you, Mike?” Randy says. “You got anything goin' on in your life?”

Michael speaks up in a low voice, almost too soft to hear. “I—I don't—I'm not interested in dating right now.”

I think I actually deflate in my chair a little bit. Why am I surprised? Michael's too busy working here and at the house to even consider dating someone. I straighten my posture, trying to appear unaffected by that emotional atom bomb.

But of course Ray picks up on my distress. “You gonna do somethin' or just sit there jerkin' off?”

Larry tries not to smile at that but fails miserably. I roll my eyes and give a cursory glance to the cards in my hand: an eight, a ten, and a one. “Stay.”

Ray groans and takes another card from the deck.

Over at the counter of the bar, Randy is trying to convince Michael of something. “C'mon, it'll get Joseph off your back, at least. Don't you ever get tired of fightin' with him all the time?”

Michael sighs. “Of course I do, but he's not here now. I can enjoy my freedom—”

“Damn right you can,” Jermaine says. When it’s my turn again I stay, and Ray grows increasingly irritated with his poor luck of the draw. “C’mon, Mike, Joseph’s not here watching over you now. You gotta relax. Look, I got a friend here I wanna introduce you to. Take her out, have fun.”

I hear Michael’s familiar sigh. “I can’t. I have to work.”

I grin to myself at his excuse. I bet he’s thanking me in his head right now. My turn comes again, and I pass. Ray swears under his breath and shows his cards: twenty-five. Larry and I split the winnings before Ray starts dealing again, but I opt out of this hand. I don’t want any distractions.

“Aww, can’t you trade with someone?” Jermaine’s pleading with him.

“I can’t. My boss is a real hard-ass,” Michael says, and I might be imagining the smile in his voice, but damned if I don’t enjoy hearing him talk about my ass.

“Yeah, so I’ve heard,” Jermaine mutters. “Y’know what? It doesn’t matter. I’ll bring her here.” I glance over at them just in time to see Michael’s face flinch like the words are a wet slap.

“You—you really don’t have to—” Michael starts to beg, but he’s cut off by Randy.

“C’mon, it’ll be fun! When was the last time you had a date, anyway?”

Michael holds that awkward smile on his lips, but I can sense the panic racing through him right now.

Jermaine strolls off to the far side of the room to use the phone. Ray perks his head up and gives me a questioning look, but I wave off his suspicion. Jermaine would have to be impossibly stupid to try something so soon, especially when his family’s still in our debt. But let’s say he was planning on sending someone over here to whack me or Ray or Larry. He wouldn’t do it when Michael was in the building. No fuckin’ way. Too big a risk.

Now, if Jermaine and Randy seem a little too enthusiastic to get Michael out of the bar tonight, then I’ll start worrying.

I stand up and move over to Michael, who’s fretting uselessly with a half-full shot glass of whiskey. Michael sees me coming and tells Randy to beat it. Thankfully, Randy obliges. “Well, you look miserable. What did they wrangle you into?” I ask.

Michael sighs and swallows the remainder of the whiskey, making a face at the bitter taste. “Jermaine wants to bring some girl here for me to meet. I really thought our plan was foolproof.”

I find myself smirking. “It can still work. I mean, it saves you from actually goin’ out with her, right? Just humor your brothers and talk to her for a bit, and that’s it.” This doesn’t

seem to be helping him. Michael looks even less happy now; I didn't think that was possible. "What's the problem?" I ask him quietly, leaning in a little closer. "I mean, I don't care either way, but I've never seen a guy fight so hard against goin' out with a dame unless he was gay."

Michael raises an eyebrow. "Did you seriously just say 'dame?' I thought people only talked like that in black-and-white movies."

I ignore his attempt to derail the conversation. "I don't care if you're gay, Michael. I just want you to know you can tell me if you are."

That smile has a story behind it, but I don't pry for details. "I just don't want to be forced into a date, y'know? This is just one more thing my family ignores my wishes on."

He didn't exactly give me a straight answer. I'm about to ask him another question when Jermaine returns from the phone. I head back to my table and join another round of Blackjack.

Depending on who you ask, the rest of the evening was either uneventful or the cause of all of the world's misery. Jermaine's lady friend dropped by about fifteen minutes later, and Michael forced out pleasantries and awkward conversation. She was rather attractive; she was tall and lean—with an almost boyish figure—her skin a soft brown and her dark, voluminous hair twisted in tight curls. She'd introduced herself as Tatiana and spent the entire night fawning all over Michael, laughing a little too hard at his jokes and finding excuses to touch his arm when she laughed.

I was surprised at the jealousy that bubbled up inside of me while I watched her interact with him. I have no real reason to feel possessive of Michael, not now, not ever. Losing June was pure destruction, each day a monumental struggle against the grating drag of grief like shards of glass beneath my skin. But Michael just gives and tries his best and *loves*; how am I not supposed to want that? How am I not supposed to want to fill the voids left behind and feel loved again?

But to see this woman flirt and talk with Michael made me irrationally angry. I tried to immerse myself in a few hands of poker with Ray and Larry, but the distraction did not serve its purpose. Every so often I'd hear her giggle at something Michael said, and the sound only infuriated me more and broke my focus on the cards. To be fair, she did manage to keep Michael talking, and I was able to learn a little bit more about him through what I could hear of his side of the conversation. But that only filled me with more poisonous rage because I hadn't been the one to unlock those secrets.

Ray stares at me over his concealed hand of cards, raising a curious eyebrow. "Ev, you alright?"

"Fine and dandy," I grate out.

He looks over at Larry. "Go get him another gin and tonic, would ya?"

Larry gets up to do just that, which surprises the hell out of me. Usually Larry's the first person cutting me off when he thinks I've had too many drinks. This is how badly they pity me right now.

Ray focuses on me once we're alone. "What's eatin' you?"

"Nothing. I'm fine."

"Your macho posturing is one of my least favorite things about you."

"One of? You have a list?"

"You don't?" I scowl at him. "You're makin' that pissy face again, Ev. C'mon, tell me what's bothering you." Larry sits back down with the drink, and Ray slides the full glass over to me. "Drink. You'll feel better."

I highly doubt that, but I swallow the drink down anyway. I risk a glance over at Michael. He turns his head and locks eyes with me. I feel a strange, jittery high from the contact, as if I've stolen him away from her in this moment. He looks at me through heavy-lidded eyes for a fraction of a second before turning his attention back to her.

If my hand was still wrapped around the glass, I would have crunched through it by now.

My tangle of emotions frustrates me. I should not be feeling this way. The only claim I hold over Michael is that of employer. He isn't mine to feel jealous over when someone else expresses interest in him. He might not be interested in dating now, but the time will come when he is, and what protests could I make then?

Finally, the night draws to a close. My nerves are frayed from the onslaught of rage and despair and desire, my body tensed with the anticipation of new pain. Michael's absently scrubbing down the countertop: his go-to task when he's distressed. I move over to him and lean on the counter, willing him to look at me. I fight the instinct to gasp when his eyes meet mine. "See, that wasn't so bad?" I tease. If he only knew.

Michael ducks his head, hiding his face from me. "I messed up. I messed up so bad," he laments in a quiet voice.

"What'd you do, forget her name?"

He swallows thickly before he answers me. "I—I may have agreed to go out with her tomorrow night."

The pain is sharp, like fire raking over my skin. Had I not already lost so much, I wouldn't be able to live through it now. "You what?"

He keeps his head low. “I didn’t want to be rude. I couldn’t say no,” he stammers out, all apologies and explanations. “It happened so fast, and then—bam—I said yes before I could take it back!”

I try to focus on the exquisite planes of his face instead of the pain, but wild envy flares up in me, throbbing madly with each heartbeat. Michael, you spineless coward! I gave you the perfect excuse; why didn’t you use it?

“Can I—can I leave two hours early tomorrow night?” he begs with liquid brown eyes, oblivious to my sweltering anger.

A lifetime of biting back the worst of my fury keeps me from ruining this moment with honesty. I clench my fists at my sides where he can’t see them and say, “Yeah, go ahead. I don’t care.”

Guilt and anger and sorrow burn in my chest. I finish the rest of my drink before casually walking out to my car.

#

Michael

The next twenty-four hours seemed to drag by endlessly. I was not looking forward to my date with Tatiana, but I didn’t have the heart to cancel. Perhaps if I had met her under some other circumstances I wouldn’t feel so burdened by the expectation of going out with her. It was no fault of her own, but my brothers’. They just don’t listen to me, and now Tatiana has to suffer because of it.

Of course, there was also the ever-present magnetic pull Evan has over me that muddled my thoughts and made it difficult to focus on anything else. Make no mistake, Evan is difficult; he doesn’t talk much, and when he does his words are harsh and angry. But I can see how exhausting it is for him to pretend that he’s fine, how it tears him up when he wants to say more but for some reason can’t. There’s quiet, uneasy tension beneath the surface, but he locks it away and says nothing at all. When he offers a piece of himself that isn’t brimming with fury, I revel in it, wanting him to spill them all. But I know I need to be patient with him.

“Michael?”

I look up at Tatiana, who’s staring at me so intensely I think I might be on fire. “Yes?”

“You okay? You’re zonin’ out on me,” she says with a smile.

We’re eating dinner in a quaint little Mexican restaurant, and I may have ordered a drink or two to boost my mood. But it seems the alcohol is having the opposite effect and putting me to sleep. “I’m fine. Just a little tired is all.”

“You should eat more,” she says playfully, gesturing to my nearly-full plate with her fork. Good advice. I shovel in a forkful of the heap of beef, cheese, and tortilla in front of me. “So, your boss seems scary.”

“He’s”—I search for a word that might obscure my attraction—“interesting.”

She drops her voice to a whisper. “Can you believe he lost his wife? That poor man.”

I feel disappointment at hearing that, yet I’m not sure why. Despite the fact that I’ve concocted silly fantasies of myself and Evan together, he’s still in mourning, irrevocably in love with his lost wife. How can I ever hope to change that? How can I ever hope to change *him*?

“Yeah,” I mumble. “I feel bad for him.”

“You live with him and his son, right? That’s really sweet of him. He must be a nice guy underneath all the scowling.”

“I think he is,” I say around a mouthful of rice. Real attractive. “I’m sure he knows how to be nice, it’s just buried under the grief.” I know that’s true, because the flickers of courtesy he’s shown me are too genuine and vulnerable to be manufactured. Evan’s like a puzzle, and with enough time I’ll put the pieces together and try to make him whole again if he’ll let me.

Tatiana takes a sip of her drink before asking, “Jermaine tells me your father wants you as the head of the business.”

I would have choked if I’d been chewing at that moment. Jesus Christmas. “Did he?” Jermaine must have pulled out all the stops to get this girl interested in me.

She nods. “So what’re you doing here in New York, Michael?”

Running away. Breaking free. I settle for something less melodramatic: “Business.”

“That sounds like a good story.”

“There’s not much to tell. My family owed the Chandlers a favor. I volunteered.”

She studies my face for a moment, which is really awkward because I’m in the middle of eating. “You don’t want to run the show, do you?”

“What makes you say that?”

“You’re here, for one.”

I wonder how to phrase this in a way that won’t offend her if she’s into the whole Mafia lifestyle. “It’s not the life I envision for myself.”

“What kind of life do you see, then?”

“Something more...normal.”

She doesn't look offended or angered by this, more like amused. “You want the whole apple pie life, don't you? White picket fence, two kids, a nice house in the suburbs?”

I feel my cheeks flush, ashamed of my childish desires. “It has its own appeal.” I think part of why I enjoy living with Evan so much is that with him that's basically my life. I've got a steady job I enjoy, and if I close my eyes I can pretend that Evan's my husband and Jordan's our son and we're sharing this little piece of the American dream together.

God, my brain is weird.

Since I was still hungry I decided to get dessert, so we ended up leaving the restaurant around eleven o'clock. Tatiana keeps her arms locked around mine as I walk her home later that evening, and I feel twisted and wrong all at once for craving a different, stronger set of arms.

What is wrong with me? It's not like there's anything wrong with her: she's beautiful, she's nice, she knows my family, so they probably don't dislike her. But I just can't do this. I can't stay away from Evan. I can't stop thinking about him. Meeting him that day in California had planted a seed of fruitless fantasies in my head, and living under the same roof with him now only exacerbated my forbidden thoughts. But it all seems so wrong to fantasize about a broken, grieving man.

We reach the door to Tatiana's apartment, and she turns to look at me expectantly. “Think you can get off early sometime so we can do this again?” Her words are laced with innuendo, and I blush under the weight of it.

I flail helplessly for an answer that keeps her at bay yet doesn't hurt her feelings. “I—I don't know, maybe. I'd have to check my schedule...”

“Well, I'll stop in again sometime and we'll take it from there, okay?”

I find myself nodding. This is the point where I would probably take a step toward her, lean in slowly and press my mouth against hers, but instead I back away and give her an awkward wave before descending down the staircase and starting back down the street.

Well, that could have gone better.

The walk home leaves me with a heavier weight on my shoulders than before. I'm tired and frustrated with myself for being such an idiot, for wanting what is denied to me.

I feel guilty and awful when I walk through the front door of the house. It takes my eyes a moment to adjust to the pitch-black interior of the living room. I fumble my way toward the staircase, blindly groping for the handrail.

“Bout time you got back,” Evan speaks up from somewhere inside the room. I still can’t see very well in the darkness, but I’m willing to bet that he’s on the couch drinking again.

“Sorry,” I say around a sigh.

“So, how’d it go?”

“It was fine.”

“Lucky you.” I’m not sure what he means by that, but the tone of his voice tells me that it’s nothing nice.

I grit my teeth and take the stairs. “Goodnight, Evan.”

“Yeah, it’s a *great* night,” he says, and I can almost hear the sarcasm. “Just wonderful.”

“Try to get some sleep,” I tell him in the calmest voice I can manage. “You’ll feel better in the morning.”

He scoffs an angry sound. “Oh, that’s fuckin’ rich coming from you, Michael. What the hell do you know about suffering?”

I just want to get to my room without inciting an emotional episode. It takes all I have not to snap back at him. *Just apologize. It’s not worth a fight.* “I’m sorry. You’re right, I don’t know what you’re going through.”

“In fact, what the hell does your family know about suffering anyway?”

I grip the handrail with a taut fist, trying to resist the urge to stomp back down the stairs and verbally chew him out.

No, you know what? Screw this. I’m not putting up with this shit anymore. The only reason I even agreed to go out tonight was so I could keep my father’s demands satisfied; if Joseph knew I was dating a woman, he’d be more inclined to not make waves and let me stay here.

I make my way down the stairs so I can fixate the proper amount of scorn upon him. “Look, I can only apologize so much for what my family’s done, Evan, but I had nothing to do with it! Treating me like shit isn’t gonna make the pain go away. What happened to your wife wasn’t fair, but hurting me out of spite isn’t fair either! I have never in my life wanted to be a part of the things my family does, okay?” I’m standing over him, and his eyes are dark and haunted. “That’s why my father let me come here in the first place—he knows I’m not a thug like the rest of them!” His expression tightens, making him look lost. “I am so sorry for what they did to you and your family, but *please*, stop taking it out on me! I’m just here to help you!”

He rakes a hand through his hair, shutting his eyes as if the gesture might make me disappear. When he opens his eyes again, I can see the new pain in his gaze. “Goddammit, I just keep fucking things up, don’t I?” He laughs humorlessly and shakes his head, his other hand balled into a fist on the armrest of the couch.

I navigate around the coffee table and sit beside him a safe distance away, just enough to show my concern and silent support if he wants it, but not to crowd him or make him feel pressured. “It’s all right. I know you’re angry and it just ripples out and affects everything.”

He sighs a sound of relief, his head resting in his hands. “It should have been me,” he murmurs in a tiny, helpless voice. “Why wasn’t it me?” I wait for him to elaborate, and when he speaks he doesn’t meet my gaze. “I—I was supposed to go to the bar that night to let the guys in for a meeting... But June and I got into an argument. We’d been fighting a lot lately. I thought she was cheating.” He gives a small, disparaging half-smile. “I guess it doesn’t matter anymore.” I want to tell him that he doesn’t have to do this, doesn’t have to tread this fragile emotional territory. I can see him struggling with the words, and I know he needs to—wants to—tell someone, and that someone has to be me. That doesn’t make it hurt any less. “Anyway, we got into a fight, and she stormed out, said she’d go over there herself.” I feel sick at the sight of his forlorn expression and the way his hand twists helplessly into his t-shirt. “It should have been me.”

That explains why the bar was locked when I first arrived; Evan had imprisoned his guilt and all of the awful memories inside, but these things have a way of creeping back and nestling in dark corners.

Nausea rocks my stomach when I realize what that dark stain was on the carpet in the bar.

I wish I was better at this; I’ve always been best at communicating with words, but this is a situation where words will only be superfluous or harmful, and I can’t begin to guess the proper avenue to help him heal. I cover his free hand with my own, hoping the gesture isn’t too forward, but it’s all I can give that doesn’t have the potential to hurt.

Evan sort of flinches away from my touch at first, almost as if instinctual, because he sort of relaxes back into it like he wants it and needs the warmth of another human being in his world. He looks over at me, his eyes filled with unfamiliar emotions. “I don’t blame you, Michael. God, that’s not what I’ve been trying to do at all. I’m sorry I’ve been so fucking hard to live with. I can’t help it,” he says, emotion clogging his throat as he drags his hand through his hair again. “I know I’ve forced you to take care of Jordie because I...can’t, and I’m so sorry for that. That’s not what you signed up for.”

I want to tell him not to apologize, that I don’t mind spending time with Jordan, but consoling him that way won’t do any good; he’ll only hate himself for lapsing and pushing that responsibility on me.

“I came here to help you,” I say instead, squeezing his fingers with the slightest pressure.

“You shouldn’t have to.” His words are hot and angry, and he wrenches his hand from mine, balling it into a fist as he stares off at nothing in particular. “You shouldn’t have to put my life back together just because I’m too fucking hopeless to do it myself.” His jaw clenches under the strain of biting back more harsh words.

My chest aches at the sight of him in so much pain. “You’re not hopeless. You’re doing the best you can. You suffered an unimaginable tragedy, Evan. Of course it’s going to affect you.” My instinct is to reach for him again, but I keep it suppressed.

He scoffs a dark, humorless laugh. “Why don’t you just go home and be done with this?”

His words reach into my chest and squeeze my heart. “Y—you want me to leave?” My voice is practically a whisper.

“Just save yourself the trouble.” He exhales a tired sigh before he stands up slowly and moves towards the stairs.

“But I want to stay,” I plead with him, rising from my spot on the couch in a panic. I follow him to the staircase. “I like it here.”

“Why? What kind of life is this for you?”

“It’s pretty much *exactly* what I want!” He looks surprised that I even would say such a thing. “All I want is a normal life and a family of my own—a partner, kids—and a job I enjoy! That ain’t gonna happen if I go back home!”

Evan turns away from me, his breathing sort of shaky. “Well, let me tell you, this is the exact opposite of normal.”

“It won’t be that way forever.”

He kneads his forehead with a hand, the other gripped around the railing of the staircase. “Don’t wait around to find out. I’m fucked up and confused, and you’d hate me if you knew...” He gives me a quick glance, looking as if he wants to say more, before he turns his back to hide the misery in his eyes.

“You don’t have to tell me anything you don’t want me to know.” It’s hard not to reach out and hug him, to try and pull some of his pain into my own heart. “I’m just here to help.”

Evan faces me, his gaze determined and careful. It’s a look I’ve never seen on him before. “Then I’ll just *make* you leave.” He starts towards me, and for a moment I worry if he might force me out the door. But instead he reaches out, grabbing my face in his hands and pulling my mouth to his. Our lips crash violently, but he’s drunk so it doesn’t seem to bother him. I can smell the alcohol on his breath, and I know this is coming from a place of anger and loss and frustration, and that the best thing I can do for him is to push him away.

Instead, my hands grab fistfuls of his shirt, pulling him closer, kissing him back in earnest. His lips are rough against my own, his stubble scraping over my chin. His fingers drag through my hair before one hand drops away and slithers up my shirt. I gasp against his mouth, but it doesn't sound scared or unsure. It sounds like I've wanted this, waited for it. His thumb curves over my nipple, his wide hands wandering over my chest and my stomach. Then he nudges me backwards, shoving me against the front door and sticking his knee between my legs. I grind my hips into his thigh, desperate for the friction, and his teeth bite my bottom lip before he reaches down and tugs on the waistband of my jeans.

I feel my heart in my throat. I can't let him go any further. "Evan, stop." I'm surprised I'm able to sound so forceful, and even more surprised when he actually obeys and backs off. He straightens up a little and stares down at me, his eyes bleeding an emotion I can't identify.

One side of his mouth pulls up into a laconic smirk. "See? It worked." He snorts an angry, dark chuckle, turning away from me and retreating up the stairs. My body doesn't react until his bedroom door slams. I slide to the floor and try to remember how to breathe properly.

No, Mike, you are not going to freak out.

My lips burn from the kiss. I can still feel his hands on me. It's not unpleasant, and acknowledging that makes my stomach twist with guilt and loathing. He was drunk; it doesn't matter what he did or said or made me feel. But I wasn't compromised, and I still kissed him back.

I stumble up to my room and shut myself in, curling up in my empty bed. It's not like I haven't, uh, fantasized about something like this before, but my fantasies certainly never involved me taking advantage of him. How could I allow myself to get caught up in the moment when he'd just poured his heart out to me? The kiss was his way of trying to get me to leave. He doesn't want me here. I shouldn't want him.

I shouldn't...

6. I Want

Evan

“Dad, get up.”

Jordan’s voice is way too fucking loud as he pulls the curtains open, and the sunlight punishes me when it pours into the room. Goddamn it, why is it so *bright*? Even with my eyes squeezed shut, it’s like the light wants to drill through my head.

“No,” I mumble defiantly, pressing my face into a pillow to hide from the sun.

Jordan sighs the sigh of a teenager and sits on the edge of the bed. The mattress jiggles at his weight, and I feel like throwing up. “C’mon, Michael made breakfast—”

“He’s still here?” My body shoots up off of the bed. Not the best idea I’ve ever had. I swallow back bile and blink away the bright white.

“Uh, yeah? Why wouldn’t he be?” He narrows his eyes in sudden realization. “Did you guys get in a fight?”

Immediately, I glance away, looking at everything in the room but him. “There’s a slim possibility we might have done that.”

“What? Why?” I don’t answer, still staring at nothing in particular; the pattern on the comforter holds my interest for a bit. My eyes follow the convoluted swirls. I feel a little dizzy looking at it. Jordan groans an exasperated sound. “Dad, were you drinking last night?”

“A little.”

“You said you were gonna stop...” he says in an impossibly small voice. Well, I’m certainly not winning any Father of the Year awards, that’s for damn sure. “What were you fighting about?”

I scrub a hand over my face. “Doesn’t matter. I made a huge mistake, and I told him I wanted him gone.” My stomach curls with nausea. I’m not sure if it’s from the hangover or my own guilt. “Do I have to remain vertical for this conversation?” Jordan shakes his head no, so I ease myself back against the pillows.

“You wanted him to leave?”

“I don’t want him to, but he should want to.” That made so much more sense in my head.

“What’d you say to him?”

Yeah, I'm not opening that can of worms just yet. "Just...awful stuff. Blaming him and his family for what happened to your mom..." Even the explanation tastes bitter on my tongue. How can I ever expect Michael to like me when I'm throwing baseless, vengeance-fueled accusations at him? "I don't know how I'm going to look him in the eye after this. It's all sort of a terrible, awkward blur." I smash my face into the pillows; they're soft and forgiving. Jordan looks at me with an angry expression. "Why is he still here?"

"I dunno, ask him." He climbs off of the bed and leaves me to my misery without closing the goddamn blinds. Well, great. Not only is my son rightfully pissed at me, but Michael probably is too. And if he's not angry, he's going to want an explanation for that kiss, and I don't have one that doesn't sound completely fucking crazy.

I might be the actual worst person on the planet.

On the bright side, Michael probably won't mention my horrible behavior in front of any witnesses. So I'm safe until Jordan leaves for school...in about ten minutes. Son of a bitch.

I lay in bed contemplating my life for a while until Jordan comes back in with a glass of water and some aspirin, staying begrudgingly silent as he sets them down on the nightstand. There are angry words he wants to form into sentences, but for one reason or another he doesn't say them, lets them linger unspoken in the atmosphere as he leaves.

If this is a sign of how the rest of the day is going to go, I want no part of it.

A little bit later, I hear the front door close. I can sort of see Jordan walking down the street to the bus stop. I fully anticipate that Michael will come up to my bedroom and chew me out now that Jordan's out of the house. So I wait. And wait. Michael, what the fuck are you waiting for, a goddamn bus?

He doesn't come upstairs to yell at me. I don't know how much time passes, but eventually I hear the front door close when he leaves for work. I crawl over to the window to peer out at him, hoping for some sort of insight as to his mood. He seems to be in good spirits, which makes absolutely no sense. What part of my awful, awkward groping session would make him walk away with such energy? Damn it, Michael, you're supposed to be as miserable as I am!

I swallow the aspirin and curl back up in bed. If I'm going to try to figure out what to say to Michael, I need to be running on all cylinders.

#

My feet carry me to the bar that night—the one place I should be avoiding. The wind chills my skin, and I shove my hands into the pockets of my jacket in an attempt to keep warm while I contemplate what to say to Michael. I'd had a vague idea of the proper course of action before I left the house, but as each step carries me closer to him, I feel less convinced of my words and absolutely certain that I will fuck this up.

On the plus side, it's after hours at the bar, so there won't be anyone else there to witness this humiliating social disaster. Evan Chandler: Eternal Optimist.

Why am I panicking? Michael isn't a total stranger; I think we're past the awkward, forced pleasantries part of our friendship. Wait, are we even friends? I've been nothing but a huge asshole to him, and he's taken it like a champ. Forgiving to a fault, much like June is.

Was.

I push down the ache in my chest and approach the bar's front door, peering through the window to see Michael cleaning dishes with his back facing me. I could probably turn around and leave right now, and he'd never know I was here. No one would be the wiser.

Or I could just get this over with. I take a deep breath and open the door.

Michael turns his head at the sound, looking way too earnest when he sees me standing awkwardly in the doorway. "Hey, Evan. Feeling better?" He's got his hair tied back in a way that should absolutely be illegal. I might be obsessing a little too much.

I sit on a bar stool and watch his thin, nimble fingers handle an empty glass, imagining those fingers wrapped around my cock. I wanted to work up to my apology, but just blurting it out seems phony, so I guess I'm just jumping right into it. "All right, look, let me just get this out of the way—Wait, what do you mean, feeling better?"

"Jordie told me you were sick this morning. That's why you didn't come down for breakfast," Michael says, sounding genuinely upset by this particular fact. "I made my famous French toast." He's pouting now. It's really distracting, but I can't tear my gaze away from the disappointed curve of his lips. "Mother's secret recipe." Now I'm thinking about his lips around my dick.

Michael's staring at me like he's waiting for something. He probably wants me to continue the conversation. I snap back to attention and fumble with a reply. "Er, yeah, he would say I was sick."

"Don't worry, I won't tell him what a hangover is."

"I'm sure he knows by now. He was just trying to put a polite spin on things like a good PR agent." I chuckle nervously.

"Is that what you came here for?" His gaze practically slices through me as he raises a perfectly-plucked eyebrow.

"Right, yeah, um, so obviously I was pretty drunk last night, which isn't an excuse for my shitty behavior and the things I said, but I feel like you need to know that alcohol was involved before you make any rash decisions one way or the other. I would like to apologize for any inappropriate touching"—Jesus, it sounds really bad when I phrase it that way—"that might have

occurred on my part, and I would like to possibly make it up to you somehow.” I absolutely need to shut up right now, but the words keep pouring out of my mouth. “I want to make it clear that this isn’t about me trying to justify what I did or said or the way I’ve treated you since you got here. It’s about me definitely owing you an apology and a promise that it won’t happen again.” Michael’s blinking pretty rapidly, like he’s trying to sort through my verbal landslide. “You’re more than welcome to stay with me and Jordie if you want. I don’t want you to leave.”

He looks at me in pointed shock.

“I—I mean, I completely understand if you wanna get the hell outta here after putting up with my crap.” I try to laugh it off, but the sound is weak in my throat. “No one would blame you, not even Jordie. If you don’t wanna stay, I’ll call Joseph and make arrangements.”

Michael looks sort of terrified. I have no idea what to do with this.

“Michael, say something, for the love of God. Otherwise, I’m just gonna keep throwin’ out words and, as you can see, that doesn’t seem to be working.”

“Umm...” Well, that’s *something*. He twists the rag he’s holding in his hands. “Lemme get this straight: you think I want to leave?” I nod. “And this is all because you kissed me last night?”

“Well, that, and the fact that I’ve been pretty shitty to you the entire time you’ve been here.”

“Evan, why would I leave ‘cause you kissed me?”

My mouth drops open as I struggle for an answer. I can’t understand why he isn’t grasping this. “Most people consider that kind of thing sexual harrassment.”

“I kissed you back!” Michael tells me like I’m the biggest idiot on the planet.

“You did?” Did he? Most of last night is a complete blank, but I do distinctly remember kissing him and shoving my hand up his shirt, both of which fall under the category of “unwanted sexual advances.”

“Yes, I did!” He’s laughing at me now. I’m not sure if this is a good sign or not. “I got caught up too, believe me.”

“Then why did you stop it?”

“Cause you were drunk,” he says, leaning in and bringing himself closer to me; it’s really hard to ignore my attraction to him when he does things like this. I have to stop myself from licking my lips at the way his t-shirt hangs and gives me a teasing glimpse of his chest. “You weren’t thinking clearly, and you just told me all that stuff about your wife...” He sighs sadly. “It just didn’t feel right to take advantage of you like that.”

“What if you *weren't* taking advantage of me?” I ask around a tiny, choked noise of distress that Michael doesn't seem to hear. “Purely hypothetical, but let's say I would have kissed you if I was stone-cold sober.” I shrug animatedly to hide the panic and horror brewing inside of me. Michael is never going to look me in the eye ever again. He's probably going to insist that we don't even know each other after this.

His voice comes out in a tiny whisper. “Do you...*like* me?”

I remember my brother's repulsion at how I'd admired Michael the first time we met. I think about what people in our world might say—or do—if they knew. I wonder what June would think of this.

None of it stops me from telling him the truth. “I like you a lot. Probably too much.”

“I like you too.”

We're officially children now, and we need to stop.

He gives me a wide, shy smile but then pulls it back, as if remembering something unpleasant. “I thought you, uh, I thought you weren't into that,” I mumble, staring at the counter. Even though we've both just admitted to a mutual longing, I still can't look at him.

His voice is quiet. “You'd be surprised about a lot of people in this business.”

I wonder what that means and how he knows.

“So, what do we do about this?” Michael asks.

“Well, for starters, you could come home with me.”

He pretends to look offended. “Buy me dinner first, pig.”

“I'm kind of a cheapskate. Can I just take you home and cook you dinner instead?”

Michael actually laughs at that. “I thought you couldn't cook to save your life. This I gotta see.”

I gesture to my parked Mercedes outside. “Your chariot awaits.” He smiles, shaking his head, and I watch his long fingers twist the rag between them and wipe down the already-polished countertop. I want his wide hands on my shoulders, over the curve of my spine, wrapped around my dick. I want them entwined with my own and pressed into satin sheets. *I want. I want. I want.*

I should not want.

I watch him close up the bar and try my hardest only to watch, not to *need*, but when he glides past me, all sharp angles and subtle curves, I feel the horrible burn of my wants. His voice is soft, his gaze a question when he looks at me. “Would you want to try again?” he asks, stepping closer with cautious feet. His hesitation tells me he’s referring to last night’s kiss, and the blood that pools beneath his cheeks confirms this theory. “Just a kiss...that’s it.” Something in my expression causes him to pull back, and he glances away, chagrined. “Or—or not. It’s okay. Never mind. I’m sorry—”

Slowly, I reach out to bring his face back to mine, his cheek resting against the warmth of my hand. Michael watches me intently through the fringe of his lashes, his lips uncoupled. I’m close enough to inhale the heady sweetness of his breath. I need to give him a proper kiss this time, one where my intentions are very clear, but it’s too much too soon. I shut my eyes, furious with myself for having the audacity to want.

With a quick glance to make sure no one’s watching, I take the plunge and bring his mouth to mine.

His delicate fingers press over my chest when our lips meet, languid and chaste. I moan around the kiss, reveling in the taste and feel of him, forgetting all of the reasons why I should not want this. Right now it’s enough to feel, to exist in the moment, to enjoy the warm press of his mouth against my own. His fingers curl in my shirt, like he wants to pull me closer, but instead he inches away to put distance between our longing.

There’s a small smile on his lips when I open my eyes, and I can tell he’s trying to read me for a reaction. “You’re staring,” he teases.

I laugh humorlessly and let out a breath I didn’t know I’d been holding. “Can’t help it.”

That makes him smile wider, and he drops his gaze to the floor, embarrassed by my admiration. “Do you have a better idea of what you wanna do?” he asks, self-deprecating, as if I hadn’t enjoyed myself.

“Oh, I know *exactly* what I want to do. I just can’t do it.” There’s far too much truth in that. Michael looks up at me with those deep, brown eyes, quietly hopeful. “I’m sorry...I can’t.” *I shouldn’t.*

He reaches for my fingers, giving them a gentle squeeze. My hands tremble in his, and I feel the scorch of want and emotion in my chest. “But you *want* to?”

The right thing to do is say no. I need to tell him to forget it happened, or that I was drunk and didn’t know what I was doing. It wouldn’t be a lie, but even if it were, it would be a lie to save him. Michael doesn’t know what he’s asking. He shouldn’t even want this, not after he’s seen the wreckage that is my life. Not when he’ll have to piece me back together.

But Michael makes me happy, and it feels like ages since I’ve felt something good. I should be allowed to have this. Just this one thing amidst all the destruction and damage.

I want this.

“Yeah.”

His smile widens, and he steps closer to me, squeezing my fingers again as he rests his forehead on my chest. I sigh into his hair and lace his fingers with mine, aching for him; the spike of heat that rises in my belly fills me with more guilt than our kiss. “Then I’ll be patient,” he murmurs, his thumbs rubbing small circles over my skin. “I won’t push you into anything you’re not ready for.”

“Course you won’t. I won’t let you.” My lips twist into a smirk, and Michael smiles in return as he stands on his tiptoes to give me a kiss of his own.

#

Michael

If someone would have told me that I’d be dating the devastatingly handsome man I met two months ago in the backyard of my Encino home, I would have laughed in their face.

Well, I’m not actually sure if we’re dating or not. It hasn’t even been twenty-four hours since that night at the bar when we’d agreed to take things slowly. But the boundaries still haven’t been established, and I don’t want to accidentally trip an emotional landmine. I’m not sure what to do. This has never happened to me before. Should I just ask him casually, “So, are we dating now or what?” No, that’s too obvious and totally not casual.

Being around Evan is way more stressful now that we’re sort-of dating. At least when I thought he hated me I wasn’t living in fear of screwing up our relationship.

I’m picking apart a chocolate chip muffin in the kitchen the next morning while I contemplate how I might bring this issue up to Evan. The cakey inside of the muffin is sort of burning my fingers, but it doesn’t scald my tongue when I tear a piece off and stuff it into my mouth.

“These are really good, Mike,” Jordan says, a half-eaten muffin in his hand while he gets ready for school.

“Yeah, but the chocolate in the middle is just overkill, though.” Evan sits back in his chair and raises an eyebrow at me; I feel his stare in my bones. “What’re you trying to do to me?”

“That’s the best part! You just don’t know how to like things,” Jordan pipes up from the laundry room, searching for his Batman sweatshirt from the dryer. He pulls it on over his head and re-emerges into the kitchen. “And did you really just compliment Michael’s cooking?”

Evan looks genuinely hurt for a moment. “I compliment his cooking all the time,” he answers back defensively. “Just because you’re not around to hear something doesn’t mean it never happens.”

“Whoa, that was deep,” Jordan says, clearly not impressed.

Evan shrugs. “Well, I *am* a writer. I have a gift.”

“A gift of writing portentous dialogue, maybe.”

“How do you even know what that means?”

“‘Cause I have a dad who uses words like ‘portentous.’” Jordan rolls his eyes, but there’s an almost-smile there.

At this point, I’m just standing in the kitchen and watching them banter back and forth; I’ve only lived here about a month, yet these boys have become two of my favorite people in the world.

“Don’t act like my vocabulary didn’t help you win that fifth-grade spelling bee,” Evan shoots back.

“Oh please, I earned those Chuck E. Cheese tokens all by myself.” Jordan looks over at me and grins. “Best day ever.”

Evan makes a breathy sound that I think might actually be a laugh. Oh my God, it is. He actually laughed—and not out of self-deprecation or at someone else’s expense. This is truly a sight to behold.

Jordan appears to be in good spirits as he slings his backpack over one shoulder. “See ya, Mike. Bye, Dad.” He walks out the front door and leaves me and Evan alone in the kitchen. I’m bracing myself for the “let’s pretend last night never happened” conversation. He seems like he’s in a decent mood this morning, so he’ll probably let me down gently, but it’s still going to suck.

Evan gets up from the table and comes over to me, close enough to smell the coffee in his mug as he plucks another muffin from the tray and pulls it apart. “You’re gonna be the death of me, Michael,” he says, popping a piece of the muffin into his mouth. His sardonic smile tells me he’s being facetious, but I can’t help but feel a chill of truth in his words.

“Evan...” His name is a breathy sigh in my throat as I try to figure out the right way to pose my thoughts to him. He watches me carefully, staring like he’s not sure where he went wrong. I turn my body toward him and try to gather my courage. I’m scared to voice this, not sure if I’ll like the answers he has to give. But it will only hurt that much more later. “Look, if— if you just want someone to feel normal with again, I get it. I won’t make it something it isn’t if that’s what’s going on. But I don’t want either of us to get the wrong impression, y’know? If you could tell me what *this* is...” I make vague coming-together motions with my hands.

I wait with bated breath for his response. I can't read his face. Wow, not even twelve hours into it and I've already ruined the first sort-of-relationship I've ever had. There's got to be a Guinness World Record for that level of incompetence.

Evan shrugs and takes a sip of his coffee. "I don't know what we have here, but I like it. It feels good, and I haven't felt good in a long time." He brings his free hand up to my face, his palm resting against my cheek. I hold my breath. I can see he's hesitating, testing himself. His mouth covers mine with the slightest pressure before he moves away, satisfied, and heads out of the room.

#

The bar is relatively calm tonight which is no good for my overactive imagination. My mind keeps drifting to thoughts of how my relationship with Evan might progress: a future with us raising Jordan together, living in a house without ghosts. It's silly and old-fashioned, but I happen to take pleasure in those kind of things. And to think my father wants me to oversee a business that makes its name taking advantage of other people.

Joseph should have known better, really.

Evan stops in around one in the morning with Ray and a few other men I don't recognize. They're clearly wiseguys, because they all have that stoic, badass look going on, their faces set on permanent scowl. Their suits are impeccably pressed and tailored, their gold rings and Rolexes a way to flaunt their wealth. When they sit together at the back of the room, they pay tribute, passing Evan envelopes bulging with cash underneath the table. The best thing about working in a bar frequented by mobsters is that they tip extraordinarily well—and why wouldn't they? It's not *their* money.

Every now and then Evan will risk a glance up at me from the table in the back of the room, trying his hardest not to draw attention to the fact that he's doing this. Each time, I grin back at him like a love-sick fool, and each time I notice the corner of his mouth pull up into an almost-smile, like we're privy to a joke known only to us.

And maybe we are. Most people in this business would find our "relationship" a laughing stock—or a punishable offense. Yeah, it's the nineties, and Evan and his crew are formidable, liberal Jewish mobsters, but a lot of these guys are old-world Moustache Petes who still won't work with anyone that's not Italian—a harsh lesson my family learned when we began to come into power. The Young Turks have a more open-minded outlook, but that only seems to extend to whatever makes a profit; what people do behind closed doors is still viewed with an old-world lens.

Dave's been sitting across from me at the bar for most of the night, talking at me about one topic or another. I say talking "at" me because I haven't really been paying attention, too engrossed in the future I hope to have with Evan and Jordan.

“Ford,” Dave says, toying with the neck of his beer bottle.

I sigh. “Do we have to do this?”

“Oh, come on, Michael, this is easy.”

Dave owns a rent-a-wreck nearby, and his thorough knowledge of cars—coupled with my absolute ignorance of most things vehicle-related—has made for a scintillating routine of car-related trivia games. For some reason, Dave insists on testing my knowledge almost every time he comes in; I suppose he hopes some of the answers will stick if he quizzes me enough.

“No, it’s not,” I whine. “Dave, I know nothing about cars.” Except how to hotwire them. But that doesn’t really require me to know which manufacturer makes which vehicles. “I know more about penguin mating rituals than I do about cars.”

He laughs at that. “Humor me, then. Ford.”

I roll my eyes and go with the easy answer. “Pinto.”

“One down, two to go.”

“Since when do I have to have three right answers?”

“Since you got one right.” He grins.

This is gonna be a long night. “Mustang...”

“One more.” He takes a swig from the bottle.

“Monaco?”

He makes a soft buzzing sound. “That’s Dodge.”

“This game sucks.”

“You can be quite the sore loser sometimes, Michael.”

I grab a bottle of his preferred beer out of the cooler by my feet and show it to him. “If I give you another drink on the house, will you leave me alone?”

“Maybe.”

That’s a fifty-fifty chance. I’m willing to risk those odds. I open the bottle and hand it to him. He takes it from me and, thankfully, shuts up.

A sudden draft of cold air floats into the bar, and my entire body shifts to look at the door. Someone walks inside and heads over to Evan's table, where he and the rest of his crew stand up and lead the newcomer across the floor to the back room. I look away immediately when I see where this is headed. Dread knots my stomach at the things to come in that room.

Dave notices my reaction and raises a quizzical eyebrow. "You okay?"

I wonder about his question. Am I really okay? Evan's going to oversee—or participate in, even—a brutal, violent "negotiation." Irrefutable proof that he's as entangled in this business as my father is. Maybe he doesn't get his hands dirty, but that doesn't change the fact that he's involved in it, giving orders. Calling the shots. Causing violence. The top of the family chain.

How am I supposed to reconcile that with the idyllic life I imagine for us?

I close my eyes, not wanting to picture the violence unfolding there but knowing enough to envision it anyway.

"Mike?"

I nod reflexively. "Yeah, I'm good." I twist open a bottle of the nearest alcoholic beverage and pour myself a shot. "Distract me, would you?"

"Pardon me?"

"Just...talk about something."

Dave gives me a curious look but does as I'd asked. "Well, how's Jordie doin'?"

My anxiety unwinds at the mention of Jordan. Of course mentioning the boy would soothe the burn in my chest. "He's great!" I answer honestly. "I mean, considering the circumstances. But we seem to get along really well. He's been showing me around town. But I've been noticing something. It seems like he's happier if Evan's in a good mood."

Dave nods, takes a sip from the beer bottle. "I'm sure he misses his mom, though." His voice sounds angrier than before.

"Oh yeah, of course. I can't even imagine..." It isn't hyperbole; I literally do not want to even imagine how miserable I would be if I lost my mother. "But I think kids adjust easier than grown-ups do. If you break them, they put themselves back together easier because they're still growing. Adults stop growing eventually..."

"Does Jordie ever talk about her?"

"Sometimes. It's usually something like, 'Mom used to do this,' or 'Mom used to do that,' but it's more than Evan says." Not that I can blame Evan. Everyone grieves differently. Some

people like to talk about the person they've lost so that person lives on through their shared memories. Other people lock it all away and let the grief hollow them out.

The slight squint of Dave's eyes frightens me a little.

"What was she like?" I ask timidly.

He takes a deep breath before speaking. "She was beautiful, of course. Loved Jordie more than anything or anyone. He was her world." Dave stares off at nothing in particular for a moment. "Guess he had to be."

"What do you mean?"

"June had...difficulty having more children after Jordie." My heart breaks anew for Evan, Jordan, and this woman I never knew. I swallow the rest of the liquid in my glass. "She tried, of course, but..." His lips part, and he looks as if he wants to elaborate but doesn't.

"Did Evan know?" I feel dirty about delving into his personal business like this, but that doesn't deter me from asking.

Dave nods slowly. "It was gonna be a girl."

His words squeeze around my throat like a boa constrictor. I blink back fresh tears. I've pried too far. I want to run into the back room, wrap my arms around Evan and hold him close, try to shoulder some of the pain in his heart inside of my own.

I stare out into the blackness of the night, hoping he might hear my silent prayers, yet also hoping he doesn't, for then he would know I've unearthed one of his buried secrets.

Well, Dave distracted me, all right. I jump when the door to the back room swings open and Evan and the others step out. I pour myself another shot and swallow it in the hopes that the burn of whiskey might serve as an excuse for my red-rimmed eyes.

"You're still here?" Evan asks me, completely oblivious to the way the earth feels unsteady and frail beneath my feet. "Why don't you head home? I'll close up." I stare at him, uncomprehending, still lost in the dizzy whirl of despair. Evan steps behind the bar to clap a warm hand on my shoulder. "C'mon. Get outta here." He reaches into his pocket and stuffs two crisp twenties into my limp hand. "Take a cab; it's too late to be walking."

I gulp against the lump in my throat. "Y—you'll be okay, right?"

He snorts a laugh. "I can take care of myself, Michael."

"Yeah, nobody fucks with Evan, Mike," Dave offers.

“Thanks, but I work alone,” Evan mutters to him in an aside. He blinks a few times. “Wait, what are *you* still doing here? Go home, Dave. Take Michael home while you’re at it.”

“You sure?” Dave asks.

Evan looks annoyed to even be asked. “One more person second-guesses me, and I’m gonna start throwin’ punches.”

I nudge Dave out the door. “Let’s go.” As we trudge out into the night to his car, the cold chills my nose and fingertips. I shove my hands into my pockets and think about Evan’s lost family on the drive home.

7. We'll Always Have *Thosibusters*

Evan

The next few days pass without any incident, except for Michael's strange, newly-acquired habit of swinging wildly between two extremes: putting distance between us, and doting on me to a weirdly unnerving degree. Not that I don't enjoy waking up to elaborate, sugar-laden breakfasts, or finding a plate of newly-baked brownies in the kitchen when I come home, but his mood swings are sort of giving me whiplash. Some consistency would be nice, or at least an explanation on why they're happening so I can try my best not to trigger the bad ones.

Jordan's sprawled out on the couch, forcing me and Michael to sit way too close to each other while we watch TV. I'm enjoying the warm press of his body, but Michael is all fidgeting and nerves, his spine impossibly straight. I can't work out why he might be nervous here. The only explanation I can think of is maybe he's internally dealing with the hugeness of being so close to someone he's attracted to.

I'm about to tease him over this when the phone rings. Jordan heaves a quiet sigh, and I stand up to head into the kitchen and answer it.

"I need you on the Gardner job," Ray says without preamble.

Dr. Richard Gardner is a potential "protection" payment; he'd served as consigliere under my father, but I sacked him after I came into power. "No, you don't," I tell him.

"What, did ya take care of it already?"

"No, you just don't need me to hold your hand. Besides, this isn't really our area of specialization. Christ, what the fuck do we even pay JD for?"

There's silence on the other end of the line for a moment before Ray pipes up: "We don't pay 'im."

"This is his gig. Give 'im somethin' to do. C'mon, you know I need to be home more."

"You need to be at work too so you can keep your home."

I roll my eyes as hard as I can, hoping he might be able to feel my disdain over the phone. "I thought you wanted to run the show anyway."

"I do, but—"

"Then look at this as an opportunity to take charge."

He thinks about that. "Who are you and what have you done with my brother?"

“Just give the order, Ray.” I hang up the phone and return to my spot on the couch. Michael’s still sitting tense and petrified.

“Are you going out?” Jordan asks me.

“Nah, not tonight, kiddo. I think your Uncle Ray can take care of things.” I lean back into the cushions and resist the urge to drape my arm around Michael’s shoulders. We watch the last thirty minutes of *Back to the Future Part II* before Jordan starts yawning.

“I’m gonna go to bed,” he says, getting up from the couch.

“You sure? *Ghostbusters* is on in a little bit. You love that movie.”

He gives me a half-smile. “I’m really tired.” He says goodnight and climbs the stairs.

When I hear his bedroom door close, I sling my arm around Michael’s tensed shoulders. “You’re not checkin’ out too, are you?”

“I can stay up.”

“Good, ‘cause *Ghostbusters* is amazing, and I don’t think I can live with someone who hasn’t seen it.”

“If I don’t like it, I’m blaming you.”

“If you don’t like it, you have very questionable taste in films. Quick, what’s your favorite movie?”

He thinks for a few seconds. “Um...*E.T.*?”

This is not a very hopeful prospect. “Second favorite?”

“*Home Alone*?”

“That piece of shit?” He’s looking at me like I just admitted to orphan slaughter, complete with a dramatic gasp for emphasis. “Crap?” Michael still looks aghast. I have no idea what to do with this. “Junk?”

“I love that movie!” He answers with feeling, and his hurt expression would be absolutely hilarious on anyone else. But Michael’s look of complete and utter devastation has a way of making you feel really guilty. “It’s so funny!”

I grit my teeth to stop a sarcastic comment from tumbling out of my mouth. No. No. *Home Alone* is not funny. It’s juvenile and childish. “Michael, forgive me for saying this, really, but your taste in cinema leaves much to be desired.”

His face turns into something innocent and bewildered, as if no one in his entire life has ever challenged him on this subject. “You think yours is better?”

“As a matter of fact, I do.” That just makes him frown harder. I nudge his shoulder in an attempt to loosen him up. “C’mon, if you hang around me long enough, I’ll introduce you to plenty of great things.” Totally fine with the implications in that sentence.

As usual, Michael is completely oblivious. “Oh really? Like what?” Or maybe not. Is he flirting back? Is this a thing that is happening?

“Well, obviously we need to introduce you to some real movies. You have potential to like things that don’t suck, since you seem pretty fond of me, so I think we can make this happen.”

He giggles at that, his cheeks pinked with emotion. I don’t think I’m ever going to get used to how intoxicating his smile is.

I’m still really hungry after dinner, and there’s no way I’m going to sit through another movie without some sort of sustenance, but I wonder if Michael will want more food or not.

Fuck it, I’m getting food.

I make my way into the kitchen and pull open the fridge. There’s half an Oreo cream pie in there that I’m absolutely going to finish with or without Michael’s help.

“Hey, Evan?”

“Yeah?” I call back around a mouthful of cookies and cream.

“I was just wonderin’, what do you think you’d be doin’ if you weren’t in the business?”

I shrug, carrying the pie over to the coffee table and plopping back down onto the couch. “Well, my father was a dentist as a side gig, so I guess I would be too.”

Michael raises an eyebrow at the pie. “A dentist with a sweet tooth,” he says, tsk-tsking at me with an adorable grin on his face. “Isn’t that against the rules?”

I stop and think for a moment. “Are there actual rules? I feel like that’s something I should know through some sort of osmosis.” Michael’s in the middle of a laugh when he stops abruptly and fixes me with a frowny glare. “What?”

“Gee, I’m glad you assumed I wouldn’t want any.” He gestures with his chin to the pie container with one fork sticking out of it.

“So you’ll kiss me, but you won’t share eating utensils with me? You are all sorts of weird, Michael.”

He looks at me with wide eyes, his cheeks that delicious shade of pink again, before a smile creeps onto his face.

We get comfortable on the couch, our shoulders shoved together while we watch the movie. I keep the pie pan in my lap, and Michael and I share the fork. It's not like I positioned things this way on purpose to make Michael reach over into my lap for a bite of pie. There's no satisfaction or arousal there at all. Nope. None.

Okay, maybe just a little bit.

To his credit, Michael seems to enjoy the movie. Every now and then he does this endearing thing where he makes a breathy sort of laughing sound. Then, sometimes, when something's really funny, he'll start giggling and making "tee-hee" noises, and it's officially the cutest thing I've ever heard.

When Michael can talk around the amount of Oreos and whipped cream in his mouth, he says, as-a-matter-of-factly, "You could be surrounded by ghosts right now and you'd never know it."

I snort into my glass of ginger ale in a way that is nowhere near flattering or attractive. That makes him laugh harder. "Can you not make bizarre observations while I'm drinking, please?"

"Sorry," Michael apologizes with a grin that tells me he isn't sorry at all. I don't think I mind.

By the time the late-night infomercials are starting to come on, we've devoured the entire pie. I'm kind of impressed. I could use a drink right now, but Michael is so close; there's no way I'm getting up and ruining his proximity.

Michael yawns and leans against me, using my shoulder as a pillow. "Can you imagine how many s'mores you could make outta that giant marshmallow man?"

"Are you still hungry, or is this a purely scientific observation?"

He gives a tired laugh. "I just really like marshmallow fluff."

"Who *doesn't* like marshmallow fluff?"

"Maybe diabetics. Or the lactose intolerant. Or dogs."

I raise an eyebrow. "Dogs?"

"You ever seen a dog eat peanut butter?"

“Okay, point taken.” My fingers play with the long curls draped over his shoulders.

“I should make marshmallow cream brownies sometime.”

“Yes, you should.”

He grins at that. “And I will make you eat them.”

“You seem to be a big fan of feeding me stuff.” I am totally fine with the filthy implications in that sentence.

Michael misses the subtext completely. “What about a marshmallow shake? Do you like milkshakes?”

“I like brownies more.”

“Okay, yeah, definitely makin’ the brownies. And you have to eat them or I’m feedin’ ‘em to you.”

“I’m okay with this.”

“Good,” he teases, closing his eyes and sighing contentedly. He’s warm and lean yet still soft, and he seems like he’s enjoying the way we’re pressed together almost as much as I am. I let my fingers drag through his hair, feel the notches in his spine at the base of his neck. My free hand brushes over his, my fingers grazing over his wrist. It’s warm and inviting, and I can feel the subtle throb of his pulse beneath the skin. Should I curl my fingers around it? Make some sort of loving gesture or just let the moment drift out into the ether forever?

Michael takes the initiative, his fingers wrapping around the breadth of my palm, tracing the knuckles and joints until he randomly pulls his hand away like he’s been burned. I examine my hand, curious as to what may have repulsed him. I don’t think my hands are gross or misshapen or objectionable, but now I’m starting to wonder. Does he think my knuckles are too bony? Are my fingers too thick? Too small? Are the backs of my hands too hairy?

Here’s a better question: why the fuck am I suddenly worrying about my hands? My hands are fine, goddamn it.

That’s when I notice it: the silver band wrapped around my third finger. That was what had shaken him.

My first instinct is to say something, to tell him that it’s okay to touch me or to want me to touch him, but I keep my mouth shut. Because as trusting as Michael is, he’s still a product of this life and this impersonal business; he hasn’t lived this long without suspicion as a defense mechanism. This early in our relationship, words will only be superfluous.

So instead, I grab his hand back, lacing his fingers in mine, and hug him closer to my chest. Whatever this is between us has potential to actually become a thing. Michael's too timid or afraid to start it himself, so it's up to me. Once he realizes that the things he wants from me are perfectly okay, nights like this one can happen again. And I really want tonight to happen again.

I press my lips to his blushing cheek, and he squeezes my hand. "I had fun tonight," he says after what seems like forever. "You're a fun guy."

"You just called me a mushroom."

It takes him a moment to get the joke, but when he does he's giggling and blessing me with the bells of his laughter. "Gimme a break, I'm tired."

"Then go to bed, Tired."

He shuts his eyes and winces like I just pressed the hot end of a curling iron over his skin. "Ow, that joke was so bad it physically hurt me."

"My jokes'll do that to ya."

"They should come with a warning. They really should."

"Since when are you a comedy snob all of sudden?"

"Well, you're a film snob, so it's only fair I get to rag on you for somethin'."

I can't help but smile. "Yeah, I guess that's fair."

Michael sits up and stretches a bit before he gets up from the couch. "G'nite, Evan," he says around a yawn as he heads for the staircase.

"Good night, Michael. We should do this again sometime."

He turns to look at me. "Really? You sure you want to?"

I move to be nearer to him, meeting him there on the staircase, and I risk reaching for him, my hand finding the soft plane of his cheek. "Yeah, I'm sure." He gazes at me with wide, hopeful eyes, and I press my mouth to his. Michael mewls out a quiet gasp but doesn't push me away or do anything to insinuate that the kiss is unwelcome. He curls his fingers in my shirt and tugs me forward. I lick at his bottom lip until he opens his mouth and lets me taste his tongue upon my own. That makes him moan softly around the kiss, his fingers falling away from my chest as his arms hang limply at his sides. I let my palm cup the back of his head and push his mouth harder against mine. I'm lost in bliss, transfixed by the taste of him, and the last thing I want is for him to break away, but that's exactly what he does, pulling his mouth from mine and practically gasping for breath.

“Are you seriously incapable of kissing and breathing at the same time?” I try not to laugh at him but fail miserably.

“Shut up.” He scrunches his face up in a pout and swats my chest. He’s blushing a deep red, but I can’t tell if it’s from embarrassment or my kissing expertise. The demure curl of his lips, coupled with the way he’s trying very hard not to look at me makes my heart stutter for a second. He closes the distance between us and presses a quick kiss to my mouth, grinning a bit at the way my hands immediately react and pull him closer. The curve of his spine likes the way my fingers trace over it, even through the thin material of his t-shirt. I take my time exploring his back, feeling the long valley of his vertebrae and the taut bunches of muscle near his shoulders. His fingers weave into my hair, and I know if I don’t stop now it will be impossible later when we’re palming naked curves and angles.

Michael picks this thought out of my head with such precision I fear he may be psychic. He breaks away from me very slowly, his hands no longer entangled in my hair, but his eyes are honest and tell me that he wants the same things I do. “G’nite, Evan,” he says again, flashing me a smile before he climbs the stairs.

#

The next day, I find JD, Larry, and Ray at the bar, sitting at the same table. They’re all scowling at me with an unnecessary amount of scorn. JD’s got his arm in a pretty dramatic-looking sling.

“The fuck happened to you?”

He gives me a sharp look. “Gardner happened, Evan.”

“You couldn’t stop a sixty-two-year-old man from breaking your arm? Fuck you, you should be dead.”

JD seems to be taking my disbelief as a personal insult. “The crazy son of a bitch stabbed me!”

“So you fucked up and didn’t make the deal?”

“He said he didn’t want anything more to do with the Family,” JD grates out. “When I tried to make an offer, he pulled out a knife and stabbed me in the arm.”

“You should be more careful next time.”

“No, *you* should!” He stands up and tugs me to face him with his good arm. “I don’t buy that you had no idea this guy had beef with the Family. Did you purposely put me in a situation where I could’ve been killed?”

“Any time we show up somewhere, we take that risk,” I say with just a hint of annoyance.

“You knew Gardner wanted to meet with you directly, not with some middle-man speakin’ for the Family! Why couldn’t you show up?”

“I got other shit to handle, alright?” I argue, because the other wiseguys in the bar are starting to look at us, and they aren’t exactly being subtle about it. “Your job is to represent my interests in the public and lead your crew. Why didn’t you take someone with you?”

“Don’t you think your job ought’a be to warn me if I’m gonna be meetin’ with someone that might want to kill me?”

“That’s an understood part of this job, kid. And how the hell do you expect to be respected when you run like a little bitch after a flesh wound?”

JD’s face goes through some sort of complicated anger management.

I need to diffuse this quickly. A caporegime has no right to argue with his superior like this; the fact that I’ve let this go on as long as it has speaks volumes to the other wiseguys. “I assumed that he’d want to kill *me*, since I was the one who fired him. I didn’t think his grudge would extend to the rest of the Family. My bad.” I shrug and clap him on the arm—on his bad arm, because I’m not above knocking my own guys around a little—in a playful manner. JD winces in pain and tries not to swear at me. “Won’t happen again.” I scurry off to the bar for a drink before he can protest.

I’m enjoying my second shot of Jack Daniels when Ray takes the seat next to me. “You’re slippin’, Ev. Gettin’ careless again.”

“Fuck off. It was a simple mistake.”

“So it’s got nothin’ to do with how JD’s sold screenplays and you haven’t?”

I keep my voice even. “Course not.”

“Nothin’ at all?”

“Nope.”

“Nothin’ to do with Dad?”

“What about ‘im?”

Ray shrugs, leans in a little closer. “Well, he made JD capo’, and you’ve got a pretty notorious track record for tryin’ to stick it to Dad.”

It was 1978; I was thirty-four years old and absolutely sick of the life my father had forced me into. I moved out to New Jersey with June and worked on my first screenplay, exiling myself from the underworld I'd lived in for so long.

But this life has a way of catching up with you. One December evening, a group of wiseguys from a friendly Family cornered me in a parking garage and beat me mercilessly. My nose broken, my body bruised and broken, I stared up into my father's dry eyes as he stood over my hospital bed. "Come back to your Family," he said, a coldness to his voice, "and no one can ever touch you again. Your enemies will become my enemies."

I moved back to the Bronx and worked under my father. If I was doomed to a life sentence as a mobster, I would make sure I became powerful enough to never be hassled again.

"That's different," I answer him. "I tried to get out. This was just a dumb mistake. Won't happen again."

"It better not," Ray says, suddenly very serious. "Every time you try to fuck with Dad or his reputation, it always comes back to bite you in the ass." He gives me a pained look that's guilty around the edges. "You don't wanna mess with that, Ev."

"Yeah, I know. I just..."

He looks at me in a way that begs me to continue.

"Why do I have to be a part of this? What about me? What, Jordan's not supposed to grow up and make somethin' good of himself? June's not supposed to live long enough to see our son get married and have kids? Why do I have to sacrifice everything for this job? I don't..." I cut myself off with an abortive head-shake.

I swallow the rest of the whiskey and try to smother my fleeting thoughts of a better life.

#

Michael

Evan makes good on his promise for another movie night, but this time he's more affectionate, holding me close to his chest and playing with my hair while we watch *Spies Like Us*; Evan had said, "Who's not in the mood for Chevy Chase and Dan Aykroyd?" I didn't realize that was a rhetorical question.

Jordan's downstairs in the basement either playing Nintendo or sleeping on the couch. We'd gone out today to a nearby game store so he could pick up a relatively new Simpsons video game. I imagine the game will keep Jordan busy for quite a while tonight, so I don't worry about him seeing us when Evan pulls me closer and wraps his arms around me.

About halfway through the movie, Evan forgets that we're supposed to be watching it and starts distracting me. He's brushing my hair aside so he can kiss my neck, and desire twists in my loins when I feel his hot breath against my skin. I am completely focused on the way his mouth is trailing over the long line of my throat, the way his stubble tickles my skin. One of his arms is wrapped around my waist, his hand settled on my hip. He's warm against my body, and every impulse inside of me is begging to turn and kiss his mouth, to slip my hands under his shirt and feel his feverish heat.

But I don't want Evan to think I'm moving too fast or that I'm impatient with the nice, slow pace we've been progressing at, so these are things I think about instead of actually do—at least until his mouth follows over the curve of my jaw and nibbles at my earlobe. Jesus Christmas, this man is trying to kill me. I tilt my head back and moan at his touch, and Evan finds it appropriate to place his hand on my thigh. I draw in a deep breath; it doesn't help at all, because Evan's warm hand is only inches from my crotch, and that's not the kind of thing you can just not notice. "You're making this very hard."

"That's the point," he says with a grin.

Now he's just being horrendously unfair. "Does that work both ways? Am I allowed to wind you up?"

He lifts his eyebrows. "You can try."

I grin at the challenge, twisting so that my entire body's facing him. I nudge his shoulders back against the pillows and climb into his lap, my knees sinking into the couch cushions on either side of him. I'm unsure if this is too much for him, if I'm pulling when I should be pushing, so I let my fingers play with his hair and ask, "Is this okay?"

Evan nods, sliding a hand behind my back. "Michael, you don't have to ask permission for everything."

"I know, but I want to respect your boundaries."

"I'll tell you if you're not."

My shaky hands lace together behind his head, and I press my mouth to his, soft and slow. He moans around the kiss, one of his warm hands crawling underneath my shirt and flattening against my skin. He traces over the curve of my back with his fingers, and I feel the tingle of electricity that travels up my spine. I let my hand glide over his arm and squeeze the strength there. My hips shift in his lap, and he sucks in a breath, grabbing my thighs. I can feel his need pressed against me, hard between my legs, and I grind into his hips again before he pulls away.

"Michael," he breathes. "Boundaries."

Ashamed of my wants, I rise up to my knees to put distance between us. "Sorry." I blink away hot tears forming in my eyes and feel foolish for the emotion. Why am I crying? It's not

like he said he doesn't want me, he just doesn't want me yet. But I still can't help but feel rejected, unwanted even as his hands are wrapped around my thighs. I wipe my eyes with the back of my hand. "Sorry, I shouldn't have—"

"It's okay." He reaches up and takes my wrists, gently pulling my arms down and kissing my forehead. "It's not that I don't want you, 'cause—believe me—I do, but I don't think I'll be able to stop if things get outta hand. I wanna take this slow. Past a certain point...it starts to feel like I'm cheating." His expression is absolutely painful. "I know that's not—" He stops, rubs a hand over his face. Evan's afraid of how much he wants this, and if that wasn't already obvious, he breathes hesitation into the curve of my throat. "I can't help but feel guilty, Michael. She'll never forgive me."

I wrap my fingers around the curves of his tensed shoulders. "We can wait. It's okay. I don't want to push you into anything." I want to convince him that what we have together is okay, that our false starts and boundaries aren't indications that our relationship is doomed.

"It's not just about sex. It's...everything," he admits, his gaze and voice strangely reverent. "The way I feel when I'm around you... It's real, and God, I want it so much, but it still feels like a betrayal."

I'm way out of my element here. I don't know the right words to say or if there even are any. I don't know if touching him will help or hurt. I just...don't know, and I hate feeling so helpless. I push the warmth of my fingers into his skin, silent apologies for the way his life has gone so cataclysmically wrong. Has my presence here benefited Jordan and Evan or simply ruined this family even more? "Would it be better if I left?" I ask him bluntly, but it sounds self-pitying and that's the exact opposite of what I'm going for.

He shakes his head with a dark laugh. "No, definitely not. Not for Jordie either." The guilt creeps back onto his face. "But the last time I was selfish..." He doesn't finish the thought, but he doesn't need to.

"It's not selfish to care about someone or want affection," I say, "especially when you're hurting. I think that's when we need it the most." My hands fall away and slide down his arms, and he shivers under my touch. "Do you think Jordie is selfish for forming a bond with me?"

"No, but..." Evan frowns, like he's trying to think of a way to give an honest answer yet still hold on to his guilt. "That's different. For him, you're just a friend. For me...we're way past that."

"You don't think you're allowed to feel this way about someone else?" His mouth goes crooked, his eyes tightening at my words, giving me my answer. "Okay, that's noble, but I don't think it's healthy. If you don't feel ready to be with anyone else, that's fine, but if you're pushing back that desire"—I wince at the taste of the word in my mouth, because it sounds too base and carnal for what I'm trying to encapsulate—"because you think you *have* to...it's only gonna hurt you. And it will ripple out and hurt Jordie too." I hate the way my words are coming out;

mentioning Jordan makes it seem like I'm trying to use his son as leverage in an argument instead of being genuinely concerned for his well-being.

But Evan doesn't seem to be hearing it that way. His eyes are softer yet somehow more intense, as if he's taken my words to heart. "Just give me time, Michael. I promise you, it'll be worth it."

"I can do that," I tell him. I'm thanked with a dazzling half-smile, but there's a hint of sadness there because Evan looks like he was expecting me to say no. "But it really doesn't seem fair for you to tease me like that. I want you just as bad, but I can't do anything about it." I frown at him. "You know how frustrating that is."

"Hey, not all of my ideas are good," he says with a self-deprecating shrug before he reaches up and tucks a curl of hair behind my ear. "But this is worth it, Michael. I know it is. *You're* worth it."

Feeling brave, I give him a quick peck on the lips, which he quickly turns into more by cupping a hand around the back of my head. I can feel the tension in his muscles as he holds me there, like he's never had to learn restraint before now. His fingers are tangled in my hair, keeping me pressed against him, and his other hand slides up my shirt to feel the rise and fall of my stomach beneath his palm.

"We should get back to the movie," I mumble around his mouth, my heart thumping madly.

Evan nods and pulls his hands away. "Good idea."

8. He Knows Too Much

Evan

The next few days are...interesting. Jordan spends them in a cloud of misery and broodiness directed at me and Michael for reasons I can't begin to understand. I chalked his surly attitude up to the usual teenage hormones kicking in, because I can't think of what I might have done to earn his scorn—well, that's a lie, but nothing I've done *recently*. He's pushing Michael away too, and Michael's been nothing but welcoming and loving to practically everyone he makes eye contact with, so I can only assume Jordan's disgruntlement is a phase. Nothing personal. Considering what he's gone through, I can't fault him for acting out a little; I certainly did my share of that since June passed.

It was painful watching Michael try to connect with Jordan when he's in a constant sour mood. Offers that Jordan would have once taken Michael up on were instead harshly rejected. Perhaps wanting to stay out of the house, Jordan began spending more time with his friends. I couldn't exactly argue against that; it was a healthier alternative to imprisoning himself here, so, again, I said nothing in opposition.

"Maybe it's a delayed reaction," Michael says one evening while we're on the couch flipping channels. He's wrapped in a quilt, sitting with his legs crossed and sipping a mug of hot chocolate. "You started mourning instantly, but maybe he stuffed it all into some internal suitcase and suppressed it."

"And it's just coming out now?"

Michael nods. "Maybe he's realizing that this is all real, that it's not getting any 'better.'"

"He seemed great when he was with you. You get along pretty well with him."

"I'm still not his mother," Michael says quietly. "But that's sort of the role I take on here, so he might feel like I'm trying to replace her."

I wonder about that. It makes sense in a way. Jordan didn't know how long this arrangement was going to last; I'll bet he figured Michael would stay for a week or two to help me get the bar running again and then go back to California. The longer Michael stays here, the more it appears to Jordan that Michael is appropriating June's role in our lives. Like we're erasing her.

"Should I try to talk to him about it?"

"If you think it would help." Easy for him to say when he's not the primary target of Jordan's fiery anger. Seriously, Michael's getting off extraordinarily easy here. It's actually really unfair. "I could be totally wrong," Michael says with a shrug. "But...I don't think it could hurt. At the very least, he'd know you care enough to ask." He gives me a sad smile that corkscrews through my heart. "I wish my father had cared enough to ask how I felt about things."

Well, that clinches it. I climb the staircase and knock quietly on Jordan's bedroom door. He doesn't answer, but the light is on from inside, so I twist the knob and walk in anyway. Jordan's lying in his bed reading a comic book. He looks up at me over the pages, and the simmer of anger in his eyes is familiar and terrifying; he picks the worst times to look like his mother. I swallow back the clotted emotion in my throat. "Hey, kiddo." I make my way inside and sit on the edge of the bed. "There's something I wanna talk to you about, but I don't want you to get mad."

Jordan scoffs. "That's promising."

"I know we don't talk about things that much anymore, but we should." He exhales an angry "get on with it" sigh. "If I'm wrong, tell me why I'm wrong, but I just wanna know why you're so upset with me—and Michael too." Silence. "So what's going on? Problems at school? You know we won't be mad at you if you're having trouble in one of your classes or something." He shuts his eyes, and his shoulders tense up. "Is that what's wrong? Or is somebody giving you a hard time? A teacher? Another kid?" This conversation would be so much easier if he gave me words I could use. Without them, I'm just sort of flailing helplessly.

"Like you care."

Okay, great. Words. They're not exceptionally revealing words, but they're still words. "Of course I care! I know I'm busy a lot with work, but I'm trying to be home more. Do you think I'm around more?"

"Yeah, 'cause Michael's home," he mumbles quietly.

I try not to get frustrated with him, because at least Jordan's attempting to communicate with me by using words instead of annoyed grunts or death glares. "Are you mad at Michael, too? Did he do something?" He scowls particularly hard at that. I have no idea why I'm asking this, but I have to make sure. "Did he...make you do anything you didn't want to do?" I hope I'm wrong. God, *please* let me be wrong. I really don't think Michael's the kind of guy that will put us in a situation that needs to be explained with dolls.

He sits up to glare at me with the proper intensity. "No! God, Dad, that's—No! Ew! Why would you even—"

"I don't know," I sort of whine. "C'mon, I had to ask, just to be safe."

"No, Dad, believe me, I'm not his type."

What the hell is that supposed to mean? "Do you—do you *want* to be?" Apparently this conversation *can* get more awkward and uncomfortable. I really didn't come up here expecting to discuss my son's sex life.

He gives me a horrified look. "No! Why is that your first—Okay, no, this makes a lot of sense, actually."

“Wait, what are you talking about?”

“Why you’re so focused on Michael being a sex-crazed pervert.” I wait for him to elaborate. I have no idea where he’s going with this. “Because *you’re* a sex-crazed pervert! Don’t even act like the reason you’re home more often isn’t just ‘cause you wanna make out with him on the couch!”

It takes my train of thought a moment to comprehend that confusing, convoluted accusation, but when I do my brain comes to a screeching halt. “What? No, Jordie, that’s—”

“Oh, please, do you really think I’m that stupid? That I can’t see what’s going on between you two? It feels like you’re cheating, right?” My heart clenches in recognition of his words; he’d heard us that night Michael had tested my boundaries. “Well, maybe you are!”

I shouldn’t be surprised at his ruthless attack; June had been the same way when we argued. “Do you feel like Michael’s trying to replace your mom?”

“You really have no idea, do you? And since when have you been able to talk about Mom? I’ve been trying to talk to you for weeks, but you kept getting drunk or pissed off at me! You’re the one who’s always talking about not cutting off communication, so why the hell should I have kept trying when you wouldn’t even follow your own rules?”

“Everyone handles things differently. And I handled that the wrong way. It wasn’t fair to you, I know.” I breathe out a deep sigh. “I shouldn’t have kept this from you. I—I just wanted to protect you.”

“Protect me from what? Finding out that you don’t love Mom anymore?”

A choked noise of distress bubbles out of my throat. “That’s not—No, that’s not what’s going on.”

“Then why? How?” Jordan looks up at me through watery eyes like I’ve wounded him in the most tragic way possible.

The moment drags on while I try to find a proper way to express my feelings. I reach for him, and he doesn’t pull away, letting me wrap my arm around his shoulders. “Jordie, of course I still love her. I always will. Just because a person dies doesn’t mean your feelings for them die too. You know that.” He nods grudgingly. “What’s going on with me and Michael...we’re taking it very, very slow. I don’t think your mom would want me to be miserable all the time like I’ve been feeling, y’know? Michael makes me feel good. I know he made you feel better when he first came here, so maybe you can kind of understand what it’s like for me.”

Jordan doesn’t seem to know what to say to that. He tries to look sympathetic, but it’s a poor effort—I can tell he doesn’t want to disguise his irritation with me.

“It’s different,” I admit, “but please, try not to give us such a hard time over it. I’m trying to heal just like you are, and Michael’s here to help us with that. Is there anything I can do for you?”

“I guess...just don’t spend all your time with Michael,” he says, trying to sound casual.

I nod and rub his back before I stand up to leave. “I think I can do that.” I flick off the light switch. “Now go to sleep. It’s late.” Jordan crawls under the blankets, and I shut the door for him and head back downstairs.

Michael cuddles closer to me on the couch when I sit with him again. He doesn’t say anything for a while, just rests his head on my shoulder and twines a hand in mine. When he speaks, his voice is soft, understanding: “Did he say anything?”

I internally debate telling him the truth. Michael’s so sensitive, and for him to know that our relationship is distressing Jordan would just give him one more reason to pull away from me.

But hiding things and keeping secrets—even if I feel like it’s in Michael’s best interest—will only hurt us in the long run. A large part of why June and I fought so much was because we kept secrets from each other. I need to be honest with him. “Yeah, he’s...he’s pissed about us.”

Michael’s countenance crumbles, devastation rippling out from him like a nuclear wave. “Oh no...”

“It’s not about you,” I assure him. “He’s mad at me. He thinks I don’t love her anymore.”

I didn’t think it was possible for Michael to look more upset. His range of heartbroken facial expressions is impressive, if not tragic in itself. “Maybe this is a mistake,” he says after a moment of silence, his voice laced with sorrow.

His words slice through the tender muscle of my heart. “Michael, no, don’t do that, okay? This is worth it. I know it is.” He looks up at me through thick lashes. “Besides, Jordie’ll be fine. I told him that you make me feel good, and I think he can kind of understand that.” I reach for my glass of whiskey on the table. “We’ll see how this goes.”

#

Michael

I wake up the next morning dressed in my pajamas in Evan’s bed. Well, I guess we didn’t have sex last night. Or maybe we did, and I put my clothes back on afterwards. Or maybe Evan re-dressed me after, which is really weird and creepy and I need to stop wondering about these things.

The sunlight leaks in through the spaces between the curtains and warms the room, giving everything a buttery glow. I become aware of a warm presence behind me, around me, and I realize one of Evan’s arms is clasped around my waist, holding me close to his chest. I can feel his warm breaths on the back of my neck. It’s all very relaxing.

One of his hands creeps beneath my shirt, caressing my stomach, and I trace my fingertips over the back of his hand. That's when he suddenly sits up in a rush, and I feel his warmth leave me. I roll over to get a better look at him, curious as to his sudden panic. He's fully dressed too, wearing the same sweats and t-shirt he had on last night. "Evan?"

He whirls around to face me, and he's staring at me like I'm some sort of ghoulish hallucination. Then he drags a hand through his unruly hair and groans, shutting his eyes in pain. My throat swells up. Suddenly, I'm ashamed to be here. He wants my presence in his bed to be an awful nightmare. For him to react this way, someone I care for so much...

I don't even notice my tears until they're trickling down my cheeks. "Fuck, Michael, don't you dare," Evan growls, but I can hear an edge of pain underneath. "Don't do this to me. Please, please, don't tell me this shouldn't have happened."

"I—I'm not..." I struggle to say more, but the words won't come out. If I'd gotten the privilege of touching him, I would have burned the feel of his skin into my memory. The way he felt inside of me would have changed me irrevocably. But I don't feel different. I don't remember his mouth on my skin or his hands caressing my body. "We didn't do anything."

Evan lets out a sigh that relaxes his entire body. "Are you sure?"

I nod, wiping my eyes as last night's activities come back to me in waves. "We just had a few drinks. You talked about June...and Jordie. Then you tried to take my clothes off, but I wouldn't let you." I laugh at the memory. Evan's face sort of closes off, like he's angry about that particular fact. "You were fine with that, and you wanted me to stay anyway. So here I am."

"That doesn't sound like me," he says with a frown.

"Being emotional and horny when you're drunk seems like a recurring theme with you."

He's not angry, because I can't feel the frustrated displeasure emanating from him. His face is sad and forlorn and doesn't suit him at all. I feel bad now for wanting him to learn new facial expressions. "How much did I..." He drags his hand through his hair again. "How much did I tell you?"

"Nothing you'd regret, I think. You talked about how you met June, how happy she was when Jordie was born... Things like that." He seems satisfied, slowly lying back against the pillows and shutting his eyes. I move closer to him, wanting to be nearer if he desires my presence. "Do you want me to go?"

Evan shakes his head, his eyes still closed, but his fingers find my wrist and wrap around it. "No. Just...lay back down for me." I do as he asks, lying beside him and resting my head on his chest. He sighs contentedly, his fingers tracing lines up and down my arm. I tug the blankets around us to shield our bodies from the chill in the air. He relaxes against me and pulls me closer. "You're sure we didn't do anything?" he murmurs. "You wouldn't lie to me, would you?"

I shake my head, placing my hand on his warm stomach and feeling it rise and fall beneath my palm. “We’re okay. I promise.”

We lie there together for some time, neither of us saying anything, just basking in the presence of each other’s company. He kisses my hair and strokes my arms, his hands gentle and never pushing for more than just the slow slide of skin on skin. The soft sounds of his breaths lull me into the relaxing cusp of almost-sleep. When I blink myself awake, I ask him, “What’re your plans for today?”

He huffs out a breath, twirls a strand of my hair around his finger. “I just have to call the beer distributor to get the new kegs into the bar, then maybe meet Ray for lunch.”

“Let me take care of that.” I turn my head so I can press my lips to the bristly line of his jaw. “You can spend the day with Jordie—just the two of you. Go see a movie or somethin’.” One of Evan’s confessions last night was that he wants to spend more time with Jordan; this would be the perfect opportunity for him to do so.

“There’s nothing good out now,” he grumbles. “The only thing that wouldn’t suck is that new Disney movie, and that’s not out ‘til Wednesday.”

“Maybe he’s got an idea for somethin’ to do.”

“He’s got school today anyway.”

“No, it’s Thanksgiving break, remember?”

“Shit, really?” He scrubs a hand over his face.

“Don’t worry,” I say with a laugh, smoothing the wrinkles in his t-shirt with my fingers. “I’ll take care of the cooking. You just focus on being a dad.”

“Michael, you don’t have to...” He sighs sadly, something deeper tugging at the edges of his frown. “June—we hadn’t done Thanksgiving in a while...”

“I want to. Even Mother is okay with Thanksgiving dinner!” Evan smiles at my enthusiasm, and I scoot up in bed to kiss the pleasant curve of his mouth. “Go on, go back to sleep. I’ll make breakfast.” I force myself out of the warm cocoon of blankets. “Do you want me to bring you anything?”

He shakes his head. “I’m okay. Thanks, Michael.”

I close the door behind me and let him heal.

#

Jordan and Evan spend the next couple of days together, and I gladly make myself scarce, working extra hours at the bar to give them the time they need. Jordan's still sort of surly with me, and I can't begrudge him for that, but I'm happy to see that he seems to be softening to his father's attempts at bonding.

This afternoon they'd gone out to see a movie, so I used my free time to call home and talk to Mother, updating her on my situation—tactfully leaving out the whole “I'm dating my boss” thing—and sneaking in a request for her apple pie recipe.

When they came home, Evan got called in for a meeting, so he went upstairs for a shower. Jordan helps me slice the apples for the pie in fume-y silence. Maybe he's upset that he's going to be left alone with me while his father's out.

I'm not expecting him to just blurt it out against the silence. “Michael, why are you dating my dad?”

My hand slips while I'm chopping an apple, and I nearly slice off one of my fingertips. Apparently the boy inherited his father's bluntness. I feel my face turn a humiliating shade of red as something reaches into my chest and squeezes. Is he upset that I intruded on his life? Does he only want me as a friend and not a potential member of the family? Does he just want nothing to do with me at all?

“Well...I like him,” I answer. “He's nice, he's funny...he's a good guy.”

“Don't confuse laughing *at* him with him actually having a sense of humor.”

“I think I see a side of him that you don't. Yeah, he's grumpy and egotistical, but I genuinely like him.”

Jordan makes a face. “Does dating turn everyone into a ten-year-old girl, or is that just you?” I chuckle to myself, slicing more apples. He takes the opportunity to twist the proverbial knife in my heart. “You know he still loves my mom, right? He's not gonna love you like he loves her.”

I know he's trying to wound me, and while it does hurt, I can't be angry at him for it. I imagine I might react the same way if my father had another woman in his life that wasn't Mother. “I would never try to take her place, Jordie, or come between you and your dad. Honestly, you're part of the reason I like it here so much.” He gives me a bewildered look. “Your dad makes me happy, but so do you, in your own way. I'm here to help both you guys—around the house, with the bar, with anything. But if you want me to go, it's equally up to you and your dad. I'd never stay if you didn't want me here.”

Jordan stares at me like he can't understand why I would say something like that. “Seriously? You'd do that? My dad would be so pissed.”

“I know, and I’d sure we’d both be sad, but your feelings matter to us too.” He thinks about that, looking sort of shocked by the sentiment before going back to slicing the apples. “Do you think you’d want that? For me to go, I mean,” I ask softly.

He’s about to answer when Evan comes down the stairs, dressed more attractively than he has a right to be. He’s wearing a dark brown, pinstriped suit that practically screams “mobster.” I’m not sure if I should be terrified or turned on; I settle for twenty percent fear and eighty percent arousal. “Hey, Jord’, are you okay staying here with Michael while I’m out?”

I hold my breath waiting for his answer. Jordan nods. “Yeah, I’m good.”

Evan gives us a weird, pleasant sort of smile that actually reaches his eyes. “Great, I’ll be back in a little while.”

I really want to tell him how good he looks right now. He looks good ninety percent of the time, but tonight he’s exceptionally attractive, like maybe he’s putting some actual effort into his appearance instead of just letting it happen naturally. But Jordan probably wouldn’t appreciate hearing me say his dad looks hot so soon after we’ve sort of made amends. So I settle for a flustered “Oh—okay,” as Evan walks out the door.

Smooth.

Jordan keeps an eye on me for a moment after Evan leaves and I go back to slicing the apples. “You were totally checking him out, weren’t you?”

This time I come dangerously close to slicing off one of my fingernails. “No! Why would you think I was—”

He snorts a laugh. “Oh man, you would *totally* crack during an interrogation. I’m actually embarrassed for you.”

Well, at least he’s comfortable enough with me to start teasing again.

#

Evan

It’s fifteen minutes ‘til noon, and I’m in the kitchen with Michael, my hand fisted needily in his hair while my body pins him against the counter. His mouth opens around mine, and he lets out a breathy sigh of my name and tugs at my shirt. Michael places a hand over my heart, as if trying to heal it, and crushes my mouth against his. “Does Ray *have* to come here?” he whines in a way that makes him sound all of twelve years old.

“It’s Thanksgiving, Michael. It’d be pretty sad if it was just us and Jordie.”

He pouts and spreads his fingers out over my chest. “But I wanna be able to touch you.” That makes one of my eyebrows jump up, and he laughs, lightly smacking my arm. “Get your head outta the gutter. You know what I mean.”

I really should tell my brother that I’m dating Michael, but I have no idea how to break this news without risking the threat of violent, apoplectic swearing. Ray seemed adverse to me even *thinking* about someone else, so the actual reality of this situation might give him a coronary. It’s a fifty-fifty chance, but I don’t want Michael’s first Thanksgiving to be emotionally scarring and embarrassing.

“Well, then maybe we should tell him,” I murmur, trying to sound casual about it.

Michael toys with the gold chain around my neck. “You really don’t think he’ll have somethin’ to say about that? You *have* met your brother, right?”

“He’s gonna figure it out eventually. He’s not a total idiot.” I slide a hand underneath his flimsy shirt collar, caressing the back of his neck. “Michael, in this business secrets get you killed. I won’t lose anyone else I love just because I didn’t want to have an awkward conversation.” The words tumble out before I can stop them, and I’m left sort of gaping at him. Michael’s lips are uncoupled in surprise, his face redder than I’ve ever seen it.

My first instinct would usually be to make a joke out of it, to say something like, “But I love nachos too, so we’re using the word in a very loose sense here.” But I can’t laugh it off with humor now, because it’s only been mere months since I lost June yet here I am calling Michael one of the people I love.

I just told him I love him, in a weird, totally unplanned way.

My body refuses to calm down, sending panicked surges of adrenaline through my veins that are very unhelpful.

Fuck.

This is bad.

Jordan swings open the basement door, interrupting my moment of terror. Michael and I break away from each other as a reflex, which is ridiculous because Jordan’s very well aware that we’re dating. “Dad, I’m hungry. Can we just start eating now?”

I lift my gaze from Michael’s stunned eyes to the neon numbers on the microwave above his head. “You can wait ten more minutes. He should be here by twelve.”

“You sure he didn’t say twelve at *night*?” Jordan grumbles as he surveys the fully-prepared table. “C’mon, Mike, I spent all last night and this morning helping you cook this stuff. The least you can do is give me an early bonus.”

I don't like being left out. "Hey, I helped too!"

"You threw a body part at me," Jordan hisses, making a face as if the memory alone is distressing him. "That cancels out your help."

While Michael and I had been preparing the turkey, I casually tossed the bishop's hat—a triangular piece of the bird stuffed inside its, uh, stuffing cavity—over at Jordan while he was lying on the couch watching TV. The look on his face had been priceless, because it wasn't borne out of horror, but the realization that, "holy crap, my dad just threw a body part at me." Both me and Michael had shared a good laugh. Jordan thought it was pretty funny too at the time, so I don't know what he's complaining about now.

"I think we all unanimously decided that was hilarious," I tell him.

"Dude, it was, but I think you lose helper points for that."

Michael pouts. "Don't take away his points." He's faking dejection so well it's actually sort of scary.

Jordan's about to argue something about choosing sides and the unfairness of it all when the doorbell rings.

Ray's brought his girlfriend Nathalie along with him; she works at the bar on the shifts Michael doesn't, so as a result they've built a decent enough friendship. She seems to get along with him better than my brother does, which is a bonus for Michael—he'll need someone to have a pleasant conversation with today.

"So, Jordie," Ray starts as we're stuffing our faces full of delicious sustenance, "you still got your nose buried in those comic books?"

I roll my eyes, and I can see the way Jordan holds back an eyeroll of his own, like he's worried I'll scold him otherwise. "Yeah, I guess."

"Y'know, when your dad and I were your age, we were helping our dad pass notes." I want to stab him in the arm with my fork. Counterfeiting is not appropriate dinner conversation.

Jordan raises an eyebrow. "I got in trouble passing notes in class once."

Ray chuckles to himself. "Not those kind'a notes."

I cut him off with an accusing stare before he can clarify. "Ray, shut up, don't tell him that."

He reaches out and pulls off a piece of the bread cornucopia centerpiece. "Aw, c'mon, Ev, you know this is what June wanted. She was always smarter than you." And look where that got her.

I glance across the table at Michael, who's staring down at his plate with a dubious look and trying very hard to look like he's not listening, before turning my glare back to Ray. "Don't start."

"So," Nathalie pipes up way too casually, "this is really good, Michael! Where'd you learn to cook?"

He smiles at her, thankful for her elimination of the tension building in the air. "I liked helping my mother and sisters out in the kitchen when I was growin' up. Plus, I have a big family, so it made more sense to cook stuff at home rather than go out."

"The dressing is really good," she says around a mouthful of it. "Are there bacon and mushrooms in here?" Michael nods with a proud smile on his face. "You should give me the recipe sometime."

"Don't be seduced by his cooking, Nat," Ray warns her. "He ain't interested anyway." I think he's trying to be playful, but honestly it's really hard to tell with my brother. "Isn't that right, Michael?"

Michael looks over at him with pure terror in his eyes. He looks like a deer that's caught in the headlights of an oncoming eighteen-wheeler. "I would never try to steal your girlfriend from you," he answers honestly.

Ray barks a laugh. "Can you believe this guy? He's a riot!"

I'm staring at my plate and praying for the earth to swallow me.

He gulps down a swig of beer and offers the bottle to Jordan. "Take a sip, Jord'." Jordan scrunches up his face in disgust and veers away from the scent wafting out of the top of the bottle.

I'm really considering stabbing my brother with a fork. Or the butter knife. "Ray, quit it. Don't give my kid beer."

He scoffs in a way that tells me he thinks I'm overreacting. "What, Dad gave us worse when we were Jordie's age! Put some hair on his chest!"

"Yeah, well, sometimes I wish Dad would've kept us as kids a little while longer."

Ray makes a "hmm" noise. "Suit yourself," he says with a shrug.

After dinner, Michael and I work in the kitchen, cleaning up and storing leftovers while Jordan, Nathalie, and Ray take up the couch watching the football game. Nathalie's sitting on Ray's lap, which looks absolutely hilarious because he's so short. They may or may not be

making out, but the fact that Jordan's sitting on the opposite side of the couch, his body language illustrating the theme of discomfort, tells me that, yeah, they probably are.

I'm dipping a piece of the bread cornucopia into the bowl of olive oil dip as Michael stores a foil-covered pan of potatoes in the fridge. He catches me stuffing the whole piece into my mouth. "Pig," Michael mutters under his breath with a laugh, swiping his thumb over the side of my mouth to scrub away a trickle of oil. He closes his lips around his thumb, gazing at me with half-hooded eyes. He'd probably kiss me if I wasn't still chewing the obnoxiously large piece of bread I'd shoved in my mouth. "Didn't your mother ever teach you table manners?"

I swallow and give him a wide grin. "What're you gonna do, spank me?"

That makes him blush, and I love that I can do that to him. It's like a super-power. "You'd like that too much." He sticks his tongue out at me.

"Put that tongue away unless you're gonna use it."

From the couch, I hear Ray say to Jordan, "Aw, c'mon, your dad ain't lookin'!" I don't even want to know what he's trying to coerce my son into.

"But I am listening, Ray. Watch it."

"Ah, you're no fun," he grumbles.

Michael cleans the dishes by hand that won't fit in the overstuffed dishwasher. I stand beside him, and while I wait for him to hand me a plate to dry off, I slide a hand over the spot where his shoulder meets his neck. I squeeze, all soft pressure and warmth, and he tilts his head back ever so slightly and moans low in his throat.

The sound of the refrigerator door popping open makes me pull away, but it's just Jordan, reaching inside for a can of soda. "I see enough of that around here lately," he says to Ray as he walks back to the couch.

Michael wiggles a clean plate at me and flicks beads of water onto my shirt. I frown and dry it off, trying to eavesdrop and listen to what Jordan and Ray might be talking about. They don't say anything else that piques my interest, so I turn my complete attention back to Michael and help with the rest of the dishes.

When we're finished, Michael's loading the dishes into the cupboards above the sink. I casually twirl the dishrag and snap it, smacking his ass. "Ow!" he yelps, looking over at me and laughing at my attempt to appear totally innocent of any mischief. "You are rude." Michael grins and lightly whacks a hand against my stomach.

About an hour later, Jordan loudly announces that he wants pie, which prompts Nathalie to agree and ask Michael what he made for dessert. "Oh, I have apple pie, sweet potato pie, and pumpkin cheesecake cake," he says proudly.

“Cheesecake *cake*? Oh my God, I have to try this!” Nathalie says.

Ray makes a face. “Why didn’t you make pumpkin pie? Everybody makes pumpkin pie on Thanksgiving.”

“Well, I’m not everybody,” Michael says. I almost expect him to stick out his tongue, but Ray probably wouldn’t find the gesture as endearing as I would. “Besides, I ran out of butter and pie crusts. But I had two cans of pumpkin left, so…” He shrugs and pulls open the basement door.

I’m at his side like a magnet. “Michael, why are you goin’ down there?”

“I put the desserts in the basement fridge ‘cause I figured we wouldn’t have enough room up here after storing everything.”

“I can help you carry something.”

He places a friendly hand on mine for a second too long. “I’m carrying food, not anvils,” he reminds me, gentle and teasing. “I got this.”

I let him go into the basement, my gaze lingering on his vanishing form. Ray clears his throat, making me startle to attention. “What?”

He stomps over to me and grabs my sleeve, dragging me down the hallway to the laundry room. He pulls open the garage door and yanks me inside before shutting the door behind him. That’s when he unloads on me: “You sick bastard! I can’t believe you actually did it! You’re fucking Michael, aren’t you?”

“Wha—no!”

“You’re fucking him! I know it! I see the way you two look at each other, all right? So don’t act like I’m fuckin’ stupid!”

“Ray, you were the one who accused me of, and I quote, ‘undressing him with my eyes’ within the first few seconds of meeting him. Maybe you just have a very strange fixation,” I say, pretending to sound concerned for his well-being. “You should get that checked out.”

“Look, maybe I pointed it out, yeah, but I didn’t mean you should actually *do it!*” Ray’s entire body gets into the act of his sigh. “I can’t believe I put gay thoughts into my vulnerable brother’s brain!”

“Vulnerable?” My brow hurts from creasing so hard.

“C’mon, if anyone in this family was gonna end up queer, it’s you.”

“What?”

“Look at you, you scruffy fuck.” He sort of slaps my bristly cheek. “Your refusal to shave is a huge middle finger to the whole code of conduct.”

The amount of sense he’s not making is formidable enough to power a small town. “What? How do you even—? Because I have facial hair, that means I’m gay? Do you listen to yourself?”

Ray glares at me like he’s trying to make my head explode with his mind. “It just means you’re more likely to spit in the face of the whole institution, is all. You break one rule, you’ll probably break others.”

I heave a frustrated sigh and rake a hand through my hair. “Alright, look, yeah, I’m sort of...dating Michael—”

“I knew it! I *knew* it! You piece of shit! You and June were together for over twenty years!” I feel the twist of the knife and the guilt curdling in my gut. “And it took you, what, a couple’a months to move on?”

I wince inwardly, knowing I deserve all of his hate but wanting none of it. “I—I haven’t *moved on*, okay? You never really move on, you just...make room for the pain and keep going.” Ray rolls his eyes and looks like he wants to gag. “I don’t really understand it myself, but it’s new and it’s different, and goddamn it, I deserve something good! Do you really think June would want me to be miserable all the time?”

Another eye-roll. “Oh God, don’t tell me Michael told you that shit. You can’t trust him, Ev! Of course he’s going to tell you whatever feeds into your own selfish wants—”

“Oh, *you’re* going to lecture me on selfishness? This should be informative.”

“He’s just telling you what you wanna hear—”

“Fuck you, all right? This thing I have with Michael—it’s *good*. And I haven’t had anything good since June—” I stop, unable to give voice to the word, yet also crushed beneath the truth in his vitriol.

“What about Jordie?”

I swing at him immediately, full of disgusting rage at his attempt at manipulation. Ray catches my fist before it can strike his face. “Michael has done more for Jordie than you *ever* have, so don’t pretend like you care about my son just so you can keep me miserable!” I yank my hand away, my fists still trembling with the anger bubbling beneath the surface of my skin. “You think I wanted this to happen? You think I wanted to lose her?”

“I’m just tryin’ to figure out why,” Ray says, one side of his mouth pulled up into a wry smirk. “This is a hell of a time for a midlife crisis.”

“Why don’t you just mind your own goddamn business?”

“Are you forgetting everything that his family’s put you through?”

“I know, I know. But he’s not like them. And he didn’t—He wasn’t—” I let the ending of that sentence taper off into the ether. But Ray knows what I meant.

“Are you seriously fuckin’ a guy?” He winces and shudders like just knowing about it means he has to picture it in vivid, pornographic detail. For some reason, I think this is the part that upsets him the most.

“I’m not—It’s not like that. Not that it’s any of your business, but we’re taking things slowly.”

Ray’s about to say something but stops, his eyes going wide and helpless. “You’re not having sex?”

“None of your business, Ray.”

“At all?”

“What fuckin’ part of ‘none of your business’ are you havin’ trouble with?”

“Whoa, whoa, wait a sec’ here.” He ignores my rage, lost in the implications. “Are you tellin’ me you’re actually *in love* with this guy?”

I squirm uncomfortably, feeling trapped by the question and his pointed gaze. I had almost said the same thing to Michael earlier today. “I don’t know. Maybe a little.” Admitting it doesn’t feel wrong, but it doesn’t feel right either.

He shakes his head and lets out a harsh laugh. “Man, what would June think?”

“I know she hates me.”

“Yeah, I sorta hate you too. What else don’t I know about you, Evan?” I don’t answer, but Ray just glares, trying to pull a response out of me. “You should be ashamed of yourself.” I stand there helplessly as he swings the garage door open and storms out with angry strides. “Nat, we’re leaving!” he calls into the dining room. I hear the distant clacking of her heels against the hardwood floor.

“But I wanted to stay for dessert,” she whines.

“Not happening,” Ray growls.

“Goodbye!” she calls as he practically drags her to the front door. “Thank you for the lovely dinner!”

Slam.

Well, that went just about as well as I expected. Better, actually. I was dreading some sort of food fight or chairs being used as weapons.

Jordan watches me curiously when I emerge from the garage and into the living room; I guess he can tell from the expression on my face that I didn't go into the garage for fresh air. Michael's standing in the kitchen wearing the saddest frown I've ever seen plastered on his face.

"Evan, what did you do?" Michael asks, almost exasperated.

"Dad, did you and Uncle Ray get into a fight?"

"N—no!" I frown at how quickly they came to the conclusion that I was at fault here. It's not like all my brother and I do is argue. Okay, maybe it is, but Jordan shouldn't know that. He's twelve.

"Really? 'Cause he seemed like he was pissed at you all day," Jordan says.

"You know Ray; he's always like that. It's how he compensates for drawing the genetic short straw," I joke, hoping it might ease his worries.

"Yeah, I guess..." Jordan shrugs noncommittally and goes back to his plate of apple pie.

Michael is not as easily swayed. He folds his arms over his chest and frowns at me. "Evan, seriously, what did you do? Did you tell him he was adopted or something?"

"Ray knows," I say plainly.

"Knows what?"

I roll my eyes. "Why they keep changing the taste of Coke. What do you think?"

"He knows about us?"

"Yeah."

"Oh." How can one word hold so much pain?

I walk over to him and slap a comforting hand on his shoulder. "Don't worry about him, Michael. He's a dick."

"What part of it bothers him the most?" Michael asks, looking at me with enquiring eyes.

“I’m pretty sure he hates everything about it. We’re both guys, your family’s put ours through some serious crap...” I trail off, hoping he gets the jist of it. “But y’know what? I’m not gonna let him make me feel bad about it. Whatever we have between us—love, lust, friendship—it’s really good. You make me happy, and Jordie’s better off having you here too. So screw him.” I open up the plastic dish encasing the cake. “C’mon, let’s eat. I wanna try the cake you made.”

He gives me a smile that’s worth all of my brother’s vitriol.

9. A Better Life

Michael

I catch Nathalie that evening when she comes into the bar an hour early for a drink before her shift starts. After I serve her blueberry margarita, I present her with a generous slice of the pumpkin cheesecake cake I'd made. "I'm sorry about yesterday. I brought you a peace offering." I try a light smile.

Nathalie stares at the cake, then looks up at me. "Why are you apologizing, Michael? It's Ray's fault. We argued the whole way back to his house. He thinks you're brainwashing his brother." She rolls her eyes and takes a sip of her drink.

"Brainwashing?" I sputter, shocked at the accusation but not entirely surprised. Of course Ray wouldn't trust me. "Where'd he get a crazy idea like that?"

She shrugs, digs into the slice of cake. "Beats me. I guess he doesn't trust you or your family."

Can't say I blame him. "Did Ray say anything about why he left?"

"Yeah, he thinks you're banging his brother," she says. I make a gasping-choking noise and feel my face heat up. "But I told him he's full of shit."

"Why would he think that?" I croak out.

"Somethin' about how Evan's been 'different'"—she uses finger-quotes around the word—"since you came around."

My hands start to shake, so I hide them behind the counter. "Really? That's...interesting." I'm aware that Ray knows, but I never thought he'd open his big mouth and tell another living, breathing soul. "Well, you're right. He's totally off-base."

Nathalie smirks over the rim of her glass. "Better tell that to Evan, 'cause I think he's into you. Or he wants to be."

"What?" Had she seen our shameless flirting when we thought no one was watching?

"I saw how close you two were sitting on the couch. I could tell he wanted to put his arm around you or touch you somehow."

I raise an eyebrow. "That's...oddly observant."

"Also, he sort of looks at you like you're something to eat."

A tingle burns up my spine at the thought of Evan's mouth around me, how his stubble might feel against my thighs. "Well, you're not completely wrong. We are sort of...dating."

"Sort of?"

"We're taking things very slowly—like, glacial pace slow." The distant sound of a door being burst open distracts me for a moment, but I figure it's Ray or one of Evan's shady crew members going into the back room.

"You're shittin' me, really?"

I shrug. "I guess it's strange, considering the circumstances." My damned curiosity can no longer be contained. I sneak a furtive glance over to the back door. It's ajar just an inch or so, but I can make out well-dressed shapes hiding in the dim lighting.

"It's not strange, it's just..." Nathalie searches for the proper word. "Well, okay, it's strange, but strange doesn't have to mean bad. I just never thought Evan was interested in guys, especially with the way Ray talks." I cringe inwardly. I can only imagine what comes out of his mouth. She finishes off the slice of cake. "This is really good, by the way. Thanks for bringing it!"

"Not a problem." I opt to refill her margarita, but she politely declines.

The back door swings open, and Evan steps out, looking particularly handsome today. He flashes me an overconfident smile and a wink. "Michael. Nathalie."

She glances over at him. I wonder if she sees him differently now that she knows about my relationship with him. "Hi, Evan. Ray with you?"

"He doesn't seem to be speaking to me today." Evan focuses his attention on me. "Michael, could you hand me the wine key before you head out?" It's late, and I'm tired, so it takes me a few moments of searching to remember I'm not looking for an actual key.

"To your left," Nathalie tells me, trying to be helpful. The shiny corkscrew edge glints in the light. I grab it and hand it to Evan.

"Somethin' on your mind?"

I shake my head and give him a small smile. "Just tired."

Evan doesn't argue with that, taking the wine key from me and disappearing into the back room again. I say good night to Nathalie and push the front door open. I make it about a block in the wintry weather before I realize I've forgotten my coat.

Nathalie laughs at me when I walk back inside. "Forget something?"

“Everybody’s a comedian,” I grumble, grabbing my coat from where I’d stashed it in a large compartment on the right-hand side behind the bar. I’ve made a habit of special-ordering my winter clothes from Janet’s boutique; as a result, my coats and jackets are eye-catchingly unique, and I’m paranoid about someone stealing them, so I keep them behind the counter.

A sound not unlike someone hitting a pillow makes me look in the direction it came from. The back door is ajar again, open just wide enough for me to see Evan standing inside the room. Two men I don’t recognize are holding another man’s arms behind his back—his nose is bloodied, his mouth gagged. Evan has the wine key in his hand, the corkscrew jutting out like a blade. Bile rises in my throat, and I turn my head away. But I hear the sound of flesh splitting open. A glutton for punishment, I look back just in time to see Evan throwing punches, each blow precise and impactful. The expression on his face is frightfully still, as if this is just another day at the office. Like he’s not beating another man to jelly.

I don’t need to see anymore.

With nausea churning dizzily in my stomach, I stand up and pull my coat on, hurrying out into the blistering cold. I struggle to keep myself together on the walk home without breaking down. While I walk, I concoct excuses to tell Jordan, rehearsed words that are detached enough from the truth that I could speak them without discomfort.

The tears begin to flow when my shaky fingers have trouble putting the key into the lock of the front door. I finally manage to get the door open. I survey the living room and the kitchen. No sign of Jordan, which is good, because there’s no way I’m going to be able to lie my way past the tears.

I find him in the basement playing video games. I swallow back the lump in my throat and find my voice. “Jordie?” I call down to him.

“Yeah, Mike?” He pauses the game and turns his head to see me at the top of the staircase, but it’s dark and far enough away that he can’t see the devastation etched on my face.

“You won’t be upset if I don’t cook tonight, will you?”

“No, I got pizza rolls. I’m good.”

“You sure?”

“Yeah, it’s fine. Don’t worry about it.” He hesitates for a moment. “You okay?”

“I’m fine, I’m just really tired, and I think I’m comin’ down with something.” I sniff for emphasis, but the tears help sell it.

“Should I make something for Dad when he gets home?”

I can feel my control slipping at the mere mention of Evan. “No, it’s okay, Jordie. That’s not your responsibility. He’ll be fine.”

“Oh, okay. I hope you feel better.”

“Thanks.” I shut the door and find the staircase to the second floor, blindly stumbling up the steps to my room. I let the tears flow freely while I turn on the shower. The water is hot on my skin, but I barely notice the temperature, too tightly gripped by a deeper, more personal pain.

How can I fight the gnawing realization clawing in my gut that Evan is very much a mirror of my father? To see him hurt someone like that, his face indicative of absolutely no remorse... What kind of future do we have if he’s going to be entrenched in violence? Is this the kind of life he’s going to raise Jordan into? Jordan doesn’t seem very interested in pursuing his father’s line of work, but I know better than anyone that doesn’t mean he won’t be pushed into it.

But Evan can’t be like Joseph. Evan accepts me for who I am and doesn’t try to change me or mold me into the person he wants me to be. Sure, he’s grumpy and mopey a lot, but considering with what he’s had to deal with I’d say grumpy and mopey are pretty good defenses. Evan knows my position on violence yet he still wants to be with me. That has to mean something, right?

He can’t be like Joseph.

He just can’t be.

#

Evan

The house is pitch black when I park in the garage about two hours later. I check the fridge first, eager to see tonight’s incentive for a prompt shower. Nothing new. This is unusual. Michael was supposed to cook tonight. Either he shirked his duty, or he and Jordan didn’t leave me any leftovers, which is just plain rude. I’m gonna have to have a talk with him.

Jordan’s not in the basement, and when I climb the stairs his bedroom light is out, so I assume he’s sleeping. Michael’s door is closed, the lights switched off. Oh. Well, this is new. What’s he hiding? *Who* is he hiding? I knock quietly on the door. His soft voice sounds from the other side. “Who is it?”

“It’s me. What’s the deal? You didn’t leave me any dinner? Some boyfriend.” I hope he can hear the teasing in my tone.

“Sorry. I wasn’t feeling good.” He sounds like his face is mashed against a pillow.

“Well, I can fix that.” He can’t see the wiggle of my eyebrows, so my innuendo is wasted. I turn the doorknob. When I get inside, I’m underwhelmed to see Michael lying in his bed with the blankets pulled up to his chin. I was expecting a far more scandalous scene.

Michael lets out a tired sigh. “Evan, what are you doing in here?”

“Just wanted to make sure you’re alright.” I sit on the edge of the bed, and he curls himself tighter into the blankets. “You didn’t seem sick when I saw you earlier.”

“It’s my stomach,” he murmurs, his eyes closed.

I place the back of my hand against his forehead. I notice how he sort of pulls away from my touch. “I’m going to refrain from making a ‘you’re hot’ joke, but your head’s pretty warm.” His mouth shows no signs of humoring me. “Oh man, not even a smile? You *are* sick.” I comb my fingers through his hair, and he seems to relax. Then something stiffens his shoulders and makes his eyes glisten with wetness. “What’s wrong? Want me to get a bucket?”

He licks his lips and furrows his brow. His eyes are focused on my hand in his hair. “There’s blood—on—on your sleeve...”

I turn my wrist to inspect the damage. Just as Michael had said, a spatter of blood stains the cuff of my shirt. “Oh well, I’ll soak it.” His brow furrows impossibly further. “What, you think you’re the only person around here that knows how to work a washing machine?”

“You sure don’t act like it,” he says with a small smile before his mouth turns down again. He doesn’t offer anything else.

“Well, let me know if you need anything, okay?” I tell him, standing up to leave. “I’ll even make you some soup or hot cocoa or something if you want. Just don’t tell Jordie I offered. He’d never let me hear the end of it.” I laugh to myself and pull open the door.

Michael speaks up timidly. “Wait...come back. I—I need to ask you something.” I cross the distance from the door to his bed and sit near him. “Please be honest with me. Do you want to stay in this life forever?”

“I don’t *want* to,” I say, stressing the word. “Why?”

He watches me with an expression I’m not sure how to read yet. “Are you always as...*hands-on* as you were tonight?”

“What are you talking about?”

Michael glares. “Evan, I saw you, okay? I know you didn’t use that wine key to open a bottle.”

I remember that one of the first real conversations I’d ever had with Michael centered around his dislike of his family and how he isn’t fond of violence. I choose my words carefully, hoping none of them upset him. “I don’t enjoy it, if that’s what you’re thinking, but sometimes it’s the most prudent thing to do. I don’t want to be the kind of person who does this. I’m trying

to put more responsibility on Ray's shoulders so he can take over eventually, 'cause...' I choke back the sentiment, closing my eyes.

Most people in this business take pride in this life, revel in the power and prestige that comes with it. Not me. Looking at Michael here, his wide eyes full of promises of a better life, no made man has ever been as desperate for a way out as I am now.

"Anyway, this is not the life I would have chosen for myself."

His expression softens a little. "What would you have chosen?"

I shrug, tempted to blow the question off altogether, because he's asking about a life I'd stopped envisioning after it became painfully clear that it would never happen. To allow myself to think of it now...

But Michael isn't asking to be hurtful. Michael is all warmth and love and compassion, and if he knew my dreams he'd probably work to make them come true. That's just the kind of person he is. So I make myself say it. "Jordie and I used to write screenplays together. I'd like to make movies, maybe have someone to share it all with."

Michael smiles, slowly reaching out for my hand. "I thought you said you were gonna be a dentist like your father?"

"That's what I would be doing, not what I *want* to do." He nods like something about that speaks to him. The worried tension in his face is gone. "You aren't really sick, are you, Michael?"

He looks genuinely terrified.

"Oh, c'mon, I'm a father. I can spot a faked illness a mile away."

He frowns at me for a moment before he exhales a heavy breath. "How did you know?"

"You looked magically healthier when I answered your questions."

#

Michael

It turns out that Evan's actually passionate about something that doesn't offend my sensibilities. Ever since he'd told me about his dream to write movies, I ask him about it over the next week to see his eyes light up in that magnificent way of his. It's a rare thing to see, because Evan Chandler is not in the business of giving genuine smiles. So when he does, it makes my chest swell and my heart soar.

Tonight, I walk home from the bar in relative calm, knowing I'll have the house to myself. Evan's been spending more time with Jordan these days, so I have no doubt that they'll be out tonight as well; I think Jordan mentioned something about going to the movies this evening. So,

when I get home I skip the task of preparing a huge dinner in lieu of ordering take-out. I spend the evening on the couch, watching *The Simpsons*, *Cheers*, and *Seinfeld* while eating beef lo mein and egg rolls.

Jordan comes home during *L.A. Law* and is clearly distressed over whether or not I left enough food for him. I hear him pull open the fridge and groan in despair. “Aw, Mike, seriously? You ordered Chinese and didn’t save me any?”

“I figured you and your dad would probably grab something while you were out,” I tell him. “But I’m awesome and ordered for you anyway. Open the oven door.”

He does as he’s told and finds the bag of take-out boxes. “Oh, sweet, thanks!”

“So, where’s your dad?”

Jordan rolls his eyes and sits next to me on the couch. “He got called out, of course,” he explains around a mouthful of fried rice. “Won’t be back for a while.” He’s faking nonchalance, but he’s not very good at it.

“How was the movie?”

“Oh, my dad wanted to go to the mall instead.” He shrugs. “Said he needed something.”

“What was it?” Evan Chandler buying retail? Perish the thought.

Another shrug. “I stayed in the arcade for a while, so I don’t know where he went.”

“Maybe it’s a present for you.”

“I doubt it. Mom was always better with that stuff.” We’re quiet for a moment before he speaks up again. “Can we watch something else?”

We find a terrible horror movie on another channel and spend the next hour or so laughing at it before Jordan goes upstairs for bed. I drift off on the couch for a bit, waking only when I hear the sound of a door being opened. The light is on in the hallway leading to the garage, so I suspect Evan is finally home. But I don’t see him. I hear sounds coming from the laundry room, the metallic sound of lids being banged shut. “Evan?”

“Yeah?”

“You okay?”

“I’m fine.” He emerges from the hallway sans shirt, and it’s like the temperature in the room rises twenty degrees. I cross my legs as I watch him walk across the room. “Jordie alright?”

“Yeah, he’s in bed. Where are you going?”

“Shower,” he mumbles out, climbing the stairs.

“Don’t you want to eat first?”

He shakes his head, and I hear his bedroom door shut.

It isn’t until hours later when I’m fast asleep in bed that I see him again. The unnaturally loud click of my bedroom door jolts me awake, and I open my eyes to see Evan standing in the doorway, his eyes emanating exhaustion and distress. The second thing I notice is that he’s mostly naked, his boxer shorts the only article of clothing on his body. I’m too tired to be aroused by this, which is a shame because this is the most I’ve ever seen of him. His body really is a thing to be appreciated, and if I were more lucid I’d be trying to memorize the feel of it under my hands.

“What’s wrong?” I ask sleepily, stifling a yawn.

“Let me in.” His voice is soft and tender underneath the command. I nod in understanding and peel the blankets back for him. Evan shuffles over to the mattress before crawling into bed alongside me without a word. His cold feet brush over my calf and make my skin jump.

“Ah, your feet are freezing!”

“You’re warm,” he mumbles dreamily, gathering me in his arms and pulling me close, pressing my back against his chest.

“You’d be warm too if you wore clothes, you caveman,” I tease.

Evan just grunts, pressing his face into my shoulder and holding me tighter. Once his body has siphoned some of my heat, his warm exhalations of breath against my skin help lull me back to sleep.

In the morning, I wake up to find that my limbs are awkwardly splayed and tangled with his like I’m some sort of horny sock monkey. One of Evan’s hands is nestled in my hair, the other still latched around my waist. My face is sort of burrowed in the space between his chin and his chest. I can’t see if he’s awake or not, but judging by the fact that he hasn’t shoved me away I’m guessing he’s still asleep. It feels nice, natural to lay here with him like this. It’s the most intimate we’ve ever been, and since one of my legs is hooked around his hips, my heel sort of pushing his crotch into mine, I’m anticipating things might get a lot more intimate.

I can feel the hard heat of his dick against me, and there’s nothing I want more than to nudge my hips forward and engorge the foreign line of his arousal. My own cock would certainly appreciate the friction. But I know Evan wants to take things slowly, and I could never forgive myself if I pushed him into something he didn’t want just yet. So I detach my legs from him and put some distance between our need.

After a few minutes of pretending to be asleep, I feel his fingers come to life in my hair, combing lazily through the tangled curls. I don't say anything, instead letting my fingertips trace over his spine and the hard muscle of his back. He sighs contentedly into my hair. "I'm sorry I didn't say good night to you last night," he says lowly, and I can't help but smile because that's such a small, sweet thing to apologize for.

"It's okay. You were tired."

"If that's what you wanna call it." He shrugs slightly.

I wait a moment before I ask the question hanging in the air. "Why did you come in?"

"I didn't want to be alone."

I understand without him needing to speak another word.

#

I don't think he's even trying the next time it happens.

Evan shows up at my bedroom door, his eyes vacant of that lost, guilty look that had been there last night. He's staring at me with an intense gaze, and the fact that he's only wearing boxers this time around too makes me believe that, yes, he totally thinks this is a *thing* for us now.

"Evan, if you wanna sleep with me, just say so," I say with a grin. He smiles back, but it's sad around the edges. He comes over to the bed and slides in beside me. While he's cradling me to his chest, I ask, "Is this going to be a recurring thing? Should I avoid sleeping naked?"

His body goes stiff against mine, and I feel the slight swell of his dick against the curve of my ass. "You—you could come into my room if you want." He shrugs, like he's trying very hard to distract himself before it becomes too much. "But, uh, I don't think I could handle you naked yet." He inhales sharply, his brain probably picturing it against his will.

"I was teasing, babe. I won't push you."

He hugs me tighter, and I feel his lips against my shoulder. "I know. You're good about that. I appreciate it." He lays a hand over the hot curve of my stomach. "I was thinking...maybe we could—maybe we could try sometime."

I'm still sort of sleepy, so I'm not exactly at my sharpest. "Try what?"

He sighs against my skin. "Cross-country skiing." I can practically hear the way he's rolling his eyes at me. "What do you *think*?"

“Oh.”

Oh.

“Is that a yes? A maybe?”

I place my hand over his. “You know I want to. But I don’t want to push you into anything you’re not ready for yet.”

“If I wasn’t ready, I wouldn’t be asking.”

“Then you’re ready now?” I sit up and turn to face him, moving to straddle his hips. I manage to grind once against his dick before he sort of shoves me away and pushes me off of him. I smile knowingly. “See? You’re not as ready as you think.”

He clenches his teeth together before he speaks again. “Maybe I don’t want you doing it that way.” A poor excuse, but I can’t fault him for trying.

I crawl into bed with him and let him wrap his arms around my waist again. He cuddles closer, still needing my warmth, and I let his body pull its heat from mine. “Evan, it’s okay. I don’t mind waiting. It’s only been a couple’a months. We don’t need to rush.”

“We should be able to do this. I feel like there’ve been moments where we could have tried, but...” He huffs a breath over the back of my neck. “Yesterday morning...I could have—we could have... We don’t have to plan it or anything, but we should just let it happen, y’know?”

My first instinct is to tell him no, try to preserve his virtue until an adequate amount of time has passed. But if I listen to him—really listen—I’m hearing that he’s ready for us to take this step. He doesn’t want it to be contrived or planned, but he’s thought about it enough times and hasn’t cringed away from the very thought of being intimate with me. That’s huge for him. By arguing with him, I’m saying it’s not okay for him to be feeling this way, that he should still be mourning. But who am I to tell him that? This is his decision, and my readiness has always been irrevocably linked to his own.

I should be proud of him for progressing this far, but instead my instinct is to shame him because I don’t think he’s mourned enough. And that’s awful. I don’t want to be that kind of person.

I nod and wiggle into his embrace. “That sounds like a good idea.” I feel his chest swell as he inhales deeply and holds me tighter.

10. Boiling Point

Michael

Evan comes into the bar one incredibly slow afternoon while I'm getting ready to leave. "Whoa, Michael, what happened here?"

"I decorated."

"Yeah, I can see that."

I stand up, and I'm almost knocked breathless at the sight of him. He's dressed impeccably stylish—a black jacket over a charcoal grey shirt and dark denim jeans. His hair's gelled back and styled in a way that makes him look younger and somehow more sophisticated. "Well, hello there, Slick," I tease, making my way behind the bar as he approaches me. "Lookin' good. You got a date tonight?"

He leans against the counter and smirks at me. It really should be illegal for him to look this attractive. "I don't know, when do you get off?"

I hook a finger in the v-neck of his shirt. "That's up to you." He presses his mouth to mine, and I moan at the taste of him. My fingers curl in his hair. We're alone here, so I think nothing of the gesture.

"Michael, don't try to distract me," he says around the kiss. "Although this is a good way to do it." Evan breaks away and looks around the room, taking in the fruits of this morning's labor. There's icicle lights hanging from the chandelier, a wreath garnishing the top of the cabinet behind me, a Christmas tree along the far wall adorned with countless ornaments and strings of clear lights. I also may have strung lights along the top of the bar. "So, you decorated, huh?"

"You don't think it's too much, do you?"

It's pretty much useless for Evan to lie, but he does anyway. "No, it's...fine. It's festive."

"I'm sorry if I went overboard. I've never had the chance to do something like this before."

"What, make a place look like something out of *National Lampoon's Christmas Vacation*?"

"No, to actually have Christmas. I told Jordie this a long time ago, but I grew up a Jehovah's Witness, so we didn't celebrate holidays."

Evan raises an eyebrow. "Really? And you told Jordie instead of me?"

“I didn’t think you liked me at the time. Like, at all.”

He looks upset about that particular fact. “I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be. You made up for it.” I give him a wide smile, and the corner of his mouth eases up in return. “You wanna stay for a drink? I’m just waiting for Nat to get here so I can go home.”

“Sure.” He sits across from me at the bar. “Just gimme a beer.”

I grab a cold bottle from beneath the counter, knowing his preferred brand. “You missed a prime opportunity there. You could’ve flirted with me and said something like ‘I’ll have Sex on the Beach’ or ‘Give me a Screaming Orgasm.’” Evan raises an eyebrow. “Hey, they’re real drinks. Look ‘em up.”

He just laughs at me and sips his beer. “You know, you’re really good at this.”

“What, making stupid drink puns?”

“No, running the bar. I mean, we’re even making a profit now. I don’t know how you did it, but you really turned this place around.”

I don’t understand what’s happening, because Evan rarely opens up and compliments me like this. Not to say it’s unwelcome. “I’m glad you think so. It’s sorta always been a dream of mine to run a business.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. My sister Janet owns her own place, a fashion store. I’m so jealous that she gets to do that and doesn’t have to be involved with the family business at all.” Well, since we’re being sappy... I lean over the counter and place a hand atop his. “Thank you for taking me into your home and bar and letting me do this. You and Jordie have both been so wonderful to me.”

Evan sort of chuckles. “I wasn’t always.”

“Oh hush.” I press a quick kiss to his lips to quell his self-deprecation. “You had a good reason, and you’ve more than made up for it.” He gives a slight smile. “But this is the kind of life I want. Just something simple with kids, family, a business, someone to come home to. It’s really nice.”

He takes another drink, his cheeks pinked with color before he speaks. “You could—you could have that if you want. I mean, that’s what we have to offer—me and Jordie.” He watches me with gentle, appraising eyes for about one second before he loses his nerve and his gaze drops down to the bottle.

I'm fairly sure that my face is unnaturally red right now. My cheeks hurt from smiling. "You're really a sweet man underneath all your macho posturing, y'know that? It's like the fudge at the bottom of the Drumstick cone; you gotta get through the nuts and chocolate and ice cream and the cone itself, but it's there and makes it all worth it."

"You realize that sounds really dirty, right?"

I open my mouth to retort, but the door chimes open, so we pull away from each other and try to appear like we're not even friends. Luckily, it's Dave who walks in, so we don't have to try too hard. He gives each of us a furtive, suspicious glance before he sits on a bar stool beside Evan. I hand him a bottle of his usual beer. "You guys can drop the act," he says firmly, looking at Evan. "Your brother's got a big mouth."

Evan nods in agreement, but I can see worry at the edges of his casual expression. "That he does, Dave, but what the hell are you talking about?"

"I heard him talking to Nat about you two." He stops, then: "Well, bitching is probably a better word for it."

I swallow nervously, glancing at Evan for some sort of guidance on how to react. Should I be scared for him? Worried? Angry? But his face is a placid mask. He shrugs. "I have no idea what you're talking about, Dave."

Dave huffs angrily. "Fine. Suit yourself."

Gee, what ruffled his feathers?

#

Evan

The next evening, I'm instantly suspicious when I walk through the front door of the house and smell something baking. Michael doesn't usually bake desserts this early; he tends to save them for late at night when a craving for something sweet kicks in. He also knows about my proclivity for sugar, so my first thought is that he's done something awful he's trying to apologize for by way of sugar cookies.

My suspicions are reinforced when I see the tray of stuffed shells on the middle of the table and the pan of garlic bread. If I didn't know better, I'd think Michael wrecked the car and was trying to make penance. "Michael, what did you do?"

"Nothing!" he protests, obviously offended by the accusation.

"You made a three-course meal."

"In my defense, the cookies were made last night. I just had to freeze the dough overnight so I could bake 'em. So technically—"

I press a finger to his lips to shut him up. “Technically nothin’. What’d you do?”

Michael’s entire body gets into the production of a sigh. “Okay, don’t get mad”—oh, this should be fun—“but my father called today.”

“You’re going home?” The words shoot out of my mouth before I can stop them, and I can only wait for his answer the way you wait all tensed up for the bowling ball to hit the pins. If he’s leaving I’m gonna—

Michael looks horrified at the suggestion. “No, no! Of course not, no!” All the air leaves my lungs in a sigh of relief. “Jermaine and Randy are comin’ back out here on business, and they wanna use the back room of the bar for a few hours...” He takes the cookies out of the oven. They’re festive, with red, green, and white sprinkles around the edge and a green swirl in the middle.

After fearing he might be leaving, the inconvenience of two of his brothers coming by the bar hardly seems like an imposition. “Yeah, sure. Just let me know when.”

His shoulders untense in relief, but I can tell there’s something else nagging at him. He cooked all of this to appease me, though, so I might as well wait until I’ve actually tasted it before I hear the second part of his bad news.

I cheat and snag a few cookies while they’re still cooling, because they taste best when they’re soft—which Michael vehemently denies, but he is wrong in every conceivable way. After dinner, I’m lying on the couch trying very hard not to be sick. True to habit, Michael made an amazing dinner, and I, also true to habit, ate too much. Michael better tell me the bad news now; I’m too full to even think about being angry.

I open my eyes to see him standing over me, peering down from behind the arm of the couch. He’s upside down, which is not helping my nausea. “Was it good?” he asks, his voice sickly sweet.

“I think it’s, like, ninety percent of my insides right now, so yeah, it was.”

He giggles and sits by my feet. “I’m glad you liked it. I love seeing you happy.”

“Alright, ‘fess up, Michael. Where’s the other half of your bad news?”

To his credit, he looks really offended. “What? Why do you think there’s more?”

“Because I just know you. Why would your brothers coming here warrant a huge dinner like that?”

His mouth twists into an angry frown as he turns his body to face me. “Okay, there’s more.” He takes a deep breath, tries again. “My brothers must have blabbed to my father that I

went on a date with that girl Jermaine introduced me to, 'cause my father asked if I was still seeing her."

"And?"

He toys with the button on the cuff of his sleeve. "Well, I sorta panicked and said I was. So then I had to call her and set up a date on my next night off."

My body's too tired to move, and I desperately want to drag my hand down my face in exasperation. But my limbs refuse to work, so I just groan out, "Why?"

"I—I don't know. I got nervous." He huffs out a breath, his hands still fidgeting with the button. "And I think he's more willing to let me stay if I've found somebody out here."

"Yeah, you have," I say pointedly.

He gives me flat eyes. "We're talkin' about a man who nearly threw a fit when he heard I wanted to move out at age thirty-four. You really think he's ready for something like this, Evan?"

"I know, I know, you're right." I drop my head back against the pillow. "Why didn't you just lie to him? Just say you went on the date. It's not like he's actually gonna know."

"Yeah, he will. Besides, I'm a terrible liar. You've heard me lie; it's shameful."

"But it's over the phone. That cuts out a good chunk of body language. All you'd have to do is not sound like you've never lied before."

"Look, it's over and done with. I've gotta do this. It's just one night, and I swear I'll make it up to you, okay?"

"You wanna make it up to me? Carry me to my bedroom."

"That ain't gonna happen."

It was worth a shot.

#

It takes me halfway through Michael's date to realize that he might actually be an amazing liar.

People like Michael do not get into relationships with emotionally-stunted gangsters whose only moods seem to be rock-bottom depression and terrible rage. What's he getting out of being with me? It's certainly not sex. It's not about money, either, because he's got quite enough of that. He's told me about how he wants to run a business and start a family, but he could get

that anywhere—it's not like he's some horrifying dungeon troll with zero social skills. He could definitely find someone less damaged to make a life with.

And that someone is probably the girl he's out with now at ten o'clock on a Friday night while I'm sitting at home stewing in my bitter jealousy. I didn't start out the evening bitter, of course. I'd wished him well, but as each hour ticked by I began to believe the very realistic possibility that I've been used. The dupe du jour.

No matter how hard I try to refute it, I can't help but sink into the crippling fear that Michael's been stringing me along this entire time

I think I'm on the brink of some sort of mental breakdown. Why would he do this to me? How long has he *been* doing this? Michael's way too timid to ever instigate conflict, so these dates are probably his subtle way of giving me the big kiss-off without actually having to say anything. Seriously, why the hell else would he go on a second date with someone when he didn't even enjoy the first one? Who does that? Nobody, that's who. Of course he enjoyed the first one—he probably fucked her at her apartment or in the back seat of her car or—

I pour myself another drink to replace the burn in my throat with the burn of alcohol.

Ten-fifteen.

Where the hell are you, Michael? How hard is it to wriggle your way out of a bad date after two hours? Two hours is way too long for dinner and slightly longer than the average movie. You should be home by now. Why aren't you home? If you want to be with somebody else, just please, please tell me first.

Maybe this is my fault. I've built up this impossible fantasy in my head that Michael might actually want me in the same ways I want him. Michael has been so good, so grateful, never demanding anything more than I was willing to give, but maybe I should have given more. Maybe he's fucking her right now because I wouldn't, couldn't give that to him. June was always forgiving to a fault for my shitty, awful behavior, but I can't expect Michael to cut me the same slack that she did.

Maybe this is all for the best. Michael drifts back to where he belongs, and I return to the ruins of my own world, trying to salvage whatever I can. Maybe someday I'll feel grateful for as much time as he'd given me instead of wishing I'd been given more.

Ten-thirty.

Another drink.

It's just one night, and I swear I'll make it up to you, okay?

What a stupid and impossible promise to make, Michael! How long were you planning on dragging this out before you finally gave me the "it's not you, it's me" speech? How many of

your kind gestures have been apologetic attempts to keep me placated so I won't question your motives?

I distract myself by climbing the staircase and checking on Jordan. He's still asleep, just as he was when I looked in his room thirty minutes ago. I go downstairs and pour myself another drink. I flip through the television channels, trying to ignore the minutes ticking by. Nothing holds my interest. The paranoia's rooted too deep now.

Ten-forty.

God fucking damn it.

Michael has been out on this "date" of his for almost three hours.

A few more minutes pass by in an agonizingly slow lull before I hear the familiar sound of the front door being unlocked. I meet Michael in the foyer as soon as he opens the door. "Where the *fuck* have you been?" He looks at me with wide, frightened eyes, and I'm cutting him off before he can answer. "It's almost eleven, Michael. What'd you do? Did you fuck her? No, never mind, don't answer that. Did you let her down easy? Did she kiss you?"

"Slow down, babe," he says with a laugh, placing a hand on my chest. I wonder if his hands touched her tonight. "I'm sorry I'm home so late. She wanted to see a movie—I can't even remember what it was, it sucked—then when it was over there was an ice cream shop nearby that she said had the best tiramisu, so we went there for a bit, and then we just walked around the park and talked. I didn't realize I was out so long. I'm sorry." I want to believe him, but there's a sick, lurching feeling in my gut that tells me he's lying. "She tried to kiss me, but I wouldn't let her."

"You didn't end up promising her another date, did you? Because that sounds like a thing you would do."

Michael looks angry to even be asked. "No, I didn't. I told her I just want to be friends, and she was okay with that." He heads up the stairs, and I follow him. "I need a shower."

"You better not have fucked her. You're mine, you understand?"

Michael sighs and turns to face me. "Evan, you're just gonna have to trust me, okay? If I didn't like you, I wouldn't be jumpin' through all these hoops just to stay here." He waits for me to say something, but no words come, so he walks into his bedroom and starts the shower.

I linger there at his bedroom door for a while, trying to sort through his words tonight and find the lie. Why would he be so eager to take a shower unless he was trying to wash away evidence of a tryst or the stench of her perfume? He's probably in there right now scrubbing the scent of her off of his body—his naked body. His naked, *wet* body.

Well, shit.

I swing the bathroom door open with one hand while I undress with the other. I hear Michael sigh loudly over the sound of the water. “Evan, I told you, I didn’t do anything.” His murky silhouette moves away from me as I near the handle of the shower door. “I’ll be happy to talk to you about it when I get out, okay?”

“Yeah, I’m not too keen on waiting.”

There’s a hint of panic in his voice. “Can you act like a normal person for one second and let me shower in peace?”

“What are you hiding? Scratch marks? Bite marks?” The thought of someone else touching him that way makes me feel ill.

“No! I just don’t want you to come in.”

“Are you jerking off or something?”

That makes him laugh a short huff of breath. “Wha—no! Why is it so hard to believe I just want some privacy?”

I grab the door handle. “I’m coming in.”

“No!” His hands are wrapped around the handle on the other side, because when I try to tug there’s resistance.

“You’re making it difficult for me to trust you.”

He exhales annoyance. “Alright, look, you can come in, but only if you turn off the lights first.”

“Aw, Jesus, Michael, don’t be an idiot.” Darkness will prevent me from checking his body for evidence of his dishonesty. I’m starting to suspect that he’s thwarting me on purpose.

“Please?” he begs, his voice cracking a little around the word. I breathe out a heavy sigh, because it’s impossible to deny him anything when he sounds like that. After I switch off the light, I hear him say, “Close the door, too.”

“Oh, come on! This is ridiculous!” We’re both naked, and this would be awesome under any other circumstance.

“Did you ever think that maybe I don’t want you seeing me naked?”

“You picked a hell of a time to get self-conscious.”

“I know, and I’m sorry.” To his credit, he does sound sorry, but I’m standing in his bathroom naked in the dark, and his apology does not help my situation. “I’m not trying to hide any hickeys or scratch marks or anything. It’s just my stupid body.”

Maybe I’m being kind of a dick. Michael’s not kicking me out or forcing me to leave; he’s trying to compromise with me, thinking that I came in here to have a conversation. I shut the door like he asked. It takes me a few second to blink through the confusing darkness and pick out shapes using the light peeking in at the bottom of the door. “Is that better?”

“Yeah, thanks.”

I shuffle my way over to a large blur that looks like it might be the shower stall. My hand gropes blindly for the handle. “Can I come in?” Michael makes an affirmative sound, so I slide the door open and step inside. The hot needles of water feel good on my skin.

His fingers reach out in the darkness and find my stomach. He yanks his hand back like he’s been burned. “So, what did you wanna talk about?”

I shove him against the tile and force his legs open with my knee. Michael swallows a quiet sound before my hand around his cock makes him moan, loud and needy against the air. His dick swells at my touch, and he grinds his hips into my hand. “Tell me you’re mine.”

“Evan, what are you doing?” he says around a gasp, his hips twisting needily.

I give him a glare before realizing that’s a stupid thing to do in the dark. “What the fuck do you think I’m doing?” I squeeze his dick, and he gives a shaky moan. “Now tell me you’re mine.”

“I’m yours.” I reward him by rubbing my thumb over the head of his cock. He lets out a soft groan and rocks into my fist for more friction. “More,” he whines impatiently.

My other hand’s pressed against the tile wall near his head, fingers curling in anticipation. “Tell me you’ll never leave.”

“I’ll never leave.” My eyes have adjusted to the dark, so I watch his face for signs of a lie, trying to pinpoint if he’s saying these things because he wants to get off or if there’s truth to them. His gaze bores into mine, and it’s so intense I almost want to look away. Michael licks his lips, reaching down and plucking my fingers from around his dick. “I’m not gonna leave you, Evan, I promise.” He takes my hand in his so that I’m no longer touching him. “These dates my brothers set me up on—they mean nothing to me, okay? I don’t do that kind of stuff.”

“You don’t fuck women?” I ask. He presses his lips together, his eyes flicking from side to side for a brief moment. “So what if they start settin’ you up with guys?”

Michael’s gaze finds me again. “I don’t cheat. And, believe it or not, I really like you. Why would I want anyone else?”

Because everyone leaves sooner or later. There's too much truth in that, so I don't say it. But I know I haven't been giving him everything he needs, and if this goes on too long he'll start looking elsewhere for it—if he hasn't already.

I press my lips to his, my hand grabbing his cock again and jerking and stroking in a way that has him moaning into my mouth. His hands are on my shoulders, at the base of my neck, his fingers digging in when his moans get louder. I can feel his dick pulse and swell as he rolls his hips into my fist that's sliding up and down. My other hand's gripping the back of his thigh, our skin slippery, my fingers fanning out over the hard muscle. Michael pushes his hips forward, and my skin tightens when our bodies meet. We've never been this close before. I can feel everything. I can feel *him*.

I moan shakily at his throat, one hand working his dick and the other gripping his ass before I tease two fingers at his entrance. Michael arches his back and lets out a yelp that's so much better than any of the other sounds I've ever heard from him. I want him to make more noises like this. I work my fingers into him, and Michael inhales sharply, wiggling his hips until I'm buried knuckle-deep. His teeth dig into my shoulder when my fingers curl and scissor inside him, and I feel his hands claw down my back.

"Mm, Evan," he sighs over my skin, which spurs me to pump my fingers in and out. "F—fuck, that's good."

"I want you to come for me." I take my hand away from his cock so I can pull his hair and watch his face when he comes undone. I nip at his exposed throat. "I'm gonna make you come, and you're gonna love it." My fingers work inside of him in a mix of quick jabs and slow circles, making loud cries spill out of his mouth. I opt to slide my other hand beneath his knee, lifting his leg up so I can fill him deeper. Michael's head lolls back against the tile wall, his lips uncoupled as his whole body tenses and he lets himself go, his hands digging into my spine and his dick spurting wet stripes of cum over his stomach. I'm very tempted to kiss him when he looks like this, but I let him ride it out instead, watching him bite his lip and whine in the back of his throat as his hips thrust against the air and my hand.

When I withdraw my fingers I wrap them around his cock, thumbing over the head to pull a hard moan out of him. He bucks into my touch, still sensitive from his orgasm, and I squeeze and stroke him until the noises he makes grow softer. Michael smiles and sighs contentedly, reaching down to touch my hardening cock. His fingers tent over the tip, and I feel a spike of heat surge in my belly. This is the first time he's ever touched me like this, the first time anyone's touched me this way in quite a while. My breath hitches, and I brace myself against the wall, letting his hand play between my legs.

"Is this okay?" he asks in a soft voice. I nod, gritting my teeth when he squeezes hard enough to hurt. "Are you sure?"

"Michael, just fuckin' do it," I snap as I feel the slow slide of his fist. He follows my order and jerks me off, his thumb swirling in the sticky beads of wetness at the tip. Then he sinks

to his knees, his hands steady on my hips before his tongue glides over my cock. “Oh, fuck—” He takes my length into his mouth in one smooth swallow. My fingers curl against the tile, my head dropped to watch him. I can feel the head of my dick at the back of his throat as he sucks me, his fingers pressing into my hips and the flesh of my ass.

Michael hums around my cock, and I’m making tiny noises that I can’t stop. “Mm, God—Michael—fuck, that’s—” I lean my arm on the wall and reach down to grab a fistful of his hair, squeezing my eyes shut. He doesn’t complain or pull away, just keeps going with his lips massaging the hilt and his tongue licking and stroking. His mouth is everywhere at once, and I’m swearing through my teeth and fucking into his throat, and Michael doesn’t care. He doesn’t stop. I feel him smile around my dick, and his moan reverberates through me. Oh my God, Michael’s mouth is amazing, and I want my cock inside of it at all times.

I break apart all at once, choking out a breath as I come in his mouth, at the back of his throat. Michael doesn’t pull away or gag. He lingers there for a moment, then I feel the slow slide of his lips as he leaves my cock. His tongue swipes at the last few drops of cum on the tip. I watch the way his throat moves when he swallows, and heat spikes in the pit of my stomach. God, I can’t believe he just did that.

“Jesus fucking Christ,” I groan breathlessly, staring down at him. “That’s—that was…” I’m not sure there’s a word for what just happened. I settle for what might be the understatement of the century: “That was good.”

He grins proudly at my praise and gets to his feet. “Just good?”

“Hey, you siphoned all the words out of my brain with your mouth. Give me a minute.” I sit on the tile floor, trying to collect my thoughts. Michael watches me with a curious expression on his face.

“You okay?”

I nod absently, still struggling to interpret the strange twist in my gut. It doesn’t feel like guilt, like when you do something you’re not supposed to, something a subconscious part of your brain tries to pull you away from. Or the way you feel when you’re reminded of all the reasons you shouldn’t want something. I know all about guilt, and this isn’t guilt.

I’m not sure what it is. It’s unfamiliar, and not entirely unpleasant. It’s like Michael’s stuck his hand in my chest, his fingers accidentally brushing over delicate places I’ve hidden away. There isn’t any pain, no throbbing of open wounds, but my heart feels swollen and tender, like the slightest touch could stab deep. It feels like something’s filled up a long vacant space inside of me, and Jesus, that doesn’t sound filthy at all.

Michael sits beside me, leaning back against the shower wall while the hot spray beats down on us. “Do you wanna talk about it?”

I look over at him, shrugging lamely. “I don’t know.” What’s there to talk about, really?

“I’m sorry if I did something wrong,” he says preemptively, like he’s just used to apologizing whenever my moods fluctuate. “I thought you wanted me to…” He makes an awkward sort of gesture to my crotch. “But I don’t really know what’s okay to want here or what you want, so you have to tell me.”

“Michael, it’s okay. You didn’t do anything wrong. I’m not angry.” I shove a hand through my hair, wringing the water out of it. “I don’t know what I feel, actually.”

“Is it—is it bad?”

I shake my head. “It doesn’t feel bad. It doesn’t feel good either, but maybe it’s supposed to.”

“Is it gay panic?”

I laugh. “What?”

“Gay panic. Some guys freak out after they have, uh, relations with another guy, like it challenges their masculinity or something.”

This ain’t his first rodeo, that’s for sure. “Michael, we’ve been sort of dating for a while. I think that would’ve showed up the first time I thought about putting my dick in you.”

It’s too dark to tell if he’s blushing, but I’m absolutely certain that’s what his face is doing right now. “Well, thinking about it and doing it are different.”

“Trust me, that’s not it.” I’m getting tired of sitting here, so I stand up and slide the door open, stepping out into the frigid air. I dry off as quickly as I can, eager to crawl into my warm bed.

“Wait, wh—where are you going?”

“I’m goin’ to bed.” I pull the door back open and dangle a fresh towel in front of him. “You comin’?”

11. Like a Virgin

Michael

Evan's hand is nestled in my hair that morning when I wake up in his bed, his fingers trailing lines over my scalp to remind us that this is real. He does this almost every morning we wake up together, and his hands are just as gentle and cautious as they were the first time. I always pretend not to notice, like I've never wondered how long he's laid there and watched me sleep, my body curled up and cradled against him in a particularly unattractive fashion. My head rests on his chest, my chin tucked so he can't see my face. One of my hands weakly clings to a fistful of his t-shirt. I am an absolute mess; I don't think he cares much about this fact.

We're intimate in ways I've never been with anyone else, and somehow that makes me feel more naked and exposed than a lack of clothing ever has...or will; last night doesn't exactly count since the lights were off, but next time I might not be so lucky.

I pretend to wake up and crane my neck to get a glimpse of his face. He raises an eyebrow, gives me a half-hearted smirk. "Well, good morning."

I slip my hand under his shirt. "I'll show you a good morning, hot stuff." Apparently I'm extra flirty when I wake up.

He doesn't fight me, lets my fingers explore his skin and palm the flesh when I want to feel more of him. The peaks of his hipbones are sensitive, I notice, when I trail over them. He makes a soft sound and shifts beneath me before taking my eager wrist in his hand. "Whoa, Michael."

I pout, not appreciative of the scolding. "I wasn't gonna..."

"You had your hand in my underwear. You were definitely thinking about it," he says with a laugh.

"Maybe I was," I mumble, my face feeling like a furnace. "But I wasn't gonna actually do it."

"If you're gonna get me off, don't waste it on a handjob. I can do that myself."

"That sounds hot. Can I watch?"

Evan pulls me until I'm flat against his chest. "Why watch when you could be an active participant?"

"I like this idea." I lay my hand over his stomach, feeling the rise and fall. "This is new for us."

"What do you mean?"

“Waking up together in your bed. It’s something we’ve never done before.”

“There’s a lot of things we’ve never done before,” Evan says, and it sounds like an innuendo.

“Easy, tiger.”

“I wasn’t talking about sex stuff. I mean, yeah, that’s part of it, but—” His mouth finds the juncture of my neck and shoulder. “Maybe you’re the one with your mind in the gutter.”

“No, I think that’s definitely you.”

He chuckles. “Yeah, it is.” He slides his hand down to my hips to prove his point, sort of tugging at the waistband of my pajamas. I melt into the warmth of his body and close my eyes. “Wait,” he starts, “we’ve woken up here before.”

“Yeah, but you were hung over. Waking up together in your bed when you’re sober: now that’s new.”

He smirks. “Hey, you don’t know that for sure.” I grin and cuddle closer to him. Neither of us say anything for a while, content in sharing each other’s warmth. Then he speaks up: “You don’t have to answer this if you don’t want to, but, uh, why don’t you want me seeing you naked? I’m not gonna lie, that’s on the top of my list of things I want.”

I take a deep breath, settling against him and throwing caution into the wind. I owe him the truth. “I have a skin disorder that destroys the pigmentation in my skin.”

Evan doesn’t say anything for a second. It feels like the longest second of my life, like it’s stretching out infinitely. “And?”

“And what?”

“What else?” I give him a puzzled look. “C’mon, that can’t be the only thing you think’s wrong with you.”

Oh, it certainly isn’t. “It’s the most obvious. It’s why I don’t look like my brothers.” He nods like something finally makes sense. “I use make-up to cover the spots, so that’s why you’ve never noticed it.”

Evan shrugs. “If you’re trying to scare me off, it’s not working. I still wanna see you naked.” He squeezes my hip with the slightest pressure.

“Of course you do,” I say around a laugh.

“Still not happenin’? Y’know, the nudity clause generally means that you get to see the other person naked. I don’t know if that sweetens the pot for you, or…” He trails off.

He’s gotta be doing this on purpose. My face is probably disgustingly red right now. “Oh, it definitely does.”

He toys with the sleeve of my shirt. “We could make this happen.”

“I thought you said you couldn’t handle seeing me naked,” I say, trying to trap him with his words.

“That has no effect on my desire to see you naked, though. Absolutely none.” Evan thinks for a moment. “Do you want me to go first?” I swallow thickly, because thinking about him stripping for me is making my hormones roar and surge. He waits for my answer, but when I don’t say anything he sits up. “Fuck it,” he says, pulling his shirt over his head. My heart starts sprinting in my chest. “Your turn.” He grins and gestures to my shirt with his chin.

I don’t even bother pretending not to admire him. My gaze rakes over his body, and my hands reach out to touch the naked warmth of his stomach. I want to slide his boxers off his hips and tug on his cock, but my fingers stay pressed over his skin. He grabs the hem of my shirt, searching for any signs of objection, but instead I grant him permission with a nod.

“Tell me if you want to stop,” he reminds me, his voice low and breathy while his fingers hesitate.

I shake my head, my mouth too dry for words, but that’s not enough. I lick my lips. “I want this. I want you. You have no idea how much I want you.”

I shut my eyes and rise up onto my knees as he pulls my shirt off. His curious fingers map out the planes of my back before I feel the warm, wet heat of his mouth open around a nipple. My head tips back, a moan escaping my throat and my fingers curling in his hair. He kisses a frenzied line down my chest and stomach before bringing his mouth up to mine, nipping and biting at my lips and making me feel all gnarled with want.

His wide hands slide my pajama pants off of my hips, and my skin prickles at the sudden chill of the air. He palms my ass, squeezing and pushing me against him. I feel the warm press of his body, and my hands reach into his hair, clutching and pulling. Evan moans a throaty sound at the hard ridge of my collarbone and jerks his hips forward.

I let my hands fall away, worried I’ve done something wrong. “Is it too much?”

“Yeah.” He breathes at my throat, his hands sliding over my skin. “But it’s okay. I want this.” Then his mouth is back on mine, gentle and cautious. I let him take his time with me, feeling the press of his fingers into my skin when his hands begin to wander. Evan hauls me closer, his hands wide on my back and my ass to bring me nearer to him. Every sound out of my

mouth makes him respond a different way; soft sighs make his fingers squeeze and his teeth bite, and louder moans elicit hip movements and gasps of his own.

We're slow, lost in the exploration of each others' bodies, and his mouth places kisses over my lips while his hands map the slope of my spine and the angles of my hip. He breathes softly against my skin, making quiet noises when I kiss him back. He seems to like my reciprocation, so I place a hand over his chest, and contentment seeps out in his sighs.

It's a slow burn between us, the way his mouth moves against mine, the way his hands wrap around my body. We've never really touched each other like this before; sometimes he'd get handsy during a kiss or I'd slide my hands up his shirt in the morning, but it would never last this long, both of us worried we wouldn't be able to stop if we went too far. There are no such inhibitions now.

Evan's skin is hot to the touch, and I follow the swell of his chest, letting my fingers trace over a nipple. He groans a low, needy sound, his back arching forward to push against my steady hand. My fingers press and squeeze, and his teeth pull at my lip while he tugs a fistful of my hair. He's still gentle and controlled, even while my greedy hands roam along his skin, longing to memorize the furry barrel of his chest and the way his stomach meets my touch. My fingers spread out as I run them over the low curve of his stomach and the top of his boxers, and he grinds his dick into the heel of my hand, moaning at the friction.

I bring my touch back above his waist, trailing over the dip at the base of his spine, my other arm looped around his neck to nestle my hand in his hair. I follow the path of his vertebrae with my fingertips, admiring the composition of his body as he does the same with mine, his hands sinking lower as my own climb higher. He palms the curve of my ass, and I press my fingers in to the curves and sinews of his back, feeling him ripple and flex when he moves. He doesn't linger there, letting his hand skim over my thigh before pressing into the hard muscle. I crawl closer to him and grind my hips against his.

He takes my bottom lip between his teeth, shoving his hips into mine and forcing a shaky moan from my throat. I can feel his swollen cock press against my stomach when he moves. "Oh God, Michael," he sighs roughly into the curve of my throat. His thighs are tense with want and restraint, and his knuckles drag over my bare hip as he tugs my underwear down. "You want this, right?" Evan asks me in a low voice, his hands hesitating while he waits for my answer.

"Of course. Do you?" He answers me with eager hands and urgent lips. I pull his boxers down over his hips, and he steps out of them and kicks the shorts aside. Evan doesn't falter when he looks down at my newly-exposed skin, his eyes luminous with love and lust as his hands drag over my hip bones. The heat of his stare burns me while his fingertips trace over my imperfections. I would be embarrassed, humiliated under the scrutiny of his gaze if Evan wasn't looking at my body like it's the most wonderful thing he's ever seen.

"I still want you, Michael," he says, answering my question before I've even given voice to it. He lifts a hand to my cheek, and I press the heat of his palm closer. "God, you have no idea. I told you it wouldn't change anything."

His words empower me, my gut tightening with nervous anticipation. I feel the wet slide of his tongue in my mouth as he kisses me again. This is all new and terrifying, and I want it so badly I can feel it in my veins. Gently, I press my hands against his shoulders, nudging him backwards until he lays back on the mattress. It might be easier for him if we do it this way; if I'm on top, he won't be as active a participant, and maybe he won't feel so guilty over it when we're done.

His head is nearly hanging off of the edge before he scoots forward and hooks his thighs around my hips to bring us closer. I swallow thickly, my throat suddenly locked up, and straddle him. Evan rolls his hips between my legs, seeking the warm heat between them. "This is okay, right?" I ask. "I—I've never done this before, so I don't know if it's gonna be good or if you're gonna like it." Jesus Christmas, I hit the awkward and inexperienced jackpot there.

Evan smiles, running his hands over my thighs and patting them reassuringly. "Relax, you'll do fine. I've got a great view, anyway."

Maybe this will be okay. Maybe I won't be a total disaster in bed.

He reaches behind his head for something, and I sit up on my knees a little to see what he's doing. His hand's groping around in the gaps of the bedframe before he withdraws a small bottle. I raise an eyebrow, because that's both the weirdest yet most convenient place to store sexual aids I've ever seen.

Evan frowns at my skepticism. "What? You never know when the nightstand will be too far away."

"Are you that lazy?"

"No, I'm in the interest of not killing the mood, which you just happened to do so wonderfully by pointing it out, so thanks for that." He sort of tosses the bottle at me and folds his arms over his chest.

"You're ridiculous," I say with a quiet snort of a laugh while I coat his dick with the slippery gel. He moans at the stroke of my hand, craving to be inside of me. I spread my legs a little wider and flex my fingers atop his stomach. "I'll go slow, okay? Just tell me if you want me to stop."

He nods and settles back against the mattress. My insides twist, hot and nervous, and I squeeze my eyes shut. I take him in carefully, letting his cock slide inside, slow and smooth. I grip the sheets on either side of him, trying to adjust to the stretch. It doesn't really hurt, just feels new and strange, like something I could get used to. My knees slide in the sheets and force my legs open impossibly wide. I drop down onto his hips, his dick sheathed completely in my inner heat. I yelp out a pained shriek, my body bowing forward at the too-sensitive spike of sensation. Evan watches me with worried eyes, biting his lip like it's taking all he has not to thrust up into me.

“You okay?”

“Yeah, just—just give me a sec’.” I settle into it, letting my thighs accommodate the wide stretch for a moment before I rock against him. He makes a low, gravelly sound in his throat and pulls my hips so his cock hits the spot that makes me writhe and wince. I curve over him, my hands on either side of his head for support. He rises to meet me, his mouth covering mine as he reaches up to press his thumb flat against my nipple. “Fucking hell, Michael,” he moans around my lips, his thumb circling and teasing while the rest of his fingers dig into my spine. I work my hips slowly, pushing back when I want him to squirm underneath me. “You are so”—he gasps when I sink upon him again—“so good...”

“You’re not so bad yourself.” His other hand clenches my ass, and he thrusts up inside of me, stealing my smugness and making me choke out a cry.

He raises an eyebrow. “Really?” From anyone else, it would sound desperate for reassurance, but it’s Evan, so it’s arrogant, a demand for me to tell him just how good I think he is. Even though he was gasping praises not five seconds ago.

I savor the low ache as I ride him, pushing my hips back against his cock, winding and unwinding my hands around the sheets to keep me steady and slow. I can feel the pulsing throb of his heartbeat in his cock, and it’s almost like I’ve taken his heart in as our hips crash and burn together in a hot clash of need. My fingers press into the firm wall of his stomach, and I bite my lip to hide my smirk at the way he’s making broken, breathy noises.

“Michael.” The sound is a cracked groan in his throat as he fucks me open and deepens the push and pull of my hips. My nails bite into his skin, and his hands move from the flesh of my ass to grip around my shoulders, pressing into the tensed muscle. I gasp a broken moan and shift the angle of my hips, allowing us to go deeper. My whole body quakes at the surge of pleasure that crackles up my spine. Evan feels it too, because he’s groaning curses—occasionally cut through with my name—over and over while I grind against the hilt of his cock. “Michael, don’t stop—please don’t stop—”

I sit up and square my shoulders, tilting my head back. “Mmm, so good.” My breathing’s shaky and desperate with need, my hands clawing at the sheets. Evan slows and stills, content to let me finish and just *feel*, wanting me to break him apart, piece by piece. I raise my hips and let him slide back in. We fit together in a way that’s so good my entire body shudders and bows over him. “Oh my God—Evan—fuck—” My hips rock against his until I feel like I’ll break open. “I’m gonna—” I fall over the ragged edge, my voice wrecked as my fingers pull at the sheets instead of his skin. That’s all he needs to unravel the threads of his orgasm. I can feel one of his hands fist a handful of my hair, the other dragging down my back as he comes with a grunt behind clenched teeth. He’s still fucking up into me like he doesn’t want to stop, and I let him ride it out, my hips moving with his to complement his strokes.

My limbs give up, and I sort of flop on top of him, letting my knees slide out from under me and straighten out. I don’t think either of us can form words right now. I feel the scrape of his

stubble against my cheek and the hot flare of his breath. He sighs contentedly at my ear, his palms blazing-hot when he lays them flat over my back. I thread my fingers through the sweaty, dark spikes of his hair. “Was that too much?”

“No, no, fuck no, Michael, Jesus Christ,” he breathes, slinging an arm over his eyes. I watch the rise and fall of his broad chest. One of the thoughts in his head must upset him, because he clenches his jaw for a brief second and sighs before relaxing, letting his arm drop against the bed. He reaches for me and pulls me flat against his chest, his mouth latched to mine.

We lay there together for a while, touching with languid hands and unhurried lips. Even when his tongue licks the hollow of my throat or my mouth opens around a nipple, it’s fueled by appreciation, not lust. His body is warm and solid against mine. It feels like home.

“So it was good?” I ask after some time has passed.

Evan laughs. “What do you think? I got laid, and I got to see you naked. It must be my birthday.” I duck my head to hide the fact that my face feels like it’s on fire. “So, yeah, it was awesome.”

“Would you—would you wanna do it again sometime?” I mumble into the juncture of his neck and shoulder. “Not right now or anything, just—at some point in the future. I don’t want you to push yourself for my sake.”

He makes a low sound of agreement. “I know, but...I like this. Even though it’s difficult, it feels real. So I’m just gonna be grateful for it while it lasts.” I close my eyes and focus on the quieting thump of his heart. “And, yes, of course I wanna do this again. My God, it’s like you don’t know me at all.”

The sound of a timid knock on the bedroom door has us scurrying for decency. “Hey, Dad?” Jordan asks from the other side of the door.

“Hold on a sec.” Evan wraps us in the blankets like post-coital burritos. I’m pretty sure if Jordan comes in here he’s going to see our discarded clothes on the floor and figure out what we’ve been doing all morning. “Kay, what’s up?”

Jordan inches open the door and pokes his head inside. “It snowed last night. You wanna—Oh my God, seriously, you guys?” He turns his back on us in an adamant refusal to see any more. “You aren’t even trying, are you?”

Evan sighs sadly. “I’m sorry, Jord’, but this was gonna happen eventually.”

“Yeah, but that doesn’t mean I wanna see it!” Jordan makes a face. “Couldn’t you at least put some clothes on and pretended you weren’t having sex in here?”

I feel compelled to say, “we weren’t!”

Jordan gives me a glare like he blames me for everything wrong with the world. “You are the worst liar in this entire solar system!”

“You really are, Michael,” Evan says.

I nudge him in the ribs. “Hush.”

Jordan sighs and grabs the doorknob, turning to leave. “Well, congrats, I guess. I’ll be in the backyard throwing up about something else.” He closes the door behind him, and once we’re alone I lay back against the pillows.

“What are you doing?”

“I wanna stay here forever,” I whine, pulling the blankets tighter around me. “It’s nice and warm. Don’t make me move.”

Evan chuckles and combs his fingers through my hair. “You could be nice and warm too if you put some clothes on.” I can hear the teasing lilt in his voice even though I’m not looking at him.

“I gotta take what I can get. My bed’s cold in the morning.”

“So sleep in here from now on,” he says casually, like it’s nothing.

I roll over to face him, staring at him in what can only be described as bewildered confusion. “Are you for real?”

“Of course. Why not?” He shrugs. “We’re dating, aren’t we?”

“Literally sleeping together is a proper date thing?”

“Shit, I don’t know; I haven’t dated in about twenty years. That’s two decades. I could be wrong about everything.” Evan looks really worried about this particular fact.

“I’m not much better.” I place a hand on his arm. “Don’t worry, we’ll figure this out together.” My gesture of solidarity makes him replace his worried expression with one that’s a hundred percent more relieved. “You know,” I start, grabbing my clothes off of the floor, “I haven’t seen snow since I was seven years old.”

“Seriously?” I manage a nod while I’m pulling on my shirt. “Wow, okay, you have to go outside then. No excuses.”

“Alright, alright, I’m goin’.” I finish getting dressed and leave the bed. Evan makes himself decent; I frown when he finds his shirt and pulls it over his head—I was enjoying the view. “It’s freezing in here,” I complain, grabbing one of his sweaters off of a nearby chair and

putting it on. “I’m takin’ this.” The sleeves are long and floppy. It’s big and roomy and smells like him.

“Don’t you have any winter clothes of your own?” he asks around a smirk.

“I do, but they’re not yours.” I flop the sleeves at him to illustrate my point.

He laughs, and the sound is warm and rough in his throat and absolutely perfect. “Well, you do look good in red.” He reaches into the closet and grabs another sweatshirt before we leave. We get to the door before he turns to ask: “Hey, is it okay that I had my cock in your ass before breakfast?”

I give him a kiss that serves as an emphatic yes.

#

I’m watching Evan try to wrap presents, and he’s extraordinarily bad at it. “Here, let me do it,” I offer, reaching for the halfway-wrapped, rectangular-shaped package.

Evan pulls it away and does a poor job of taping the paper down. “No, Michael, I got it.” When he’s finished, he plops it down between us, and it sort of bounces in the middle of the bed.

This is the saddest Christmas present I’ve ever seen, but I can’t fault him for trying. “Watch me.” I refold the corners of the paper to make them nice and tight. Then it’s time for the tape. Judging by Evan’s expression, he’s clearly trying to blame his inability to wrap presents on me somehow. “See? You gotta take the slack out of it.”

“It was fine the way it was,” he grumbles while I dig through the bag of bows.

“No, it wasn’t. C’mon, even mail-order pornographers wrap with more finesse.” He raises an eyebrow. “Not that—not that I would know, of course.”

Evan gives me a curious look. “Yeah, sure,” he says with a smirk, tossing the newly-wrapped gift into our steadily-growing pile of finished presents.

We’re sitting on Evan’s bed, wrapping Christmas presents for Jordan on the last eve of Hanukkah. Since I’d told Evan that this would be my first Christmas, he and Jordan gave me free reign on which holiday we’d celebrate this year; I said, “Why don’t we celebrate both?” Evan gave me his word that he’d be okay with receiving gifts from me for Christmas, and Jordan, of course, is totally fine with more presents. My first real holiday season, and here I am celebrating two of them at the same time. My life is awesome.

Evan grabs the next item in the queue pile of gifts waiting to be wrapped. “Another video game? Don’t you think Jordie’s got enough of these?”

“They’re not all the same, y’know. Besides, he only ever has about five games at the same time because he ends up trading them to get credit for new ones.”

“Well, if he ever ends up in prison, at least he’ll be great at bartering for cigarettes.” I frown and toss a bow at his face. He barely flinches. “What?”

“Don’t be ridiculous.” I stick my tongue out at him, only to find that he’s not even looking at me, instead examining another present in the pile. “Evan, pay attention. I’m tryin’ to teach you a useful life skill.” He snorts a sound of amusement. “Don’t laugh! Y’know, you’re gonna be outta luck if you got me anything, ‘cause I don’t think Jordie will help you wrap my presents if he knows you’re being uncooperative. He’s got very strong principles.”

“Most stores offer gift-wrapping,” he says. “This isn’t my first holiday, Michael.”

I contemplate tossing another gift bow at his face. “You actually buy retail?”

“Would you prefer gettin’ somethin’ stolen for Christmas?”

He’s got a point.

“And how’d you get so good at this, anyway? You with your lack of holiday celebrations.”

“It’s not like it’s hard.” I chuckle. “It’s just a matter of makin’ things look nice.”

“Are you saying I’m incapable of making things look nice? Because that’s a flat-out lie.”

“That’s...not exactly what I said. I don’t think you’re incapable. You’re just lazy.”

He makes a face. “Gee, Michael, don’t sugar-coat it.”

“If you actually put effort into this, I’m sure you could do it.” I place the newly-wrapped present into the pile and pull out one for him to wrap. “Try it.”

“I don’t know why you’re so anal-retentive about this,” he grumbles in protest, grudgingly taking the Iron Man action figure from me. “It’s not like it really matters if it looks nice or not. Jordie has never, at any point in his life, disliked a present because it wasn’t wrapped perfectly.” He’s sort of aggressively rolling the package up in the paper. It’s difficult not to laugh, because I didn’t think it was possible to angrily wrap a present until I met Evan. “He’s not gonna take points off if the corners are loose”—he goes to fold the extra flaps of paper over the front, but I guide his hands and he corrects his mistake while glaring at me—“or if the fuckin’ flaps are folded on the front.”

I wonder if wrapping presents and decorating was June’s thing, and this is only reinforcing Evan’s loss. Maybe that’s why he’s so grumpy. “Hey, we should put the Spider-Man sweatshirt in the Sega CD box, and put the Sega CD in a regular ol’ clothing box that we save for his birthday, so when Jordie unwraps the sweatshirt he thinks it’s something way cooler.”

Evan looks up at me with a horrified expression on his face. “Whoa, calm down, Satan, let’s not get too crazy.”

I laugh in a way that no one could ever consider attractive. “Aw, c’mon, where’s your sense of humor?”

Evan’s about to answer me when the bedroom phone rings. I suppose that our time together is up for the night. He leans backwards, stretching out his arm to reach the receiver on the nightstand. “Hello? ...I’ll see if he’s available.” He sets the phone down and sits back up to talk to me. “It’s your father,” he mutters. “You wanna talk to him?”

What could my father possibly want with me now? A million different possibilities flood my head, none of them pleasant. I nod weakly, sliding off of the bed and walking around to the other side instead of contorting my body to answer the phone. “Hello, Joseph.”

“Michael, it’s good to hear your voice. How’ve you been?” He doesn’t sound sick or ailing. Could Mother be sick? Is that why he’s calling?

“Fine, fine. Is something wrong?”

“No, ‘course not. We were just wonderin’ if you might be comin’ home for the holidays. Y’know, celebrate with your family.”

At the mention of the word, my gaze instantly darts over to Evan, who’s still wrapping presents with all the resentment of a teenager. Over these past few months, I’ve gone from being alone in a strange city to having my own little family in our cozy suburb. Sure, I hadn’t exactly pictured my ideal life involving me dating a gangster, but Evan’s job almost doesn’t matter. Evan acts nothing like Joseph when he’s with me and Jordan; he’s kind, funny, affectionate, and involved in his son’s life. I feel more at home with Evan and Jordan than I do with my blood family, and Evan probably wanted me dead the first few weeks I was here.

I try to find a reasonable excuse. “Well, I think Evan and Jordan need me here. I mean, it’s their first Christmas since...” I trail off, hoping Evan isn’t listening too closely. “I think me being here would really mean a lot to them.”

“It’d mean a lot to us if you’d come home for a couple’a days,” Joseph argues. “Your mother would love for you to come home. All your brothers and sisters’ll be here.”

“Why? Mother won’t celebrate Christmas.”

I hear him sigh. “We’ll have a family dinner. I know how much you love cookin’ for those.”

“I’ve had family dinners at home for thirty-three years. I have an opportunity here to do somethin’ different, to have a real Christmas.” I quell my argumentative streak and try to appeal to his fatherhood. “This means a lot to me, Joseph. I’m sure Mother will understand.”

I can almost envision the glare he’s giving me right now—it’s probably the one that says “defy my orders, and you’ll sleep with the fishes.” My father’s a big fan of mob clichés. “Michael Joseph Jackson, if you think this other family needs you more than we do—”

“Look, this is my only chance to do this. I’ll probably be home next year anyway.” Evan’s posture stiffens slightly at my words.

Joseph grunts a noise I’m assuming isn’t a happy one. “Fine, Michael. Have it your way. I just wish you’d see it from my point of view. Y’know, I ain’t gettin’ any younger, and—”

“Don’t,” I interrupt him firmly. “Don’t do that. It’s not fair to me. I’ve made my decision, and I’m sticking by it.” I nearly slam the phone down when I hang up. This is exactly the reason I don’t call him unless it’s absolutely necessary. What right does he have to try to guilt me into coming home when I’ve already made it quite clear that I intend to stay? Mother doesn’t do that when I speak with her on the phone; she’s thrilled that I’m happy here, and although she misses me she doesn’t let that take precedence over what’s best for me.

Evan’s finished wrapping another gift when I sit back down on the bed. “Hey, Michael, if you wanna go back home for Christmas, go right ahead. I don’t wanna make you feel like you have to stay here for our sake.”

“No, I *want* to be here! I’m excited! See?” I gesture to both piles of presents, exhibits A and B that I truly do want to spend my holidays with Evan and Jordan.

“Yeah, I know, but I gotta make sure you know your options.” He rubs the back of his neck. “To steal you away from your family...that’s the most selfish thing I could ever do.”

I reach for his hands, and he gives them to me. “Evan, you and Jordie are just as much a part of my family as they are.” I thought that would make him smile or at least laugh at me and say something about cheesy lines, but Evan only looks shell-shocked, like my words have stirred anew some rusted-over part of himself. I can feel the blood boiling beneath the surface of my skin. “I—I shouldn’t have said that. I’m sorry.”

“No, no, that’s—you really meant it?” He squeezes my fingers that have gone limp in his hands. I find it in me to nod. “So...you’re definitely staying, right?”

“Yes. Staying.”

“So,” he says while we’re wrapping the rest of the presents, “what’s this about you being home next year?” He’s doing a poor job of keeping the panic out of his voice, and his hands are sort of shaking as he folds the wrapping paper.

“Don’t worry about it. I had to say something to give me an edge. He wouldn’t stop guiltting me.”

The corner of his mouth turns up a bit. “Oh, my favorite.”

“Did your father...manipulate you into doing things for the family?”

“He was more about invalidating whatever was going on in my life, good or bad. When I was proud of somethin’, he’d shoot it down. When I had problems, they didn’t matter, ‘cause everybody’s got their own problems, and nobody’s gonna think that my problems are any worse than theirs. So after a while I just learned not to complain to anybody.” He gives a half-shrug.

“You can complain to me,” I offer, trying to be helpful and lighten the mood.

“Why don’t you go first? You seem like you’ve got a lot of baggage to dump.”

Oh, do I. Where do I even begin? “I don’t think you’ve got time.”

“How do you know?”

“There *isn’t* enough time.”

He laughs. “Try me.”

“You really wanna hear about how I couldn’t go to regular school when we moved to California because I had to work? I went to public school for about a year, but we had to have a tutor at the house ‘cause my father would take me and my brothers out on jobs.” The memory alone frustrates me. “I hated every minute of it. All I wanted was to be back home so I could read books and draw pictures like normal kids.” I feel like I’m complaining too much even though he gave me permission to do so, so I try to steer the conversation back to him. “I’m so glad you’re letting Jordie have that.”

Evan smiles, but there’s a hint of sadness there, and I want to try to smooth it away with my hands or mouth. “I’m trying, but he’s the one who’s actually interested in doing something else. He doesn’t talk about it much, but I can tell he’s into other stuff—writing movies, drawing comics. He’s got more options than I did.”

We finish wrapping another present and move on to the final gift in the unwrapped pile. My hands fidget unnecessarily with the paper. I’m not sure what to say that won’t be an awful, retreading of the past for him. “Is this weird for you, celebrating two holidays at the same time?”

“Sort of. June tried to get us to do both. It’s how she was raised.” His mouth is somewhere between wistful and contented, like he doesn’t know how to feel about the memory. I hold my breath and wait for him to speak again. We sit in a familiar, tense silence while his fingers toy with the ribbon I’ve tied around the package.

“You miss her so much, huh?” That’s a horrible understatement. He huffs a humorless laugh, and his mouth does that sad pinching thing I’m well acquainted with. I think I pushed too much. “Thank you for letting us do both then.”

I get a glimpse of a dazzling half-smile before the jiggling of the doorknob interrupts us. Then: “Dad, the door’s locked.”

I’m scrambling to hide the presents underneath the bed. “What do you need, Jord’?” Evan asks.

“Can I come in?”

Evan’s laughing at my frantic attempts to hide any and all evidence that there were ever Christmas presents in this room. I’m sort of laughing at myself too. “No, kiddo, what do you want?” He grabs the last armful of boxes and stuffs them somewhere inside the closet.

There’s a short silence, then Jordan groans. “Ugh, don’t tell me you guys are naked in there.”

“Okay, I won’t,” Evan says with a smirk.

“Gross!”

He laughs and pulls open the door. “I’m kidding. What do you need?”

“I, uh, I need your help with that thing, remember?” Jordan says pointedly.

Evan thinks for a moment. “Oh, right! The thing. Yes. Of course.” He looks over his shoulder at me. “I’ll be back in a little bit.”

“I’ll warm up the bed for you,” I promise while I’m peeling back the blankets so I can slip inside their cocoon of warmth.

Jordan makes a sound of disgust, and Evan closes the door behind him when they leave.

#

Evan

In retrospect, it was probably a good idea for Michael to have been so adamant about making me wrap presents earlier; Jordan and I are now in his room wrapping our presents for Michael, and this would definitely take a lot longer with only one person doing the work.

“You got really good at this,” Jordan says with a small frown, like he’s hesitant to be impressed by my skills in case they turn out to be some sort of parlor trick. “Who taught you?”

I pretend to be offended. “Why do you have to assume someone taught me? I’m capable of learning things on my own, y’know.”

“Dad, I know you. Gift-wrapping is not a thing you’d learn unless someone made you do it.”

That’s technically true. “It was Michael,” I admit.

There’s a hint of a smile there. It’s practically microscopic, and the only reason it isn’t totally invisible is because I’m his father, but it’s there. “He’s good for you.” He forces the words out like he’s embarrassed to say them.

“You just said we were gross twenty minutes ago.” I might be antagonizing him on purpose.

Jordan squirms a bit. “Well, yeah, you are, but he’s still good for you. I mean, you’ve been a lot better since Michael came to live here.” I’m glad he’s been observing that, especially since he hadn’t been too thrilled at finding out Michael and I were dating.

“So have you,” I remind him.

He shrugs a little, uncomfortable with the attention but still appreciative. His hands begin to fidget with the bow stuck onto the wrapped gift between us. “Does this have anything to do with Mom?”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, I know Michael really wanted to have Christmas, but so did Mom.” He makes it sound sort of accusatory, but maybe that’s my own guilty conscience twisting his words. Wouldn’t be the first time.

“Yeah, it is, a little bit,” I admit, because to say that I did all of this for Michael alone would be a lie. “I wish I would’ve done more to make her happy while she was here.” I’m delving deep into the realm of things we don’t talk about, and I’m still no better at it.

“You did your best,” Jordan says softly, and it’s the worst thing he’s ever said to me. Because it means my best wasn’t enough and Jordan knows it. He knows that when I tried my hardest, it was all anger and demands and holding on too tight, and he knows it so well that it wasn’t even a surprise when I would lash out or turn innocuous conversation into an argument. It was just business as usual. Just Dad trying his best.

“I think I can do better, don’t you?” I owe it to her. If I can’t be better for our son, then what good am I?

Jordan nods. “You already are.”

12. A Very Special Hanukhristmas

Michael

I throw a very subdued Christmas party at the bar on Christmas Eve. Well, I can't technically call it a party, due to Evan's strict policy of not drawing attention to the place, so it's more of a holiday special with cheap drinks and platters of festive cookies and brownies I'd made the night before. Most people who dropped by for a drink or two ended up staying longer, which in turn influenced the other patrons' decisions to stick around. No one wants to be the first person to leave a party.

Dave's still lingering while I'm cleaning up. I'm trying to give him subtle hints that I'm closing the bar for the night—switching off the neon “open” sign out front, wiping off tables, stacking chairs. He's been here practically all day, and he seems to think that since we trade stilted conversation during my downtime that we're suddenly best pals. I don't hate the guy, but we don't really have anything in common save for our friendship with Evan.

That's why, at three in the morning on Christmas Day, instead of being home with Evan and Jordan, I'm stuck here at the bar with Dave Schwartz.

“You must've made some good money tonight,” he says.

“Yeah, we make a lot when I have food for sale.” Most bars serve complementary pretzels or peanuts to make their patrons thirstier; it's an old bar trick—the high salt content dehydrates you, making you buy more beer. But I find that kind of dishonest and skeezy; I'd rather serve food that actually tastes good—people will eat more if it's palatable, which eases my conscience about serving alcohol. “I think I'm gonna use the money to replace the pool table.” The pool table in the far corner is a sad, worn thing, beat up and faded over years of use. It's definitely seen better days; the balls have to be identified by color because their numbers have actually worn off.

Dave gives me an incredulous look. “What? Really? Don't you need the money?” Doesn't he know the family I come from? “Is Evan giving you an allowance now?”

“No, silly! I have my own money.” Dave sighs through his nose. I'm not sure what the expression on his face is supposed to mean. “Don't be so glum, chum. It's Christmas.” I flash him a smile, hoping it might inspire one of his own, but Dave remains grumpy and despondent. “I'm sure you've got something planned, right?” If he's planning on coming back to the bar, he'll be in for a nasty surprise: we're closed for Christmas.

“No... I kind of had much bigger plans that were supposed to have happened by now, but they fell through,” he says in quiet frustration. I wonder what those plans were. “Besides, I don't really celebrate Christmas, y'know, being Jewish and all.”

“Oh. Well, I’m sure Evan wouldn’t mind if you came over for dinner tonight. It won’t be just the three of us—some of Evan’s friends’ll be there. I’m sure you’ve seen ‘em here before. And his brother Ray—”

“Thanks, but no thanks, Michael,” Dave says, shoving a hand through his hair before hopping off of the barstool. “I think I’ll just enjoy a quiet day at home.”

I hate knowing that he’ll be alone, that he doesn’t have the comfort of friends or family to surround him during the holidays. But maybe it’s for the best that he doesn’t come over; seeing Evan’s prosperous life might only make Dave feel worse about his own situation.

He makes his way to the door. “Well, okay then. Good night. Drive safe,” I say to his back as he leaves.

It’s about four o’clock when I finally get home, and Evan’s kicked back on the couch, his feet on the coffee table while he drinks a beer. The fireplace glows with a soft, golden warmth.

“‘Bout time you showed up,” he says, the line of his mouth curving into a smile. I sit beside him, and he holds me close in a way that lets him breathe against my neck. One of his hands slides up my shirt and fans out over my back. I try to reciprocate the gesture, but he jerks away from me at the contact. “Shit, Michael, your hands are freezing!”

“That’s not really fair; you’ve been toasty warm in here for God knows how long.”

“Go take a hot shower. Warm up. I’ll be here when you come back.” His wink promises great things if I follow his instructions. He doesn’t have to tell me twice.

#

Evan

As promised, I’m waiting for Michael when he comes downstairs smelling of soap and lavender. I guide him towards the fireplace, eager to see how the perfect planes of his face look in the golden light. We sit on the floor, and he gazes back at me with eager eyes. He’s nothing short of stunning, of course, with his wide, shy smile, like he knows I’m appraising him.

“I wanna ask you something,” he starts.

“Ask away.”

He glances to my left at the Christmas tree, its plethora of multi-colored lights twinkling and shining. “Since it’s technically Christmas now, we should each open something early,” Michael says.

I smile at his enthusiasm. “Michael, you can’t wait a couple more hours?”

“Why should we wait? It’s Christmas. We’re not breaking any rules.”

“Jordie’ll be pissed if he finds out we got to open stuff early.”

“He doesn’t have to know,” Michael pleads.

“No dice, babe. You gotta wait like everyone else.”

He goes all pouty at me. I can see him trying to formulate another avenue of attack. “It’s more for you than me, Evan. There’s one thing I really wanna see if you like.”

“Is it that giant fuckin’ thing over there?” I ask, gesturing with my chin to an enormous wrapped package propped up against the wall. Seriously, it’s huge.

His smile is sweet and innocent. “No, I know you’ll like that one.”

“Is it a seductive, naked picture of you?”

That makes him laugh. “No, and stop trying to guess.” He sort of swats at my chest. “That’s not the one I want you to open.”

“You’re not opening anything early, Michael.”

“Will you open yours then?”

“Jeez, you’re worse than Jordie,” I tease him. “No, c’mon, this is your first Christmas. We ought’a do it right.” If he pouts any harder, his face might actually stay that way. “Michael, don’t be a brat.” I don’t think I’d ever be able to deny him anything if his face constantly looked like this. “Okay, fine, but I have one condition.”

That perks him right up. I think there’s a twinkle in his eye. “What is it?”

“You have to let me give you my present first.”

“That sounds reasonable.”

I love the look on Michael’s face when I kiss him; at first, he looks like he’s surprised that I would ever do such a thing, then his eyes close and his mouth softens against mine, and I feel the soft curl of a smile. He reaches up to tangle his fingers in my hair. I scoot closer, and he fists my t-shirt in a demanding pull, hauling me nearer and greedily mashing our mouths together.

I break away for a moment to look at him. His mouth is open and damp, his lips parted slightly and swollen red with lust. He licks them before taking his bottom lip between his teeth in that way of his that makes my hormones crackle and burst like fireworks. I drag him back to me with one hand, the other traveling up his shirt to feel his chest expand with each quick breath. My fingers play with a nipple, and he moans around my mouth, like he wants me to push his legs apart and just *fuck* him.

“Oh, you like that?”

I take his whole-body shiver as a yes and dip my head down, dragging his t-shirt over his head so I can take the bruised red nub into my mouth. Michael grits out an encouraging groan, burying his fingers in my hair. My teeth graze over the tender skin, and he makes a soft sound in his throat when I move to give my attention to his other nipple.

“You know what else I’d like?” Michael tries to sound like a tease, but with the way my mouth is suckling one nipple and my hand is tweaking the other, he sounds like he’s begging for an alternative solution to this whole orgasm thing.

“I know you want me to put my cock in you, Michael, but you’re just gonna have to wait.” The thought of sliding into his warm, wet heat conjures up a pretty pleasant mental image that slams straight through me. I kiss the curve of his ribs, my mouth trailing over his skin as I ease him onto his back. I move slowly, purposefully, and he sighs happily at the smooth texture of my lips and tongue contrasted with the sandpaper scrape of stubble.

He drags his fingers through my hair as my tongue swirls around his navel. I think he’s actually holding his breath. It’s only when my mouth nips at his hipbones do I realize that, yes, he totally is holding his breath, because he tries to yelp but there’s no air. I drag his pajama pants over his hips, pulling his underwear down with them. I’ve seen him naked a bunch of times, but never in this light, never beneath me with his eyes shut and his mouth open and wanting. My teeth graze over the jutting peak of his hipbone, and Michael wiggles his hips, letting me know exactly where he wants my attention.

The next sound he makes is a heavenly gasp when I wrap my fingers around his dick, hard in my hand. I’m careful with him, even as my thumb plays with the head while I plant my mouth along his inner thigh and suck bruises into the skin.

Michael jerks his hips underneath me and groans at the sensation. I probably shouldn’t be teasing him like this, but that moan doesn’t sound like he wants me to stop.

Okay, maybe he wants me to stop.

His leg snaps out at me, and I’m barely able to dodge it. “Jesus, Michael! Watch it!” I raise my head up to glare at him with the proper amount of intensity. “I wasn’t planning on any head injuries today.”

“Is that a double entendre?” Michael sticks his tongue out. I just roll my eyes before dropping back down to nuzzle his thighs. My mouth is everywhere except his dick, but it really needs to be, because he’s probably going to come pretty soon. I’ve never done this before, and I’m hoping that Michael’s not gonna be upset about my lack of experience in this area.

I run my hands up his thighs before I take the head of his cock into my mouth. Michael cries out in bliss, rolling his hips in desperate need. It’s not enough to make me pull away, but I

wrap my hands around his hips to remind him that I'm a novice at this. I drag my tongue along the aching length of his dick. Michael squirms, his back arching and his fingers tightening my hair. I work my mouth and tongue, finding the ways to touch him that make him moan against the air and make his fingers dig quick into my scalp.

Michael slings his heels over my shoulders and forces his cock too deep in my throat. I pull away, my lips sliding back up to the head, and Michael props himself up on his elbows to look at me curiously. "I—I'm sorry," he apologizes breathlessly.

"It's okay, just...remember, I'm not as good at this as you are." He chuckles, and I kiss his inner thigh. "Is it good?"

Michael nods, makes a cracked noise of agreement in his throat as he lies back down, his hair disheveled and wild splayed out on the rug beneath him. I take him in as far as I can, and I feel the squeeze of his thighs against my cheeks as he tenses. My hands slide along the angle of his hips up to his waist, and Michael meets me there, his fingers curling around my forearms and digging in when he's about to go over the edge.

"Evan..." There's a soft edge of warning in his voice, then Michael breaks apart almost instantly, a ragged cry leaving his mouth as he loses himself.

I thought I was ready for it, but I clearly miscalculated. When Michael comes, it hits my throat, hot and thick in my mouth, and makes me gag instantly. Some of it ends up on his stomach while I'm gasping and choking, feeling a warm trickle in the wrong place in my throat.

Michael's actually sort of laughing at me, which really doesn't make this better.

"I could have died!" I manage around a hacking cough.

"How did you not expect that?" Michael asks, panting and shaky. "What did you think was gonna come outta there, a parade?"

I glare at him viciously. "Shut up. Do you always nitpick your presents?"

"I dunno, this is the first time I've ever gotten one." He sticks his tongue out. I'm about to snap at him, but I cough again. Goddamn it.

"I didn't think it was gonna be"—I stop to cough—"like that."

Michael traces his fingertips over my arms. "Well, maybe if you practice you'll get better," he says in a way that's supposed to sound innocent.

"Not if you're going to laugh at me."

He actually looks miserable, like the prospect of not laughing at my failures physically wounds him. “Alright, fine.” He pushes himself up and stares down at me. “I guess I gotta show you how it’s done, huh?”

“I guess you do.”

13. It’s My Birthday And I’ll Angst If I Want To

Michael

The holidays pass in an incredible, wonderful blur of love and family. For Christmas, I’d gotten Evan an enormous television set for the living room—the giant box he’d been eyeing all week—a custom leather jacket (courtesy of Janet), and a Cartier timepiece. He’d protested that my lavishing him with gifts only made us more imbalanced.

“Evan, you’ve given me you,” I’d said to him. “You’ve given me the opportunity to have a real life with you and Jordie. That means more to me than anything you could buy at a store.”

He’d laughed and called me a walking cliché, but I could tell this perceived “imbalance” bothered him more than it should.

Jordan was thrilled to receive his toys and video games from the both of us, however, and that was what really mattered to us.

Ray was much more civil to me at the Christmas party than he had been at Thanksgiving, but that truly isn’t saying much. At least he didn’t storm out when Evan and I shared a touch that lasted a little too long.

New Years’ was spent cuddling together on the couch, and then taking the “party” upstairs to Evan’s bedroom after Jordan fell asleep.

For Jordan’s thirteenth birthday on January 11th, I admit I probably went a little too far. I’d opted to make the cake—chocolate with cookies and cream icing—and cookies and brownies (chocolate chip and cheesecake, respectively). Evan didn’t complain, because his sweet tooth practically rules his decision-making, but he did get pretty angry with me when I’d asked him to help me wrap Jordan’s presents the night before. I wasn’t sure if this was another emotional milestone—Jordan’s first birthday without June—or if Evan was actually upset with *me*. But then he made it crystal clear.

“I wanted to do more,” I’d said to Evan, “but I thought maybe I was going a little overboard.”

Evan scoffed. “Oh, well, gee, thanks for that, Michael. I’ve already lost my son to you entirely, but that would’ve tipped it right over the fuckin’ edge.”

I stared at him in awe that he could ever think something like that. “Did—did Jordie tell you that?”

He’d laughed a bitter sound. “No, but he doesn’t need to. Any idiot can see what’s going on here. You just waltz in and throw your money around, impressing Jordan and basically ensuring that his ‘Favorite Dad’ sticker sits firmly in your corner instead of mine.”

I reached for his hands, but he’d pulled them away from me, folding his arms over his chest in childlike defiance. “Baby, no, don’t think that way. You’re his father. Trust me, I know about fathers. You always love them deep down, no matter what.”

Evan hadn’t argued with me after that, but he did stay sullen and scowly, temporarily realigning his expression into something more pleasant around Jordan.

A couple days later, I’d asked Jordan when Evan’s birthday was, if I’d missed it, and if we should do something special for him.

Jordan laughed. “No, dude, trust me. Dad hates his birthday. We don’t do anything for it.”

“You—you don’t?”

“Well, Uncle Ray usually buys him a beer, and Mom used to get him, like, socks or something, but that’s as far as it went.”

I frowned. Why wouldn’t Evan want to celebrate his birthday? “So...nothing? No cake, no cards, not even a ‘happy birthday’?”

“It’s up to you, Mike, but don’t say I never warned you.”

I decided to ignore Jordan’s warning and make Evan a cake for his birthday on the 25th. I could understand why he wouldn’t want presents—his talk of “imbalance” on Christmas told me enough about that—but to at least celebrate it? I couldn’t see how it might hurt. So I spent all afternoon preparing a fancy dinner and a cake for him.

Jordan comes up from the basement and sees the platter of stuffed shells on the table. “I wanna go on record that I’m not okay with this.”

“What, it’s just dinner,” I say sort of defensively.

“I just hope you’re ready to deal with Dad. He’s gonna be pissed.”

“I don’t think he will. It’s not like I would have known he thinks his birthday’s such a...bleak event.”

“Well, no, but you wouldn’t have known what day it was unless you asked somebody, and if that person knew when it was, they’d also know he doesn’t like to celebrate it.” He gives me a “told you so” smirk. “You’re in so much trouble.”

We both hear the distant slam of Evan’s car door from inside the garage. Jordan quickly flops onto the couch and pretends to have no part in my celebratory dinner. I’m about to call him a traitor when the garage door opens and Evan steps inside.

“Oh good, you made dinner,” he says, his eyes brilliant with excitement.

“Of course!” I stop myself before I say something stupid like, “Why wouldn’t I? It’s your birthday!”

Evan doesn’t notice my brief moment of panic. He slides past me on his way to the staircase, his hand brushing my stomach as he passes by. He gives me a lust-filled glance over his shoulder before he disappears on the stairs. I think about following him, about letting him maul me against the shower wall, but I figure he can wait for a couple hours.

It’s only when I bring out the cake does Evan get a little suspicious of my motives. “You made dessert too? What’s the occasion?” There’s a healthy dose of accusation in his voice.

“Since when do I need an occasion to do something nice for you?”

“Since, well, ever.” I frown at the assumption. Jordan’s wearing his guilty face which is making this a lot more awkward than it needs to be. Evan looks over at him, then raises an eyebrow at me. “Michael, what did you do?”

“I didn’t do anything!” I protest a little too loudly. Jordan is actually laughing at me, albeit quietly.

Evan doesn’t push, just accepts the cake in pointed, doubtful silence.

When we get upstairs to his bedroom, I try seducing him, but my hands barely manage to slide up his shirt before he grabs my wrists and sits us on the bed. “Alright, Michael, you can tell me now. What did you do that’s so bad it warrants dinner, dessert, and sex?”

My brow creases in petulance. “Evan, I didn’t do anything. I thought I’d do something nice for you ‘cause it’s your birthday, you big ass.”

Evan’s lovely face turns to impassive stone. His dark eyebrows form an angry line over his eyes. “Jordan told you.”

“No, I coaxed it out of him.” Evan’s expression is still unreasonably livid. “C’mon, baby, what’s wrong?” I poke his stone of a shoulder. He doesn’t respond. “I know you don’t hate all birthdays, because you were happy to celebrate Jordie’s a couple weeks ago. So what is it? What’s so bad about birthdays?” I cuddle closer to him, placing my hands on the backs of his.

“Tell me. I won’t laugh or judge you or think it’s dumb. Pinky promise.” I offer my pinky; he does not find it enticing.

Evan watches the way my fingers trace small circles over the backs of his hands. He snorts out an angry, heated breath, but his fingers start to stroke mine in a tender gesture of affection. “Getting older.”

“Aw, c’mon, I’m sure you’re not that old.”

“What are you, like...thirty?”

“Give or take a couple years. Why?”

“I might be a little bit older than you.”

“So?” I say with a shrug.

He lets the silence hang in the air before he speaks again. “Okay, maybe more than a little.”

“I know you want me to bite with ‘How much more?’, but I’m not gonna do that because it doesn’t matter to me how old you are. Do you think I won’t care about you anymore if I know your age?” I almost want to laugh at how ridiculous that notion is, but I don’t because I promised him I wouldn’t.

“Not that you won’t care, but... Let’s face it, you’ve got a lotta options, Michael. It’s not like you’re stuck with me ‘cause I’m the best you can get.”

“No, I’m stuck with you ‘cause I wanna be.” I stick my tongue out at him and earn a small smile. “Besides, I sort of have a thing for older men.” I feel my face heat up from the weight of the admission.

“Well, is that *thing* gonna be worth it when I die ten or twenty years before you do?”

I huff an exasperated breath, blowing a few loose curls out of my face. “Evan, don’t be ridiculous.” He just rolls his eyes at me; now I see where Jordan gets it from. “You can’t be sure of that.”

“Let’s just say I wouldn’t bet against those odds.”

I sigh and lean my head on his shoulder, my hand toying with the hem of his t-shirt. “Well, I would. I don’t think you’re old at all. And no, I don’t need to know your age to determine that. It’s all in the way you act. You make jokes, you tease me about practically everything, and”—my teeth graze over his earlobe—“you definitely don’t have any trouble *satisfying* me.”

“Enjoy it while it lasts,” he says in a way that manages to sound irritated and wounded at the same time. “I may not be able to do it much longer.”

“Maybe not if you get your hands blown off in a horrific accident...” Evan doesn’t appreciate my attempt at humor. He’s being very stubborn tonight. “Trust me,” I murmur, “you drive me crazy.” I grind the heel of my hand against the swell of his cock through his sweatpants. He makes a breathy sound, pushing his hips into my touch. “The way you touch me...the way you look at me...” I get my hand under his clothes, wanting to make him feel even a fraction of the knotted lust and ache I feel with him. I stroke my fingers over his cock. He breathes a stunned noise of surprise and tilts his head back. I climb into his lap, rocking my hips in quick little jerks against him before I push him down into the sheets.

“Michael, wait, wait,” he protests, his eyes still closed in bliss as his legs shift beneath me.

I sit up in his lap, fearing he’s gone back to his resentful demeanor. “What, you don’t...”

He shakes his head. “No, I—I wanna try something.” I’m not entirely sure he’s not going to sulk away from me if I let him up. “For my birthday.”

“I thought you wanted me to ignore your birthday.”

“Well, I changed my mind. Get up.”

I lick my lips at the command in his voice. “Yes, sir.” I slide off of him, landing at his side on the bed, curious as to the thoughts in his head. Evan twines my hands in his and presses me down against the mattress. I stare up at him in wonder before his hips grind into mine, conveying his intentions. I bite my lip, my thoughts a lusty red haze of nerves and arousal.

Evan notes the brief flicker of fear in my eyes. “You’ll let me, right?” I nod, unable to speak, and he tugs my pajamas and underwear down my legs, pulls my t-shirt over my head before letting me do the same to him. My shaky hands trail up his bare thighs, curve around his hips to bring him closer to me. I can feel the hot, hard ache of his cock against my thigh. I reach for it, but he catches my wrist and pins it at my side, shaking his head. My legs wrap around his hips, ready for him however he’ll have me.

My heartbeat is a nervous flutter in my chest. I trust him not to hurt me, but the surrender of power is somewhat exhilarating. Evan’s been a passive participant in our intercourse for the most part, letting me set the pace and rhythm and force. This is monumental for him—it will be his first time in control with me. His first time since June died...

I feel the slow stab of heat, and my hands dig into his arms. “I got you,” he promises, gliding a hand underneath my knee to bring us together in one smooth slide. Evan’s totally helpless once he’s inside of me, if the way his other hand is caught in the sheets is any indication. Neither of us is going to last very long. But that’s okay, because Evan shoves into me in a way that’s shivery-good, that makes my hips tilt up against the solid press of heat. My mouth opens for him, never needing to be coaxed, and we move together in a slow roll of sensation. His hands

clutch my hips so he can drive all the way in and hit the spot that makes me shudder and hiss out words in fragments and gasps.

My legs are a tangle around his hips and his ass, pulling him in, needing to feel every twinge of want in his muscles and hopeless shudder his body makes when he's buried within me. I press my fingers into the flesh of his ass, the taut skin drawn over his spine, the jutting peaks of his back, trying to memorize the feel of him, as if his body's a puzzle I'm trying to put together.

Evan kisses me in a hot shove of mouth and teeth, biting vicious want into my bottom lip. When he pulls away, I moan a graceless sound, and my shaky fingers grip around his biceps when I feel the rush of heat building and burning until I can't breathe. Evan grinds into me, giving himself over to it and falling over the edge, making a low, rough noise of satisfaction in his throat. I squeeze my thighs around him, and he rides out the wave with slow, deep thrusts that break me open, dragging my release out in long, wet pulls.

His body shudders once before he falls back down, fingers clutching the sheets as he gasps and aches above me. We're both messy and breathless and satisfied. He shifts, sliding against my slick, wet stomach, and the feel of my cum between us makes him moan again. I kiss his panting mouth, gentle and appreciative. He breathes in shaky, hard gasps against my lips, and I curl my fingers in his messy hair, kissing him until he goes quiet.

Evan rests against the curve of my stomach and smirks. "You up for a shower?"

14. Enemies Closer

Evan

Larry's outside of the bar one balmy March evening, sucking on a cigarette like it might hold the world's secrets.

"I thought you quit smoking."

"Yeah, well, it's been a long fuckin' week. I'm stressed."

I stand next to him, my back pressed against the spackled wall. "I'm listening."

"Some of our associates are deciding to form alliances with other Families," he explains around a puff of the cigarette. "Most of them have joined up with the Cascios; word is they run New York now, not us."

"Just 'cause they hooked a couple'a stragglers?"

He turns to look at me. "It's more than that, Evan. Haven't you wondered why the Cascios have a lot more pull now than they used to? Or why you haven't been earning as much in kick-ups? People aren't afraid of us anymore."

"Well, what's Dom doin' that we're not?"

"His job." Larry fixes me with an intense stare. "Something's distracting you. Maybe it's Michael, maybe it's problems at home, but it's killing us. Dominic Cascio owns the East Coast now."

It takes a while for that to sink in. How the hell did I miss something like this? "Why am I just now hearing about this?"

"You honestly haven't even noticed, have you?" Larry says, looking at me like I'm an idiot before taking another drag off his cigarette. "Maybe you ought'a pull your head outta your ass...or Michael's."

The bar's nearly empty when Dominic Cascio stops by later that night. Dominic owns a small Italian restaurant down the block called Aldo's, named after his brother with whom he operates the joint. Dominic's also the head of New York's most powerful Family, if what Larry said has any weight. He beckons me over to a table near the back of the room. Commanding me to move instead of deferring to my power and sitting across from me. Interesting.

When I sit down, he says, "So I got this job I need to do, but my boys are too busy, y'know, with the casinos." Dominic owns a few hotels around Atlantic City but most of his manpower goes into managing the casinos. "It's gotta go down tomorrow night, so I figured we could work something out that's mutually beneficial."

“What’s the job?”

“There’s a big shipment coming in at the Container Terminal just outside of Jersey. I’ll give you one of my guys—name’s Victor Gutierrez. He can convince the Spanish-speaking workers there to, y’know, *lose track* of a couple’a packages. Bring ‘em back to my place, and I’ll take care of it from there.” He places his hands flat on the table. “I’ll give ya, say, fifteen percent of the cut.”

“How much we talkin’?”

“About fifty grand total.”

I try to hide my surprise. Fifteen percent of that divided amongst the other crew members I would send on the job—that’s chump change. I’m almost insulted.

“I’m gonna have to think about this one, Dom. Talk to the guys, maybe renegotiate.”

He gives a low chuckle and leans in. “I don’t think you’re in a position to negotiate anything. You’re not the biggest fish in the pond anymore, kid.”

“Be that as it may, I still don’t take orders from you. I’ll talk to my guys, see if they want a part in it, and I’ll give you my answer tomorrow.”

Dominic stares me down for a long moment before silently stalking out of the bar.

I meet with Larry and Ray in the back room to discuss the deal. Larry just listens with a stiff, scary expression on his face, but Ray is all animated irritation.

“Oh, fuck that guy!” he barks, before reconsidering with a disgusted look. “No, wait, never mind. You actually might.”

Larry snorts a quiet laugh under his breath. I am not amused. “This sound like a set-up to you or not?”

“He ain’t the kind of guy to send somebody to the wolves,” Ray says. “He didn’t get where he is by bein’ vindictive.”

“There somethin’ you wanna say to me?” I glare at him.

Ray puts his hands up as if warding off an imaginary attacker. “I didn’t say nothin’.”

Larry puts us back on track. “Maybe you should go, Evan. Bring a couple of JD’s guys, but if you’re there it might deter anyone from making an unwise move against the Family. Eliminating a boss is still very much frowned upon.”

Something on my face must communicate the fact that I’m not too crazy about this idea.

“It’s not typical for a boss to do the dirty work like this himself,” Larry explains. “If he intends to make an aggressive move, Dom may be counting on you sending soldiers out to do the job.”

“If I die, I’m blaming it on you.”

So that was how I ended up getting acquainted with Victor Gutierrez. The following night, the job went off without a hitch—nobody even drew their gun—and we took the celebration to the bar, our pockets stuffed with paltry sums of cash. Me, Victor, and Ray sit around the table dealing hands of Blackjack and ordering drinks. The bar is practically empty, but Michael’s busy enough tending to us.

He saunters over to our table and sets down another round, sliding my gin and tonic over to me. “You sure are in a good mood tonight.” My mouth dries up when I take in the flirty tilt of his hips. The alcohol rakes my throat with fire.

“It’s all thanks to this guy.” I point at Victor with my thumb. He leans back in his chair as if the compliment has made him more comfortable in his skin.

“Dom never told me you were such a smooth talker, Evan,” Victor says.

Ray rolls his eyes so hard I fear they might roll right out of his skull.

“Yeah, he sells me short. It’s the curse of being so devastatingly handsome,” I tell Victor.

Michael laughs. “And modest. Don’t forget modest.”

“Now *you’re* sellin’ me short.” I give him a quick, pointed look that he feels in his bones.

“Let me know if you need anything else,” Michael says before walking back to the bar.

When Michael’s out of earshot, Victor leans in and whispers, “So, he yours?”

The extent of my relationship with Michael is not public knowledge, though our closest friends and most trusted associates know about us. “We gonna have a problem here?”

Victor gives me a big, hearty laugh at that. “No, of course not! I was just curious.” He takes a casual sip of his scotch. “So, you two got a thing goin’, huh?”

The look on Ray’s face tells me he’s wishing very hard to be an only child.

“Ain’t nobody’s business if we are, Victor.”

He drops the subject for the rest of the evening.

Ray shows no signs of being a supportive brother on the drive home. “Man, Victor’s got your dick in his mouth almost as much as Michael does.”

“What is with your strange, almost obsessive concern with my dick? There somethin’ you wanna tell me?”

He blows a gust of air out of his nose I’m assuming is supposed to be a “fuck you.” My brother is nothing if not juvenile. “I’m just sayin’, Ev. I don’t trust him. Guy’s a sleazebag.”

You know you’ve crossed the line somewhere if Ray calls you a sleazebag. “We couldn’t have pulled that off without him and you know it.”

Ray pouts in that way of his when he knows I’m right but doesn’t want to admit it. “Just be careful, alright?”

“Sure.”

#

Michael

“Hey, Michael, you gonna be busy this Saturday?” Evan asks me the next evening after dinner.

“I think Jordie wanted to go somewhere with me. Why? You need me to work?”

“No, I was wondering if you were free.” He scratches the back of his neck. “Like, for maybe a date?”

My eyebrows shoot up. We’ve been together for about five months now, and we’ve yet to go on an official date. That might be due in part to my reluctance to let Evan be seen in public with me “that way.” I’m not embarrassed at all to be dating him, but his reputation is important. People need to respect him, and if word gets out that he’s “with” me, well, respect for other people’s life choices isn’t exactly a characteristic of this business.

But I guess just going out to dinner doesn’t necessarily signal to everyone in a five mile radius that we’re together. So I nod agreeably and ask him to elaborate. “Okay, what did you have in mind?”

His hopeful smile falls apart as he speaks. “Well, uh, you remember Mark, right?”

“That doctor guy your dad was friends with?”

“Yeah, yeah, he comes around sometimes, remember?”

“Right.”

“Well, his sister’s gettin’ married on Saturday, and I was invited, and I thought maybe you might want to, y’know, go together.”

“*Together* together?”

Evan’s face goes hot, red with chagrin. “Well, yeah, that’s the idea. We’re a couple, right?”

“Evan...”

Something in my tone makes him decide to abort the mission. “If you don’t want to it’s fine, I just—I just figured I’d ask—it’s no big deal or anything.”

I place a hand on his arm to quell his flood of words spewing forth. “Evan, I don’t think that’s such a good idea. I’d love to go with you, but if we go ‘together’ it might get back to my father.”

Evan shrugs. “So?”

“So, my father deludes himself into thinking I’m only interested in women.”

“What’s he gonna do, ground you?”

“He could force me to come home,” I offer.

Another shrug. “I’d like to see him try.”

“What about your reputation? You don’t think people won’t look at you differently if they know we’re together?”

“Jordie doesn’t...for the most part. And so what if they do? Fuck ‘em. They won’t talk to me about it because they can’t defend their position and they’re too scared of me. So I won’t even know about whatever they’re saying.”

“That’s the point, though. They’re barely scared of you now. Your Family name’s lost a lot of its pull; this could be the final push that tips the scales and renders you powerless.” Evan continues to scowl. “I mean, you’re supposed to be this feared, macho, tough guy, and can you imagine how many people are going to blame what happened to June as the trigger for your ‘sudden switch?’” His entire face winces like he’s been stabbed. Now he looks very pissed off. “I know that’s not what happened, but that’s how it’s gonna look.”

He rakes a hand through his hair. “Well, you *are* a Jackson. Maybe it’ll make me more intimidating. Like, you fuck with me, you fuck with the Jacksons.”

His desperate backpedaling is causing me severe second-hand embarrassment. “I just don’t think it’s a good idea right now.”

“Well, when will it be, Michael?” Evan snaps.

“Isn’t it enough that we’re happy together? Why is it so important to you that other people validate our relationship?”

His hands clench into fists at his side. “I don’t know. I just—I just feel like we should be able to do things like this,” he grates out through his teeth. “But no, I guess even the people who are dating me don’t want to be seen in public with me!” He storms off before I can say anything in response.

That could have gone better.

#

Evan

I go to the bar after the fight with Michael, needing to get out of the house before I insult him or say more things that are wrong and heated. Victor’s there, sipping a mojito and reading a newspaper. He waves me over to his table when he sees me.

“Sheesh, man, you look like you could use a drink.”

“If you’re buyin’, sure. But none of that fruity shit.”

After my first shot of whiskey, Victor asks, “So how’d you get into all this anyway?”

“All what?”

“This.” Victor makes a gesture to the room that I don’t understand.

“The bar?”

“No, the business,” he says in surrender, with what I feel is a completely uncalled for amount of frustration.

“Oh, well, I didn’t have a choice, really. My father was very convincing.”

“Did you want a choice?”

This conversation is becoming an uncomfortable mirror of the ones I’ve had with Michael about the same topic. I shrug in a way that says nothing at all. “Yeah. Would’a been nice, y’know? I had delusions of grandeur just like everybody else.”

“Like what?”

“I got a box of old screenplays I wrote somewhere, probably buried in the closet. My son liked to entertain the notion that I might be able to write movies.”

Victor raises an eyebrow. "Ain't that what JD does?"

"He's sold a couple, yeah."

"Then why the fuck's he hang around you guys? No offense."

"He needed the money. He may not look it, but the guy's a total pussy. Can't handle a gun or nothin'. But he's smart, and he's got 'leadership skills,' so my father made him capo'."

Victor tilts his head in thought. "Why don't you sell yours? Follow your dreams, and all that shit."

I scoff a laugh. "I don't think that's gonna be possible for me." My habit of self-sabotage is much too strong.

"Suit yourself."

We keep up the idle chit-chat for a while until Victor asks, "So, what's eatin' you, anyway?"

I don't know why I answer honestly. I guess I just want someone else's opinion who doesn't seem like they'd be disgusted by my relationship with Michael. "Michael doesn't wanna be seen with me in public because he's worried about my reputation."

Victor snorts derisively. "I was wonderin' why you two weren't more public. Y'know, loud and proud."

I groan internally at the stereotype. "He doesn't want his father finding out. You know how it is."

Victor chuckles in a way that tells me he absolutely does. "You don't find it odd?"

"You ever meet his father? Not the kind of guy you wanna be enemies with."

He shrugs. "Hey man, I learned to keep my friends close and my enemies closer. If you trust the guy, that's your call. I'm sure you're right." He takes another sip.

"You think he's lying?"

"Well, tell me this, Evan. What reason would he want to keep it hidden unless he has something to hide?"

I'm not following his line of logic. "He doesn't want his father to know. And I get that, I guess, but he's a grown man. It shouldn't really matter what his father says about it. And then he goes on about how my reputation will be ruined or tarnished if people knew, which...it's nobody's goddamn business what I do with my dick."

“Do you think he’s projecting?”

“What?”

“Y’know, like, taking his own fears of being found out and putting them on you. Maybe he’s the one who’s worried about ruining his reputation.”

I let that bounce around in my brain over another shot of whiskey.

“Have you two ever gone out before?”

“Like as a couple? No. People see us here, but that’s ‘cause he works here. We don’t go out on dates. We stick to indoor stuff like watching movies or TV.” As I speak, I feel myself traveling toward some murky place in my head I’m not sure I want to go.

Victor nods like he’s been expecting this. “So what reason would he want to hide it to such an extent that he won’t go out with you?” I haven’t the faintest idea. “Have you tried talking to him about it?”

“Yeah, I told him I don’t care what people think about me. It didn’t seem to matter.”

“Maybe he’s got a secret reputation you don’t know about.”

I raise an eyebrow. “Meaning?”

Victor shrugs. “If I had to get close enough to learn the secrets of my enemy, a little sex here and there wouldn’t be nothin’—so long as the whole world didn’t know about it.”

I feel a curl of nausea in the pit of my stomach and try to drown it with another shot.

#

Evan

Could Michael really be a spy sent by Joseph to take over the Family from the inside? The theory makes sense, but it’s a hell of a gamble that sex would play a part in it. When I’d met Michael, my wounds from losing June were raw and bleeding; engaging in any sort of intimacy—physical or emotional—hurt like a blade stabbing in deep and then splintering off. Even now, I still feel the sharp edges of guilt when I touch him a certain way or say something more meaningful than just surface snark.

But Michael is agreeable in a way that’s almost eerie. He doesn’t like to make waves or disagree with me if he thinks it might cause a problem. This is the first time he’s ever really argued or insisted contrarily to me. And the issue at hand was that of bringing our relationship out into the open. I wonder if that means something.

When I get back from the bar, still feeling the warm buzz from the whiskey, it's about midnight. Michael's in his own room, having fitful sleep in his bed. I slink into the bedroom and stand over him. "Michael."

He rolls over onto his back to face me. "What are you doin' in here?"

"What are *you* doing *here*?" I really hope we're not having a sit-com moment right now.

Michael sits up and runs a hand through his messy hair, leaving it in new disarray. "Well, you were mad at me, so I didn't think you'd want me there in bed with you. I thought this might be easier until we had the chance to talk about it."

"We had a disagreement. It's not the end of the world."

He shrugs, looks up at me with honest eyes. "I don't like upsetting you."

I feel a prickle of suspicion at his words and try to shake it off. "Well, we'll get better at this. It's still new." I offer him my hand. "C'mon, you don't have to stay here. Come back to bed."

He takes my hand and lets me lead him into our bedroom at the end of the hall. "You're not still mad, are you?" he asks when we're inside.

"I guess not. I mean, I didn't change my mind or anything, but I'm not angry about it." I shrug and sort of nudge him onto the bed. "We'll talk about it later."

Michael nods, reaches up so his fingers curl in my shirt. "Does that mean I can kiss you?"

"Always."

Thrilled by my permission, he tugs me closer to bring my mouth to his. He's nipping and biting at my lips which is starting to make my insides all twisty and tense with want. One of his hands begins to work the buttons of my shirt from their clasps before sliding over my chest. His other hand drifts to my belt to unlatch it. I rise up to my knees to make his task easier, and Michael does the same, his eyes dark with lust. He digs his hand into my underwear, pulling out my cock. His fingers grip around the shaft a little too tightly, but his thumb is dragging along the underside of my dick in a way that tells me I'm absolutely going to blow my load right now if he keeps doing this.

I make a low sound of approval, and Michael gently shoves me onto my back so he can go down on me. I grit my teeth to silence any embarrassing noises that might pour out of my throat, but it's useless because I know I'm moaning sounds that make Michael smile around my cock, his mouth sucking and his tongue swiping and ohfuckohfuck why is he so good at this? It doesn't make sense. Michael takes me in deeper, lets my dick glide past his lips and bump against the back of his throat, and he's actually fucking *grinning* at the sharp inhale I make and

the way my nails rake over his scalp. He's a goddamn natural; everything about his technique is too practiced, too theatrical to be genuine.

I shove his head away—carefully, because I still want my dick attached to my body—and study his face. “You don't like it?” he asks timidly.

“Where'd you learn how to do this?”

Michael looks bewildered by the question. He sits up in the space between my legs. “You really wanna talk about that now?” I push back the loose tendrils of hair dangling over his face and wonder if the man I've fallen in love with here is a lie. Has it all been an act of fantasy to extract secrets or information from me, or does he really care for me this way?

“There's something I wanna try. Do you mind?”

He shakes his head. “No.”

“You don't even know what it is.”

“I trust you.”

You shouldn't. I push him back against the mattress and climb over him, my knees on either side of his ribs. I sit in his lap like a king on a throne. Michael grinds his hips against my ass, and I can feel his cock, swollen with need. He bites his lip and watches the slow slide of my hand play along the length of my dick. His hips roll in a needy rhythm while my own buck into my fist, and the friction is about twenty different kinds of intense and amazing. Everything about this is fantastic, actually. Michael's hands grip around my thighs, forcing our hips to grind together in a way that makes me moan a strangled, helpless cry. God, that is so fucking good.

When I feel like I'm close, I rise up onto my knees again, staring down at him. “You want me to come?” His hips answer with an affirmative yes. I grab his hair and pull his mouth to my cock. A few more tugs is all it takes for me to break apart. There are way too many things I want to pay attention to here, and I soak them all in. Michael's ready for it, his tongue darting out to capture the stripes of my orgasm. He shoves his hips against me, and I can't help but smirk when I look at him beneath me with pearly evidence of my lust dripping from his mouth. He tries to mirror the expression, but it looks wrong on his face somehow; he's in no position to look so smug, not when he's licking my cum off of his face.

I smear my thumb in the wet, white splatter streaked across his cheek, and he takes the digit into his mouth, the taste of my need bitter on his tongue. He swallows and bites his lip, looking way too pleased with himself. I just came on his face; he doesn't have permission to look so fucking happy about this. A normal person probably would be pissed I didn't warn them first; Michael here just takes it in stride like a goddamn porn star.

He's definitely done this before.

And if he hasn't, he's doing it now for my benefit, putting on an act and never raising opposition to my wants in the bedroom. Because that's the one place where no one knows about it.

Defeated by my climax and my worries, I sit back in his lap and let him grind against me until it's his turn to fall over the edge. He grips the sheets in his hands, his teeth digging into his bottom lip as he crumbles. "That was hot, babe," he says, his chest heaving with exertion. I grunt and crawl off of him, unbuttoning the last few buttons on my shirt and tossing it to the floor. I slip into bed once my clothes are off. I can feel Michael watching me curiously. "You okay?"

"Yeah, just tired," I mumble, my face pressed into the pillow. Michael cuddles close and wraps his arms around me. I try to ignore the way it makes me feel. His warm breath flares over the back of my neck. I try to ignore that, too. Because it can't be real. He couldn't possibly have liked that. I was with June for over twenty years, and if I pinned her down and jerked off on her face she'd probably have mortally wounded me—or at least had a few words to say about it. But Michael practically fuckin' orgasms from it. I'm glad he's into shit like that, but his enthusiasm feels manufactured, like he's putting on an act for my sake. Coupled with what Victor had said about Michael have some secret reputation he doesn't want known...

I lay awake for some time, internally debating both sides of the issue and getting absolutely nowhere. I don't know what to believe now. It isn't until Michael sort of squeezes me in his sleep that I have a moment of clarity. His hold around my waist tightens, and he cuddles closer against my back, wiggling into the infinitesimal space between us.

Maybe I'm wrong. Obviously he cares for me. The sex might be for show, but little subconscious things like this can't be lies. The way he laughs at my stupid jokes, the way he's drawn to me like a magnet when we're near each other, the way he holds me like I'm impossibly fragile...

It's real, right?

#

When Saturday night rolls around, we're down at the harbor again on another job when Victor asks me, "How are things with you and Michael? Did you get to go on your date?"

Why does this guy care so much about my relationship, I wonder? Could he be interested in Michael? Or maybe he's interested in me. My mirror works; I know I'm good-looking. "No, I went alone, but we talked it over and decided to just take things slowly."

"So what's he doin' now?"

"He took Jordie to a movie. They've been hanging out a lot lately."

"Don't you think there's somethin' odd about how much time he spends with your kid?" Victor asks as we're loading boxes into the back of Ray's Ford Explorer.

“Not really. I mean, he’s sort of like a kid himself. They’re into the same things like comic books and video games. I think it’s good for Jordie to have someone he can talk to and hang out with. I mean, Michael’s not gonna potentially get him into stuff that might harm him like his friends at school might, y’know?”

“Yeah, makes sense. It doesn’t bother you that he’s so much older than Jordan?”

“Well, age in and of itself isn’t a harmful thing.”

“True, but do you think maybe Michael’s using his age and his experience and his money to get an advantage over Jordan?”

I sit down beside a box in the back of the car. “What do you mean?”

“Well, what’s Jordan been like with you since Michael showed up?”

I think about it. “He’s...different, I guess. Not necessarily in a bad way, but he was really gung-ho about hanging out with Michael at first. Then when he found out we were dating he sorta pulled away from both of us, but then he was right back to hangin’ on Michael. He does gravitate to Michael a bit more than he does to me or any of his friends, but I don’t think there’s anything inherently wrong with that.”

Ray comes back and finds us lollygagging. “Hey, c’mon, quit sittin’ around with your thumbs up your asses.”

I don’t get to talk to Victor again that night, which I am absolutely okay with, because every conversation I have with him spirals my mind into a different, more confusing direction than the last. Is he trying to pull me away from Michael so he can move in on me? He hasn’t exactly been shit-talking Michael, but his questions are leading me to examine my relationship with him in areas we’re not completely comfortable with yet. Even if I stop talking to Victor, he’s already unleashed a Pandora’s box of doubts and confusion in my head. There’s no putting this genie back in the bottle.

I get home late that night and stumble into the foyer. Michael and Jordan are curled up together on the couch, with Michael’s arm wrapped tightly around him. Jordan’s practically cocooned inside Michael’s embrace. Dread twists in my gut. I tiptoe over to the couch and lift up the blanket that’s draped over them. Thank God, neither of them are missing any articles of clothing.

Would I even think twice about this scenario if it were June instead of Michael? Of course not. But June is Jordan’s mother, and June didn’t mysteriously come to live with us and have things that gave her an advantage over Jordan. Michael does. And if Michael has ulterior motives to being with me...

My lungs stop when I remember that Michael's first questions to me were about Jordan. He'd asked if I had a son and how old he was.

I swallow back the bile in my throat and lock myself in my bedroom. I do not sleep well that night.

#

Michael

My back hurts in the morning from sleeping on the couch. Evan comes downstairs while I'm fixing breakfast, his face frowny and distressed. Something in his eyes seems to have changed, but I can't decipher it. He's quiet in a way that forebodes rage brewing beneath the surface. His heated energy makes me uneasy. I want to ask what's upsetting him, but I don't want to risk becoming the target of his anger.

Jordan's watching TV on the couch when Evan says, "Hey, Jord', y'know, I'm free today if you wanted to go somewhere."

"Oh, well, Michael was supposed to take me to the mall today," he answers. "Maybe some other time, Dad."

"I could take you," Evan offers.

"Baby, you hate shopping," I say with a chuckle, hoping to infuse him with some sort of levity because he's strung way too tightly this morning. "It's not a big deal. I'll go with him."

Evan gives me a glare, and I swallow back the lump in my throat. I'd almost forgotten how terrifying it is to be on the receiving end of one of his glares. He hasn't been this sulky and despondent since I first moved in.

After a while, Jordan goes upstairs to get dressed. I take this opportunity to break the silence between me and Evan, because otherwise it seems like we'll never speak to each other again. "Evan, why are you so cranky this morning? Is it 'cause I didn't come to bed last night?"

"Sometimes I don't know if you like me or my kid more."

"Oh c'mon, be serious." He's still scowling at me, like that was an accusation he wanted a real answer to. "Are you still upset about not going public with our relationship?"

Evan just grunts, turning his back on me before heading up the stairs and closing off the conversation.

The days continue on this way, with Evan trailing silent anger and frustration in his wake. I try to give him his space, allowing him some time to shake off his sour mood, but he seems insistent on stewing in anger and misery. Even in bed, he's unresponsive, rejecting my advances

in lieu of rolling over on his side and going to sleep. I guess he's just decided that he hates feelings and prefers not to have them.

Which isn't hurtful at all, by the way. Thanks for that, Evan.

My hours at the bar are spent performing surveillance on Evan and his new buddy Victor. They've been spending a lot of time together lately. I wonder if that has anything to do with Evan's sudden withdrawal from me.

Of course, I could be wrong. It could be strictly business. But I have to wonder.

Dave interrupts my reconnaissance one evening, waving his empty beer bottle in my face. "Michael, can I get another drink, or you gonna keep starin' at your boyfriend?"

"Sorry," I mumble, opening a new bottle and sliding it over to him.

"You two havin' trouble?"

"Evan's turning the silent treatment into an art form."

Dave laughs a bitter noise and shakes his head. "He's such a goddamn hypocrite."

"What do you mean?"

"He's always goin' on about how communication is vital in relationships, but when he actually has to take his own advice, he takes the easy route and just withdraws." He scoffs a sound of amused irony before taking a sip of beer.

"I just wish he would tell me what I did wrong so I could fix it, y'know?"

Dave looks at me, oddly sympathetic. "Michael, maybe it's not *your* fault. You ever think of that? Maybe Evan's the one who's wrong here."

"I guess we'll never know." I watch Evan while he's not looking at me. He says something to Victor, and then Victor approaches the bar and orders a drink. When I hand it to him, he brings it over to the table and sets it down in front of Evan.

Great, so my own boyfriend won't even speak to me long enough to order a freakin' scotch.

Evan continues his silence with me throughout the evening. I feel like I'm going to go crazy, wracking my brain with what I could possibly have done wrong to make him this upset. Dave left about an hour ago, so I don't have the option of distracting myself by making small talk with him. I watch Evan and Victor exchange words before Victor comes over to me and takes a seat at the bar.

“Evan need another scotch?” I ask dryly, not bothering to hide the disdain in my voice.

“Nah, Mike, how ‘bout you and me have a drink instead?”

Out of the corner of my eye, I see Evan get up and leave. I could really use a drink now.

“Yeah, sure.”

15. Shelved

Evan

Michael's visibly shaking when he comes home that night, fumbling with his keys as he gets through the door. I rush to his side, reflexively twisting the lock and putting the chain on the door. "You okay? Did someone give you trouble? Were you followed?"

He shakes his head vigorously, still trying to command his trembling fingers to return his keys to his pocket. I reach out and clasp his warm hands in mine. Michael takes a deep breath and rasps out, "Where's Jordie?"

"In his room. Why? What's wrong?"

Michael looks up at me with frightened, red-rimmed eyes. "Evan, you can't let Victor near Jordan ever, okay?" he stammers out around quickened breaths. His hands grab my t-shirt and haul me closer. I wince as his grip pulls out a couple chest hairs. "Please, you can't! Promise me, Evan—"

I extricate myself from his hold before he ends up giving me a full chest wax. "Whoa, Michael, slow down. Tell me what happened."

He drags a hand through his hair, willing himself to breathe steadily. "Victor was—Victor was at—at the bar tonight..." I slide my hands up his arms to remind him that he's safe with me here. "He started asking me all these weird questions"—he swallows hard—"about me and Jordie. Then he—he asked me if I was having sex with him!" His entire face flinches in disgust, shuddering around the words like they're poison. "I couldn't believe he asked me that! And then—then he told me all this stuff about how it was okay if I was, and how I could just tell him the truth..." He snuffles, wipes his eyes with the back of his hand. "He told me there's a place where 'people like us' are accepted and welcomed, and how I should come with him to meetings and..." Michael stops, unable to say anymore.

Fury peaks in my blood. "Where is he now?"

"Still at the bar, I guess. I just—I just left when Nat came. I had to get outta there. I had to warn you, 'cause you guys spend a lot of time together, I thought..."

I'm furious. *Murderously* furious. I'm shaking now, my muscles tense to the point where it feels like they might snap beneath the pressure of my anger. It all makes sense now why Victor had assumed Michael was fucking my son—because Victor fucks kids. Of course he would see any adult male's close relationship with a child as the same sort of twisted perversion he indulges in.

But this knowledge gives me no relief. I'd been duped, led astray by a master manipulator. How could I ever let myself think for a moment that Michael could be capable of something like that? A growl rumbles through my chest as I stand there almost numb with rage.

“So that’s what he was talkin’ about,” I mumble. “Don’t worry, Michael, I’ll take care of this.”

“Wait, did you know about this?”

“No, of course not! Do you think I would’ve let that fucker breathe one more breath if I knew?” Michael doesn’t answer, still frozen in repulsion. I make a quick phone call to Ray and tell him to meet me at Victor’s apartment while the slimeball is still at the bar. By the time I’m finished, Michael’s looking at me with stark horror.

“I’m not gonna kill him, Michael,” I tell him, assuming that’s the source of his outrage. “Although he certainly does deserve it. All I want right now is to put a bullet between the sick fuck’s eyes, but—”

“You piece of crap!” Michael shouts abruptly. “Is that why you’ve been treating me like shit the past couple’a days? Because that asshole told you I was—like him?”

Uh-oh. I scramble for an answer that isn’t at all a yes of any sort. I find none. I’m left sort of gaping at the air.

Michael gasps and shoots up out of his seat on the couch, pointing at me defiantly. His finger jabs into my chest. “Oh my God, you did! You actually believed him?”

“N—no, I didn’t believe him, I just thought—”

Apparently that was the worst thing to say. Michael straightens up, fury emanating from him like nuclear radiation. “Go fuck yourself! You thought I would ever do something like that?” His hand lashes out and slaps me across the face. I actually see stars for a moment, the force of the impact stunning me. He stares at me, his face a mask of fury. It looks like he has more words he wants to scream at me, but they don’t come. Instead, he stalks up the stairs and disappears into the guest room before I can think to protest.

“Goddamn it.”

#

Between me, Ray, and the five other guys I called out to help us, we manage to turn Victor’s place over pretty damn well. I’m actually impressed. It isn’t often I get to destroy things; that’s a task usually reserved for JD’s underlings, and very few people refuse to pay often enough that I need to get involved in persuading them.

Victor lives in an absolute dump, though, so he’ll probably be able to weasel his way out of paying for the damages by saying the giant holes in the walls were made by mutated rats or something. Mutated rats that also broke all of his expensive electronics, knocked over every shelf

and desk, and left all of his NAMBLA materials in conspicuous plain sight on the living room floor.

Ray and I make a quick stop back at the bar once we've finished trashing Victor's place. Luckily for me, Victor's still there, and there's only a smattering of witnesses—all of whom will testify that they saw nothing.

I force up a wide grin when I see him sitting at the bar and move toward him. "Ah, Victor, just the man I wanted to see!"

"Ev, hey, how's it—" I don't give him time to finish. My hand shoots out and wraps around the back of his skull, slamming his face straight into the countertop. A sharp crack sounds in the air. Then the blood begins to flow. No one looks the least bit disturbed by this. I yank his head back by his hair. Nathalie recoils when she realizes there's blood spatter on her apron.

Victor looks at the crimson stain on the counter. "Why did you do that?"

I whip my hand to the scruff of his shirt collar and toss him onto the hardwood floor. Victor lands on his back, the air leaving his lungs in a "pluu" sound. I drop down and plant a knee on his chest so he can't get up. Victor's cradling his broken nose like a wounded animal. "I don't ever want to see your face around here again, you sick bastard," I growl, bending down until my face is merely inches from his. I grip his nose between two fingers.

JD lets out a tired sigh like he's seen it all before. "Evan..."

"You shut the fuck up," I snap at him. "This ain't your business." I turn my attention back to Victor. "If you ever set foot in here again, I'll see to it that you end up like Hoffa—part of somebody's front fender. *Capisce?*"

Victor scowls at me. "I didn't do nothin'! Is this 'cause I talked to your boy?"

I squeeze his broken nose. He howls in pain. The sound is not unlike nails on a chalkboard. With my free hand, I reach back and grab my thirty-eight from the waistband of my jeans. I shove the barrel in his open mouth. He stops screaming. "Ooh, wrong answer, Victor. You're supposed to say, 'Yes, sir, I understand.' And which 'boy' of mine did you talk to? 'Cause, either way, it's not going to go well for you, but I'd like to know exactly how many bullets to pack into you before you're tossed into the compactor."

"Look, man, I ain't even interested in Michael, if that's what you're worried about—"

I force the barrel back in his mouth. "Oh, right, of course not. You like 'em younger. *Much* younger." Bile rises in my throat. "You even look at my son, and I'll blast you so full of lead you'll crap pencils."

Victor's face turns a shade of sickened green I didn't know was humanly possible.

“Now, you’re going to get up and walk outta here. And you’re not going to come back or contact me or my Family in any way whatsoever. If I so much as hear your name again, you’d better hide ‘cause I’m coming for you.”

Victor doesn’t have to be told twice.

Once he’s out the door, I stand up and look at the blood on the counter. Nathalie’s already wiping it up with heavy-duty cleaner. “Sorry about that,” I say, gesturing to the spatter on her apron.

She shrugs. “It’s an off-day when I don’t end up with blood on me.”

I nudge Ray. “She’s a keeper.”

JD and Larry are the only other people in the bar. I sit at their table, trying to ebb the surges of adrenaline flowing through my body. Ray materializes in the chair beside me with a beer in hand. “Never a dull moment with Evan, huh?” I shoot him a glare that he ignores.

“Mind telling us what the hell that was about?” Larry asks.

I debate how to best sum this up. A lot of my vitriol centered around how Victor had deceived me and led me astray with his false compliments and ego-boosting. But I go with the obvious: “Victor has sex with children.”

“You should have shot him,” JD says.

“Yeah, I’m a real prince.” Ray’s wearing his favorite “I told you so” face. I point a finger at him. “Don’t.”

He gasps in mock-surprise and places a hand over his heart. “I wasn’t gonna say anything.”

“Oh, you so fuckin’ were. Just don’t, alright?”

Ray puts his hands up in surrender. “Alright, hey, I won’t say nothin’. Just remember to pick up the phone when you get home.”

“What? Why?”

“‘Cause I fuckin’ called it!” He leaps up and does some sort of victory dance. I struggle very hard to pretend that this isn’t happening. “Didn’t I tell you that guy was a sleazebag?”

“Yes, Ray. Yes, you did.” I really want him to stop.

“But you didn’t listen—”

“Okay, fine! You were right. I was wrong. Is that what you wanna hear? Christ, the least you could do is be sympathetic. I’m gonna have to beg for years to get Michael to forgive me.”

Ray’s visibly leaking smug superiority all over the place. “What, did Michael tell you the guy was a sleazebag too?”

“In a manner of speaking.”

Larry clears his throat. “Evan, far be it for me to criticize your methods, but don’t you think that was a little harsh?”

“The guy fucks kids.”

“Do you know that for sure?”

“Oh, don’t give me that lawyer bullshit.”

Larry shrugs. “Victor may have been on loan to you, but he still works for Dominic. Think of it this way: maybe Dom loaned you his car, and that car might be a piece of shit, but he’s still gonna be pissed if you bring it back wrecked.”

#

Michael and I don’t seem to be on speaking terms when I get home. He’s in bed glaring at me as I walk past him to get in the shower. After I’m washed up, he’s still glaring at me. I want to remind him that he can simply relocate to the guest room down the hall if sharing a room with me bothers him so much, but it seems like he’s just going to frown at me in accusing silence until one of us breaks down first.

By the looks of things, it’s going to be me.

I climb into bed beside him. Michael immediately rolls over onto his side so he doesn’t have to look at me. “Michael, I’m sorry.”

He just lays there like an angry ball of hurt.

“Will you please just talk to me? I fucked up, and I’ll never be sorry enough for it.”

He makes his point through silence for what seems like ages before he finally speaks to me. “Evan, I can understand you being afraid that I might cheat on you. I can even understand thinking that I might have ulterior motives for being with you. But this? This is absolutely the worst thing you’ve ever done.”

That’s certainly debatable. But I keep my mouth shut and let him talk.

“How could you ever believe something like that about me?” he continues, his voice quivering almost imperceptibly. “How could you even *think* I would hurt Jordie? I would slit my own wrists before I ever hurt him. And for you to take the word of a total stranger over me and your own son?” The anger slides back into his throat.

Ray’s gloating is like a soft pillow in the face of the agony in Michael’s voice; I’d take that a thousand times over and be grateful for it. “Michael...”

He huffs irritation at me.

“Michael, look, I thought it was bullshit at first. But, I mean, Jordan only wants to spend time with you; he can’t wait to get me out the door so you two can be alone. And then after Victor starts telling me all this shit, I come home and see you two curled up on the couch with your hands God knows where...” I’m not explaining this properly. I sound like I’m trying to excuse the awful things I’d thought about him, which isn’t my intention at all. But I need him to know that I was fucked up on alcohol and paranoia and anger when I started forming those suspicions. It wasn’t really *me*.

“Jordie and I have a friendly, honest, true, and loving relationship,” he says weakly, swinging back into anguish.

“I know. I’m so sorry I doubted you for even a second.” I wait for him to say something. He doesn’t. I fill the silence with more words. “Michael, I’m sorry. I don’t know what I was thinking. I know you; you’re good and loving and honest and a much better man than I am. I know you could never do something like that.”

He’s still not speaking to me.

I heave a deep sigh. “Okay, Michael, look. I didn’t wanna tell you this, but I guess I have to... Part of the reason I even listened to Victor was because he—he was nice to me.” I can almost see Michael rolling his eyes even though his back is turned. “We’d talk, and he’d tell me all these things about how he thought I’d be a great screenwriter, how I should follow my dreams and get outta the biz if I wanted to. Stuff like that. Looking back, it all seems so obvious. He was just sucking up, trying to stroke my ego in hopes that I’d open the books for him. I realize that now. But at the time I couldn’t see it. Maybe I didn’t want to, because if Victor was lying about you...then he was probably lying about me too.”

Michael’s rigid posture crumbles into dust, and I hear him snuffle. “You stupid-ass,” he mutters, wiping his eyes before he rolls over to face me. “Do you really have that low an opinion of yourself?”

I try a half-smile, but it almost hurts my face. “It’s like you don’t know me at all.”

He doesn’t see the humor. He reaches out with a cautious hand and places it over my heart. “I compliment you all the time, Evan. Why don’t you believe it when I say it?”

“You sorta have to be nice to me, right? I mean, you wouldn’t get very far being a total dick.”

Michael shrugs. “Seems like it worked for you.” His words puncture my fragile heart, and he seems to notice my distress, curling his fingers in my t-shirt. “I’m jokin’, baby. I’m still pissed at you, though.”

“You should be.” We lay together in silence for a moment. Michael sneaks his hand underneath my shirt and spreads his fingers over my chest.

“If I close my eyes,” he says, “it feels like I’m pettin’ a Wookiee.” I laugh, and the sound is foreign in my throat after what seems like ages of suspicion and broodiness. “You’re ridiculously hairy, y’know that?”

“Yeah, June wasn’t a big fan of that either.”

Michael shoots me a wounded look. “I didn’t say I wasn’t. I like it.” He drags his hand through the hair on my chest. “I like it a lot.”

“Don’t tell me that’s another *thing* for you.” I really, really want it to be a thing for him; it’d help me feel a lot less guilty about our whole relationship if Michael openly appreciates things about me that June didn’t.

“Maybe,” he mumbles, his cheeks flushing. Michael would be a completely different person if he lost his ability to be embarrassed about everything.

“Well, good, ‘cause I’m not shaving. I tried it a couple times. Never again.”

Michael giggles. “I’m trying to imagine you clean-shaven. I actually don’t think I can.”

“Yeah, it’s pretty horrifying. I wouldn’t recommend it.” He settles in and rests his head on my shoulder. I can smell the sweet aroma of his soap and shampoo; he smells of lavender and baby powder, sometimes coconut. June had been more fond of vanilla, caramel, and warm, sultry scents. “My anniversary is coming up,” I say after a moment, reminded by the memory of her. Michael doesn’t say anything, just strokes his hand over my skin in gentle reassurance. “I’m not asking for any favors, just...try to sympathize if I’m a total dick.”

His mouth curves into a small smile. “I’ll try.”

#

Dominic Cascio is not happy the next afternoon. He storms into the bar, and when he sees me he practically teleports over to where I’m sitting. I feel a twinge of fear shoot up my spine. “You wanna tell me why Victor’s face is all busted up and his apartment’s wrecked?”

“You wanna tell me why you employ a sick piece of shit that has sex with children?”

That sort of takes him aback, throws him off for a second. But his emotional balance is restored within the moment, and he’s right back to vein-pulsing anger. I feel the storm brewing, and I know I’m gonna get tossed around in the winds. Better if no one sees it.

“No reason why everybody’s gotta know our business,” I tell him, trying to diffuse his anger and take the confrontation elsewhere where there are no prying eyes. “Why don’t we talk in private?”

He follows me into the vacant back room. “You had no right to shakedown one of my guys. I let you use him on a couple jobs because I trusted you to treat our arrangement with respect. Instead, you make a fool of me. Victor is very valuable to my Family; he kicks up a lot of money for us.”

I roll my eyes. “Yeah, I’m sure he’s a real humanitarian.”

Dominic focuses his controlled anger on me. “His personal indiscretions are the matter of the Family. Had you reported this to me, I would have dealt with him appropriately. But you chose to take justice for yourself.” He gives me an appraising look. “Which seems to be your M.O.”

“Alright, you made your point. I’m volatile, a loose cannon, don’t work well with others.” I spread my hands. “Anything else?”

Dominic sighs, the anger leaving him like air out of a balloon. He takes a step forward and claps a hand on my shoulder. “Look, kid, I appreciate all the new business. You’re a good guy who’s been through a lot. Your old man would be proud.”

Those are the worst words he could have left me with.

16. *Plus que ma propre vie*

Evan

I've been dreading this day for months.

Even throughout a strict adherence to my medication schedule, I knew it wouldn't be enough to combat the whirlwind of emotions set to erupt on this bleak day.

It's worse than I thought it would be, because nothing within me has changed since June passed. I'm still making the same mistakes and godawful fuck-ups with Michael that I made with her. Jordan is arguably better, but that's only because of Michael's influence on him. June's death has reinforced that I'm nothing without her.

I stayed for a few hours after Michael left the bar that night, adamant about festering in my misery. Dave knew the significance of today's date, so he didn't bother me, content to drink beside me without saying a word. Nathalie knew enough not to hover, opting to sit near the back of the room with her beer. I close my eyes and let another gulp of whiskey roll past my tongue, my fourth or fifth drink of the night. Dad was always a big fan of Jack Daniels. So is Ray. I guess the apple doesn't fall too far from the tree.

Feeling my control beginning to slip, I let the walls down and take my punishment in silence on my wedding anniversary.

Go fuck yourself, Evan! You're too selfish to understand.

You were right, June. I'm selfish. My relationship with Michael proves this in stunning, painful clarity. Why else would I latch on so quickly to something that makes me happy? Maybe I started feeling things for him when I realized what he was doing for Jordan, but the fact of the matter is that I let myself want him when I should have been mourning you. It's not fair, and nothing I do will ever make it right. I fucked up.

It's always about what you want! What about what I want?

I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. I should have been there for you. I should have done more, instead of just trying to impress you with fancy jewelry and expensive gifts. That wasn't fair to you, but it seemed like it worked so I didn't know what else to do. What did you want? I would have given you anything you asked, you know that.

Jordie needs you, but you're pushing him away!

But you kept pushing him into this life, a life I never wanted for him. I don't want him growing up thinking this is how it's supposed to be. He'll never have a chance at being a happy, healthy human being if this goes on the way it is. Look at what it's done to me. Why would you want to put him through that?

Oh, don't act like you care, you selfish, lying motherfucker!

No, please, don't go. Don't go. Let it be me. It should be me.

God, June, I'm so sorry. It should have been me.

I rake a hand through my hair. Dave looks over at me and places a supportive hand on my shoulder. I feel tears leak out of my eyes. "I miss her so much."

"I know you do. We all do. She was wonderful."

"You don't get it. June was everything to me, and it's my fault she's gone. All because we got in a stupid fucking argument about the same old shit I should've fixed by then."

"You can't blame yourself," Dave says quietly. "You wanna blame somebody? Blame the guy who shot her."

That was an accident. The bullet didn't have her name on it. It could have just as easily been me. It *should* have been me. "If I hadn't pissed her off, she wouldn't have come here. She'd still be alive."

"And you'd be dead."

"Maybe it would've been better that way."

"You don't know that, Ev."

I shrug and take another drink. "She was the absolute best thing in my train-wreck of a life. Now there's no family anymore."

Dave's expression is strange all of a sudden. He takes another drink from his beer bottle, avoiding me with his eyes. "Don't say that. You got Jordie...and Michael, I guess."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"What, I'm just sayin', he's sorta family 'cause he lives with you. That's all." Dave's sputtering and making awkward hand gestures I don't understand.

"You said his name like it's poison in your mouth, Dave. What's up? I thought you and Michael were friends."

"Oh, I think he's a great guy. He's very intelligent."

"But?"

“But nothin’. I just—when I think family, I think blood relations, or adopted kids, or spouses, y’know?”

I raise an eyebrow. “You don’t consider him part of my family, do you? You still see him as hired help.”

“No, Ev, c’mon, that’s—that’s not...” He shakes his head. “Forget it.”

“No, speak up. What’s eatin’ you?” I finish my glass of whiskey and pour another. He watches my hands, and an angry expression grows on his face that he tries to drink away.

“Well, if Michael wasn’t in the picture, everything would be as it was. I’m not—”

“Meaning what? Me and Jordie’d be miserable all the time? Michael’s done wonders for my son. That’s gotta count for something.”

“Oh, I know, I’m just sayin’ ...it seems like you and Michael got together pretty quick.” He leans in close. I can smell the alcohol on his breath. “I’m not sayin’—I’m not sayin’ you planned it that way or anything—it might’ve just evolved that way—but, I don’t know, it just seems awful fast.”

I feel like he’s just stabbed me. “Fuck you. You don’t have the right to judge me or my relationship with Michael.”

“What about Jordie? Y’know, I get that you had your reasons for getting with Michael, but Jordie wasn’t too happy about it.”

“Cause it was different. He’s fine with it now.”

“Is he? Or is he just pretending because he knows it’s not going to change?”

I glare at him pointedly. “Did Jordie say somethin’ to you?”

“Look, I love that kid like a son. I’m just sayin’ maybe you’re not taking his feelings into account here. Maybe you’re too wrapped up in what you want to make the right decisions for Jordie’s welfare.”

“Well, he’s not your son, so why don’t you keep your opinions to yourself. You don’t know the issues.”

“Because you don’t really talk, Ev. You just sorta close off whenever somebody hits a nerve.” I growl in annoyance and turn back to the bar. “Exactly the way you’re doing now. How is anything supposed to get resolved unless you talk about it?”

“What do you want to be resolved? You think Jordie’s being harmed because of my relationship with Michael, and I happen to think you’re full of shit. There’s nothing to talk about here.”

He shrugs and takes a sip. “I’m just saying, this is sort of a pattern for you, Evan. You’re so caught up in what you think is the right thing to do that you don’t even consider it from anybody else’s point of view. I mean, you didn’t hear me out about the baby—”

“Because it doesn’t concern you,” I answer through grit teeth, dropping the words like lead weights. Dave is well aware that this subject is utterly forbidden.

Dave huffs a sound of frustration. “Fine. But you need to take better care of Jordie than you did June. You owe it to her.”

“You don’t know shit about my relationship with my wife, either.”

Dave sneers and says, “More than *you* know.”

“What the fuck is that supposed to mean? What did she tell you?”

A distant slamming sound makes my head turn in its direction. Nathalie is gone. When I look back at Dave he’s off of his barstool, staggering a few steps away from me to put distance between us. I get the gnawing feeling that he’s going to drop a huge bombshell. “She’s told me a lot, man.”

“How long?”

“Ev, c’mon, it’s water under the bridge now—”

I slam my glass down against the bar, barely hanging on to my composure. “Tell me! How long?”

It feels like an eternity before he finally gives me an answer, but he still won’t look at me. “I don’t know. Five years, maybe?”

There’s a small voice in the back of my head shouting “no no no no,” and I’m too inebriated to block it out. My sluggish brain finally connects the dots. The realization hits me like a slow-motion car crash, inevitable and unstoppable.

“Were you fucking her?”

Dave doesn’t say anything, just stands there unmoving, unfeeling, but his silence tells me all I need to know. Time stops, and the breath leaves my lungs in a shaky exhale. I feel like I’ve been punched five times too many. Of course June would be no different than the rest. Of course Dave would betray me.

I struggle to remember how to breathe properly. “You were, weren’t you? You were fucking her!”

“C’mon, that’s not—She was the one who started it—”

His excuses are like the scorch of a match on my skin, igniting the full force of my wrath. I swing my fist at his face. There’s a satisfying crunching sound when my knuckles connect with his chin. He falls over, and when he stands up he looks at me expectantly, waiting for me to throw another punch. But I’m already storming out the door to my car. I’m not gonna waste another punch on him. A bullet would be a much more fitting end for the piece of shit who fucked my wife for five years and masqueraded as my best friend.

#

Michael

I’m sprawled out on the couch, absently flipping channels for something to watch. This is probably an exercise in futility, considering the fact that it’s four in the morning and there’s nothing but infomercials on every channel. Except maybe the scrambled ones. There’s probably dirty movies on those channels, but the last thing I need is to be horny when Evan’s not here.

I don’t know where Evan is right now, and I’m not sure if I even want to know. Judging by his line of work and the ways he usually spends his time late at night, he’s either drinking at the bar or participating in unscrupulous activities. Either way, I don’t like it. About a week ago, he’d mentioned that his anniversary was coming up—so he’s definitely drinking. He came into the bar a little while before I left for the night, but he’s been gone for hours now. That can’t mean anything remotely good.

I’m pretty invested in an infomercial for a super juicer when I hear the front door trying to open. Someone’s turning the knob. I freeze, wondering if I should hide or find some sort of weapon. Being killed by a burglar is not the way I would have expected to die.

Evan slams the door open and storms inside, fury practically emanating off of him as he stomps up the stairs. I feel my insides turn to ice, but I’m on my feet instantly, hurrying to catch up with him. “Whoa, what’s going on? Where have you been?”

“I’m gonna fucking kill him!” Evan growls, restless anger reverberating through his chest.

“Kill who? What’s going on?” I grab his arm and try to pull him back, but he wrenches out of my grip.

“Son of a bitch! I fucking trusted that piece of shit!”

I follow him up the stairs and into his bedroom. “Evan, will you just tell me what’s going on?” He starts throwing open dresser drawers and rifling through them. Like he’s searching for something. “Are we in danger? Did something happen?”

He's putting together a handgun with clumsy hands. Panic grips me. "Nobody in this world was allowed to come between this family of June, me, and Jordie."

I take his wrists in a gentle but firm hold, trying to get him to stop and think for a moment. "Whoa, whoa, are you talking about me?"

"No, Michael." He gives me a disgusted look before tearing away from me. "Y'know, the world doesn't revolve around you."

I opt to ignore that little jab at my ego. I sniff the air, suddenly suspicious; he's leaking a pretty potent stench of booze. "Are you drunk?"

"I'm fine." He loads the chamber of the gun and stalks toward the door. "Just leave me alone. I've got shit to handle." I block the doorway, hoping he might reconsider this decision.

That's when he shoves me out of the way and smashes his forearm into my chest.

I grab his arm and twist it behind his back, putting him in an elbow lock. It doesn't stop him. He propels backwards and knocks me into the doorframe. The air leaves my lungs in a whoosh. Pain surges through me. I let go of him, and he rushes down the stairs.

He's never been this belligerent and violent with me before. Words alone will not get through to him. I dig through the drawer he'd left open, searching for a spare gun. It doesn't matter if it's loaded or not. I find a handgun and meet him halfway on the staircase. "Evan Robert Chandler, I am not screwing around!" Something in the tone of my voice makes him freeze. He turns around slowly to stare down the barrel of the gun.

He's sort of smirking at me, which really pisses me off because I'm pointing a gun at him. Smirking should not even be a thing. "Oh, come on, Michael. You're not really gonna shoot me, are you?"

"Maybe I will," I say, but the conviction that ought to go with it is missing.

He laughs bitterly. "I bet you don't even know how to shoot one of those things."

"You wanna find out?" My finger curls around the trigger. I watch his jaw tense, his mouth a hard line. "Come on, baby, just talk to me," I beg, plead with him. "Whatever it is, it doesn't have to end this way."

"Would you be calm if one of your brothers betrayed you and ruined your life?"

That stops me for a moment. I drop my hand away, confused as all hell. "Is this about Ray? You're gonna kill Ray?"

He gives me a puzzled, angry look. "No! Jesus, Michael, can you not be a fucking moron for two seconds? Not *my* brother."

I let the insult roll away. “My brother?” Oh God, has he found out which of my brothers killed June? I don’t even think I want to know. That’s information I can live the rest of my life without knowing.

“No! Dave! Fucking Dave!” he shouts, infuriated with our guessing game. He actually stomps his foot, which would be sort of adorable if he wasn’t so terribly angry.

I’m tired of guessing too. “Look, Evan, if you don’t tell me what’s going on right now, when you come back me and Jordie won’t be here.” Even though it’s harsh and cruel to hit him in such a weak spot, he’s freaking me out so badly that I don’t even feel guilty for it. This will be his first lesson on talking things out with me instead of resorting to violence.

He does that jaw clenching thing again and exhales an angry breath. When he speaks again, his voice is raw and wounded. “Dave was having an affair with June.”

My mouth drops open. His words are like a landslide, crashing down on top of us, burying us in the implications. His unbridled rage makes a whole lot of sense now. I try to find something to say that isn’t horrible or just plain unhelpful. The silence between us drags on for what seems like an eternity.

Evan’s just staring at me in a world of total hurt, as if he hadn’t meant to just blurt it out like that.

“How long?” I wince at how loud and awful it sounds in the empty space.

“About five years,” he says, like he’s regretting everything in his entire life.

God, that’s...really fucked up.

I’m still trying to find words when he turns his back to me and storms down the stairs. I scramble after him. “Wait, where are you going?”

“Where do you think? I’m gonna kill the son of a bitch!”

“Evan, no. You’re not killing anybody—”

He whirls to face me with the most bitter rage I’ve ever seen, freezing me in my tracks. “What, are you fucking him too?” I can’t even think straight. The accusation feels like a wet slap across my face. “You better not be, because if you are I swear to God I’ll burn this fucking house down with you in it.”

Tears prick at my eyes. “You—you don’t mean that,” I choke out, stunned by the venom of his words. I want to believe that his guilt and grief and anger just exploded, that he’s only spewing hateful words out of frustration. He’s accused me of some awful, vile things, but he’s never threatened me. Never.

Something about my expression brings Evan back to me. He looks as horrified as I am, like his awful words have pierced his heart too. He stares at his hands, still cradling the gun; Slowly, I reach for them and pluck his fingers off of the grip one by one. He lets me take the gun from him, his eyes unfocused and lost.

“C’mon, Evan, you’re better than this. I love that you’re trying to do better, to be better than your brother and father, even though their way is all you’ve ever known. That’s one of my favorite things about you.” He looks at me as if to say “really?” and I smile reassuringly, wrapping my fingers around the warmth of his wrist. “What Dave did...it’s not fair. But killing him or hurting him isn’t gonna take away your pain.” Evan looks at me like I’ve said something worthwhile. “Try to set a good example for Jordie. What would he think if he knew you killed Dave?”

That reaches him. He sighs angrily, but there’s no heat to it, just desperation and sadness. He walks over to the open door, motions something to Ray—who’s waiting outside, leaning against his idling Oldsmobile with a stub of a cigarette between his fingers—and shuts us inside.

I wait for a moment before voicing my concern. “You—you didn’t send him off to go kill Dave, did you?”

His mouth tightens, his eyebrows fixed in a worried line above his eyes. “No.”

“Do you want to talk about it?”

Evan nods slowly, lets his hands fall away from the doorknob like he doesn’t know what to do with them anymore.

“Okay, I’ll go upstairs and fix up the bed. You can come up whenever you’re ready.”

He still looks lost and shell-shocked, so I don’t think I’m gonna get a reply. I head up the stairs and dismantle the guns, placing all the pieces back into the drawer. It takes me a moment to realize that my hands are shaking from the adrenaline still pumping through my veins. Would Evan really have killed me or was he just tossing out hyperbole in a heated moment? He’s never laid a hand on me or Jordan, never so much as threatened either of us until tonight—which probably wouldn’t have happened if he’d been sober. To top it all off, he found out his wife had been cheating on him for five years. That’s the kind of thing that could make anybody lose their mind, drunk or not.

I busy myself with re-making the bed while I wait for Evan to join me in the bedroom. It takes about ten minutes before I hear his heavy footsteps on the stairs. He stops in the doorway, which gives me pause. Even in the dark, I can see the haunted look in his eyes, as if he doesn’t think he belongs here anymore.

“Come on, babe.” I pat the empty space beside me on the bed, hoping he might warm it with his body. “You don’t have to talk if you don’t want to. You can just go to sleep if that’ll make you feel better.”

“No, it’s okay.” He starts stripping as he makes his way over to the bed. I admire the view as he tosses his shirt and pants onto the floor before he slides into bed with me. “Fuck, I’m sorry, Michael, that was—I shouldn’t have...” He breathes out a frustrated, tired sigh, laying on his side so he can look at me. “I’m so sorry. I don’t know what the hell I was thinking, barging in here like a fucking raving lunatic.”

I reach out for him and place my hand on the rough plane of his cheek. He closes his eyes, comforted by my touch. “You were upset.”

“I threatened you,” he grates out through his teeth. He doesn’t open his eyes, still too ashamed to look at me.

“You were drinking, and you were upset.”

His mouth twists into something angry. “Michael, in no way am I trying to excuse any of the shit I said to you tonight, but you gotta understand why. Every single girl—and I am not kidding you—every single girl I have ever gone out with, from the very first girl to the very last, has cheated on me. And I have not cheated on anybody.”

Jesus Christmas, it just gets worse. I shut my eyes in pain, sliding my hand into his hair, struggling for the proper words, but there aren’t any.

“I would never,” he says softly, his voice wavering like this entire conversation is a raw nerve being poked and prodded. “But that history makes me so fucking paranoid. My finger’s been stuck in the electric socket so much that I don’t want to get stuck in there again, y’know? It’s nothing personal against you. It’s just with me. It’s my problem.”

I lay there beside him, letting my fingers trail over the muscles of his back as I try to come to terms with his misery and anger, now that I understand the reasons for it. “Trust me, it won’t happen. I’m not sure I could even if I wanted to.”

“I trusted Dave with my life,” he says, his eyes haunted and guilty. “And this is how he repays me.”

“You still have me and Jordie. We’re not goin’ anywhere.”

Evan tries a smile, but it’s weak, and I can see the ghosts in his eyes. We lay there for a while, the hum of an uncomfortable silence buzzing around us. His skin is warm under my fingers, but he huddles beneath the blankets like he needs their warmth. He seems to be relaxing from my touch though, as the small, fine lines of pain on his brow slowly begin to fade.

I risk inching closer to press my mouth to his. He softens immediately at the kiss, responding to the warm pressure by reaching for my face and bringing me closer. He pushes a feverish hand underneath my shirt, his fingers skimming over the curve of my spine. Evan kisses like he doesn't know how to stop, but this time is different, all soft touches and a gentle press of mouth. I don't want to be intimate with him in this sad, depressing space, and I don't think he does either. He breaks away slowly, watching my face for any signs of discontent. His eyes tighten, and he takes a deep breath, turning over so that his back faces me.

How much is one man expected to take before it's all too much? Why is heartbreak the only thing Evan seems to get out of his relationships?

I know he needs my comfort now more than ever. I cuddle up close to him, my body pressed up against his back, and curl my arm around his chest. When I press my lips to the back of his neck, I can feel the tension in his muscles fade.

It takes him a while to get to sleep, and I stay awake for all of it, feeling the anger and hurt ripple out of him as he hides his pain from me. I kiss his skin, letting him know I'm still here, that nothing that happened tonight has changed anything between us, and his fingers curl in the sheets as he tries to be strong. When he trembles, I press my hands flat on his chest, as if I can absorb some of his agony and bear it for him. "Please don't cry, baby," I whisper, unsure if words will hurt or heal but desperate enough to try them anyway. "I love you. Jordie loves you too."

Evan stops moving beneath my touch, slowly rolling over so he can see me. The tracks of his tears are visible, even in the darkness. But what takes my breath away is the expression on his face. His brow is creased in bewilderment, his eyes anxious. "You love me," he marvels. It isn't a question, though his voice is rich with disbelief.

"Yes! I love you. Truly, I do."

Evan's still staring at me like a man seeing the grace of God. Sudden understanding of his awe wallops me like a suckerpunch. This is the first time I've ever said those words to him. His eyes well up with tears, and he buries his face in my chest, his shoulders shaking with silent sobs. I hold him in my arms and let him cry.

When he finally falls asleep, exhausted by his grief, it's my turn to cry.

#

Evan's gone when I wake up the next morning. I feel a flail of panic in my chest that doubles when Jordan sticks his head into the bedroom. "Michael?"

"What? What's wrong?" I sit up like something sprung out of a toaster. "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine." He takes a few steps inside and sits on the end of the bed, still unsure whether or not he belongs in here. "What were you guys fighting about last night?"

“You, uh, you heard that?”

“Hard not to.”

I let out a sigh. “It’s not important anymore.”

“You might wanna tell that to Dad.”

My immediate reaction is panic. “Why? What did he do?”

“Well, for starters, he threw out all his beer.” My jaw drops. Jordan reaches over and closes it for me. “And he made breakfast, which, y’know, he never does.”

“Is it edible?”

“Yeah.” Jordan looks at me like he has no idea why I would be surprised by this. “Dad can make stuff without burning the house down or anything, he just...doesn’t.” I’m still processing all of this when Jordan asks me, “So what were you guys fighting about? ‘Cause whatever it was, you must’ve won big time.”

I jump out of bed and take the stairs two at a time until I’m in the kitchen. Just as Jordan had said, Evan’s working over the stove, and there’s a pile of empty beer bottles in the trash can. The kitchen is not the disaster area I’d pictured. It’s actually pretty clean, as if he didn’t have a hilariously messy fight with breakfast.

“Well, good morning,” I greet him, sliding my hands around his waist and resting my chin on his shoulder. His hair is damp, and I can smell the sweet scents of shampoo and cologne. “Oh, you made breakfast *and* took a shower? It must be my birthday.”

He chuckles and pokes at the pancake in the pan with the spatula. I feel like I’ve woken up in an alternate universe. “You act like I’ve never done anything nice for you.”

“Goin’ down on me first doesn’t count,” I murmur in his ear.

“Well, shit, in that case...” He makes me a plate of pancakes and hands it to me. “Maybe I should start doing nice things for you.”

“You give me everything I could ever want simply by being you.”

“Are you giving me permission to hit things?” Evan asks, a hint of a wry smile on his lips. “Or people? It can be very therapeutic, y’know.”

“That wasn’t where I was going with this,” I say around a laugh. “But I think you have the potential to express your anger in less, um, destructive ways.” I pat his chest reassuringly

with my free hand. “Y’know, like...in the bedroom. In a totally consensual, hot way.” My face is probably warm enough to fry an egg.

Evan raises his eyebrows as if considering my suggestion. “That’s a lot of sex, Michael. Are you up for that?” I give him a pointed look, because, really, that’s such a stupid question. But he seems to pull the thought from my head just fine. “I’ll take that as a yes.”

17. *La Casa Nostra*

Michael

I don't see Dave until about a week later when he comes into the bar looking like hell. His face is a variety of colors, and none of them are pleasant. The bruises have begun to fade into yellowy-browns, but it's still pretty obvious that something—or *someone*—messed him up bad. I can't say I'm surprised—I'd be more shocked if Evan *hadn't* sent someone to beat him up. But what shocks me the most is that it doesn't really bother me. In fact, it doesn't seem like enough considering what Dave did to Evan.

Dave doesn't say anything to me all evening, just sits at the bar and slowly sips his beers. I suspect his silence might have something to do with the fact that Evan's here as well, sitting in the back of the room along with a few of his soldiers. Keeping an eye on Dave in case he tries to steal me away too.

I'm talking to JD while opening a case of Guinness the next afternoon when the front door swings open and an attractive woman struts inside. She's got dark skin and hair, her body packed into leather pants and a black tank top. JD turns to ogle at her. I follow his line of sight and realize in stark horror that he's mentally undressing my sister Janet.

"Well, well, well, look at you! Someone's doin' well for himself!" she says with a laugh, walking up to the bar with long strides and embracing me in a one-armed hug. "You're not gettin' into too much trouble, are you?"

"Hey, what's with the attitude? I'm the big brother, remember?"

JD nearly spits out his drink. "That's your sister?"

"Y'know, for the longest time, people thought we were the same person 'cause they rarely ever saw us in the same place," Janet explains.

He might actually be gazing at her in wonder. "I don't see how that's possible."

I sort of wave him away. "This guy," I chuckle, looking at Janet. "He's such a kidder. We have fun."

"I'll bet. This your boss?"

"No, he's"—I quickly scan the room for Evan—"he's not here."

"Evan's at a meeting," JD offers helpfully.

I give him flat eyes. "Really. I assumed he just got lost on his way to the bathroom."

JD does not seem to appreciate my gift of comedy but says nothing. Amazing restraint for him, really.

“So, what are you doin’ here?” I ask Janet. “Is this a social visit?”

“Neiman Marcus just picked up *True You*,” she says with a wide grin.

“You’re kidding? Seriously?”

She nods excitedly. “I figured as long as I was in town, I’d drop by and see how you’re doin’.”

“How long are you in town?”

“I fly back home tomorrow night.”

“Oh, well, if you’re not busy tonight...” I sort of flounder for words. “Maybe you’d be interested in having dinner with me and Evan and Jordie? They’d love to meet you.”

“You sure he’s okay with that? From what I’ve heard, he’s a real hard-ass.”

I bite my tongue from saying something lewd involving the words “hard” and “ass”; Janet’s no stranger to raunchy humor, but I’m not sure if I should be telling her I’m dating Evan just yet. “Yeah, he’ll be fine.”

Janet claps a hand on my shoulder. “Listen, Mike, I gotta run for a bit. I’ll call you when I get done and we can work out what we’re gonna do for dinner, ‘kay?”

“Sure.”

We hug again, and I let her go.

JD watches her walk away with a bit too much interest. He turns back to me, trying way too hard to look casual. “So, uh, she single?”

“I’m going to start hurting you now. I’m not sure if I’ll stop.”

#

“Remember to be nice, okay?”

“What, me? I’m always a delight.”

I’m sitting on the bed, watching Evan sort through the clothes in his closet as he tries to find a shirt. I’m hoping he finds something presentable, considering the fact that Janet is going to meet my live-in boyfriend tonight.

Evan makes a noise of frustration. “Where the fuck are all of my good clothes?” he mumbles, shoving hangers aside in his search.

“As much as I love your filthy mouth, you might not wanna use it around my sister,” I warn him playfully.

He pokes his head out from the closet to fix me with a glare. “Gee, thanks for the vote of confidence, Michael. Since you’re giving out patently obvious advice, why don’t you remind me not to put my pants on backwards?”

“Might wanna rein in the sarcasm too.” I stick my tongue out at him, and he just rolls his eyes and continues his search for presentable clothes. I’m enjoying the view of his shirtless torso. I’m secretly hoping his wardrobe has vanished into an alternate dimension, never to be seen again, because his body is a thing to be admired. I’m sure Janet would appreciate it.

“Do you want your sister to meet me or someone else entirely?”

“I don’t want her thinking you’ve been corrupting me during my time here.”

Evan scoffs a laugh. “Corrupting you with my dick.”

I sort of squirm in the bed. “Don’t talk about your dick either.”

“No sarcasm, no swearing, no dick jokes—you’ve basically taken away all my methods of communication here.”

“Why don’t you just hush and get dressed?” I slide out of bed to assist him with the task, because Jesus Christmas it should not take this long to find a shirt. “Maybe if you’re good I’ll let you have a little fun tonight.” I wink, as if the subtlety was lost.

Evan grins and turns to me. “Oh, Michael, you don’t have to *let* me do anything.” He snakes his arms around my waist and squeezes my ass. I pretend not to enjoy it for the sake of proving a point. “Why’re you tryin’ to distract me, anyway? Does your sister know I’m bangin’ you?”

His confidence tonight is equal parts sexy and obnoxious. “I haven’t told her yet, but, on the bright side, she’s probably the most open-minded of my family. So if we did tell her, I’m willing to bet her reaction would be much better than your brother’s.”

“That ain’t sayin’ much.”

The doorbell rings, and I hear Jordan yell “Door!” from downstairs. “I’ll get it,” I tell Evan as I leap off of the bed. “And put a shirt on. I don’t want my sister thinkin’ she took a wrong turn and ended up on the forest moon of Endor.” He laughs harder at that than I’ve ever made him laugh before; I feel very accomplished. Apparently the way to Evan Chandler’s heart is through *Star Wars* jokes.

When I open the door, Janet's standing there with an impish grin on her face. "Nice place you got here," she jokes. We share a hug, and I let her inside to show her around. "Jordie, this is my sister Janet. Janet, this is Evan's son Jordie." Jordan waves to her from his spot on the couch. "Evan's upstairs; he should be down in a minute."

While we wait for him, I quickly fill Janet in on my life in New York, leaving out the more scandalous bits, of course.

"Sounds like you've been busy," she says when I've finished.

This is the point where Evan would say something like "busy with my dick!" I'm glad he's not here to add that to the conversation. "Pretty much, yeah."

Evan finally comes downstairs. "Well, you must be Janet. Michael's told me a lot about you."

"Oh, has he?"

"I bet you've got tons of embarrassing stories about him, huh?" he asks her, winking at me. I glare at Evan in a way that says he is definitely not getting any tonight.

"Do I ever!" Janet looks way too happy about this. Tonight may be a total social disaster.

"So, Janet," Evan starts over dinner, "what brings you out here?"

"Michael didn't tell you?" He shakes his head. "Well, I run my own clothing store back home, and my newest line just got picked up by Neiman Marcus. I figured if I was gonna be in town anyway, I might as well check up on my pain in the ass big brother." She shoots me a smirk.

"So you're the one who makes all those fancy jackets Michael wears?"

"Yep, that's me." Janet looks over in my direction. "Y'know, I never would've guessed that you'd be a bartender. Evan's not workin' you too hard, is he?"

Hot blood roils beneath my cheeks. I kick Evan in the shin from beneath the table as a silent reminder of tonight's "no dick jokes" policy. "No, I'm actually enjoying myself!" I realize as soon as the words come out of my mouth that was probably the worst possible thing to say. Evan poorly suppresses a snicker, and Jordan just sighs quietly, glaring down at his plate and wearing his best "I will set both of you on fire" face.

"Yeah, it's almost like you're a natural or somethin'," Evan says with an impossibly straight face.

I officially hate him right now.

Janet seems to pick up on our doublespeak, but she doesn't know what exactly he's insinuating. "Well, maybe you can buy a bar when you get back home. Joseph wants you to call him so you can make arrangements to head home in a month or so."

I glance over at Evan just in time to see his whole face flinch like her words are a cattle prod against his skin.

"I don't think I'm going home, Jan'," I tell her carefully, my hands fidgeting with a fork. "I like it here. I'm happy." Evan looks reassured, if only a little bit.

Janet nods concedingly. "I'm not arguing with that, but you know how Joseph is. You really think he's gonna take no for an answer?"

"He's gonna have to," I say with a shrug. "Tell him I'm not coming home."

Janet looks like she wants to say more; her expression clearly indicates that she thinks I've gone completely crazy, but she doesn't say anything else about it. The rest of the meal is spent with Janet telling Evan almost every embarrassing anecdote I've starred in. Honestly, I wouldn't put it past her to drag out albums of baby pictures if we were at Hayvenhurst. I guess I can't be too upset about it, since her stories are making Evan laugh—considering the fact that he can be the world's biggest grump, this is quite the achievement.

After dinner, we're clearing dishes and cleaning up, and I'm so close to Evan it's almost a crime that we can't touch each other now. Every now and then I feel the hovering warmth of his hand over my back, but he never actually touches me, just lets his hand linger too long when reaching for something. But the temptation is there, and I can't fathom how he's keeping it at bay. I'm one lustful glance away from tearing his clothes off.

"Mike, can I talk to you for a sec?" Janet asks me when I'm finished with the dishes.

"Yeah, sure."

I wait for her to say something.

"In private," she says purposely.

"Oh." I lead her into the laundry room at the end of the hallway for some privacy. "What's wrong?"

"At the risk of sounding like our father—Michael, you know you can work at a bar anywhere, right? You don't have to stay here to do that. You can even buy one back home. Joseph might actually let you move out if you find a bar and spruce it up."

"That's exactly what I've done here. I don't get why it has to be in California. Oh no, wait, I do—so he can keep a tight leash on me in case he needs a favor."

Janet sighs. “Then why do you want to stay so badly? Most kids get tattoos or smoke pot to rebel against their parents. This is a little extreme.”

“Is it so hard to believe that I like it here?”

“No, they seem nice. I just don’t understand why you’re so adamant about staying here over a job.”

“It’s not about a job,” I murmur.

It takes her a second, and then she slaps her palm against her forehead in sudden realization. “Oh my God! You have a crush on Evan, don’t you? You totally do!” My expression must convey a modicum of truth, because she’s not laughing at me. She’s actually looking at me with confusion, sympathy, and—oh no, that’s *pity*. “Is that why you want to stay?” My throat’s too dry to respond, so I just sort of stare at her. “Mike, I know how you want to save people, and Evan seems like a nice guy, but I don’t think it’s gonna work. He just lost his wife, and you don’t even know if he’s into guys or not. Is it really worth it to stay here for God knows how long just because you think he *might* be into you?”

My cheeks burn, and my gaze drops to the floor. Suddenly, my shoes are very interesting. “Um, that’s the thing, I sort of...know he’s into me.”

“Sort of? Did he tell you?”

He told me with his hands, his mouth, his cock— “Okay, I *know* he’s into me.”

She sighs. “Was it one of those ‘maybe we can try sometime in the future’ things? Because, Mike, those never work out. All that means is that he’s too polite to say no flat-out.”

“We’re dating,” I say firmly.

She opens her mouth like she wants to argue but stops. “Seriously?” I nod. “Oh my God, that explains so much. Why didn’t you tell me? Oh, of course: Joseph.”

“You get it now?”

“Yeah, but I’m not the one you gotta convince.” My thoughts drift to how I might convince Joseph in a worst-case scenario; I don’t like what I come up with. “You really like this guy, huh?”

“Yeah.” I feel myself turning red again. My shoes squeak against the tile floor. “I can’t explain it. It’s just...it’s cosmic. He’s absolutely wonderful. Jordie too. I have a real family, the life I’ve always wanted for myself. You have no idea how happy I am here.”

She smiles proudly, like a mother watching her child grow. “I think I do. I’ll do my best to talk to Joseph, but don’t be surprised if you get an angry phone call in the middle of the night.”

“From him or you?”

“It depends,” Janet says with a laugh. When we get back into the living room, she proudly announces, “So, Mike tells me you two are an item?” Evan looks at her with something approaching shock. “Gotta say, he could do much worse. You’re not bad-lookin’.”

He places a hand over his chest in mock-sincerity. “It’s a curse I live with every day of my life.”

“And he’s modest too,” Janet says. “What a catch.”

“I’m pretty much irresistible, what with my rapier wit and brawny body.” Evan opens the refrigerator door and takes a swig from a soda bottle. “Women want me. Men want to be me. And in Michael’s case, men want to be with me too.”

I laugh and grab the bottle from him. “Use a glass, stud.” He just snorts amusement and kisses my forehead.

“Jordie, do they flirt like this all the time?” Janet asks him.

“Yes!” he wails from his position on the couch. “This is why I can’t have friends over, because Michael and my dad flirt like teenagers!” He turns to glare at Evan. “Do you know how embarrassing it is to have to tell them, ‘Oh, ignore all that noise, it’s just my parents *moving furniture*’?”

“Jordie!” Oh my God, has he actually had friends over while Evan and I were, uh, in the bedroom? I might actually die of embarrassment.

“Hey, you can’t hear anything if you’re in the basement,” Evan points out. I elbow him lightly in the stomach, and he folds like a bad hand of poker.

“So, people know about you two?” Janet says gently.

Evan doesn’t take offense. “Sort of. Just a couple’a friends of ours. We don’t go out together or anything.”

I try not to feel guilty about that. “Yeah, I don’t think it’s embarrassingly obvious that we’re together.” I look over at Evan, then at Janet. “Is it?”

“Not really, no,” she says.

“Is that a ‘no’ or a ‘not really’?”

She laughs and puts a calming hand on my shoulder. “Mike, relax. I can sorta see it ‘cause I’m your sister, but anybody else probably isn’t gonna think twice about it.”

“You’re not reportin’ this to the man in charge, are ya?” Evan asks casually.

“No, of course not,” Janet says. “What Joseph doesn’t know won’t hurt him.”

If I could only be so lucky.

18. Shakedown

Michael

Three days later, I close up the bar for the night around three in the morning. The air is balmy, absent of the frigid cold of winter and the unbearable heat of summer. I walk down the block, passing by Aldo's with its windows tinted so dark it's impossible to see inside. The neon "open" sign flickers, the "n" burned out. Rumor has it the Cascio family owns the place as a cover business, in much the same way that Evan maintains the bar.

I hear the restaurant doors swing open when I've crossed the street. Normally, the sound wouldn't put me on alert, but the timing is too precise to be coincidental. It's almost as if someone was waiting for me. The Cascios are Jackson allies, but any conversations held at night in a place with little to no traffic are probably not pleasant ones. I try to hurry past the alleyway in between the restaurant and the neighboring condominium.

"Where ya goin'?"

"Hey, c'mon inside and have a drink."

Oh, this is just lovely.

I quickly assess my options here. I always keep my multi-tool on me for occasions like this, and I know exactly where it is—front pocket, right-hand side. But getting to it in the event of a fight might be too difficult. In that case, hand-to-hand self-defense would be better. A knifehand to the throat. A palm strike to the diaphragm. A knee to the groin. Quick, effective strikes.

I turn around to see two men a few feet behind me. One is huge—and I mean huge. He's got about two inches on me and probably weighs about two hundred and seventy-five. He looks like he might wrestle bears in his free time. He takes a puff of his cigar and flicks it into the street. The other guy has an average build and pores so big his face looks like the surface of the moon. There's a scar across his left cheek. Both of them are wearing dark suits.

"Can I help you, gentlemen?" I ask in my best helpful voice.

The man with the scar looks at the big man. "Is this the guy?" They share a laugh. "Oh man, get a load'a this."

Someone must have sent them. They obviously have no idea who I am. Any wiseguy hoping to converse with a Jackson would have the good sense to approach him respectfully. These two are either incredibly reckless or not associated with a Family at all.

"Who are you working for?"

The two men lumber toward me, and without thinking I instinctively step back to put distance between me and the strangers. I realize with horror that they've herded me into the mouth of the alleyway. Trying to run past them would be a suicide mission.

"We got a message from Joe Jackson," the big man says.

"I think you've got the wrong—"

That's when the big man's palm hits me right below the sternum.

I drop to my knees, the air whooshing out of my lungs. His meaty paw grabs my hair and wraps around my skull. He slams me against the concrete wall of one of the buildings so hard I think I might've gone through it. My head throbs from the impact as pain rips through me. Time seems to slow down now. I swing my leg up wildly, and my foot connects with his chin. I hear the hollow clicking sound of his teeth colliding. He raises his knee up as he lets me drop.

Panic churns in my gut before I consciously realize what's about to happen.

My nose snaps against his knee like a dried-out bird's nest. I feel the warm trickle of blood as a fist bashes into my side, then the whole world is pain and panic and more pain.

"Motherfucker!" the big man swears around a mouthful of blood. "He knocked out my fuckin' tooth! You see that, Ernie?"

"Yeah, yeah, I see it," the guy with the scar—Ernie—says, clearly unimpressed by the display.

The big man reaches out and grabs my shirt, lifting me up and shoving me against the wall. Stars burst into my vision as the world spins dizzily. "I'm gonna smash your fuckin' face in, see how *you* like it!"

It's a struggle to breathe through the blood gushing from my nose. I try to think, to relax, to harness the adrenaline and find the best time to strike.

"Whoa, whoa, Ralph, hey, we ain't supposed to leave marks, remember?" Ernie warns him. For a split-second, Ralph takes his eyes off of me. That's when I make my move.

My hand shoots out like a cobra and strikes him in the throat. He chokes out a gurgling sound, his hands instinctively flying up to his wounded windpipe. I'm ready when I hit the ground. I spring up and smash my knee into his groin. Ralph drops like a sack of hammers.

"Enough!" Ernie shouts, stepping between us with his gun drawn and pointed at me.

"You said Joe Jackson sent you," I ask him.

"Yeah, that's right."

“For what?”

“He wants you to stay away from his son,” Ernie says.

I feel my veins turn to ice. “*What?*”

Ernie suddenly looks worried, like he wasn’t expecting me to have no idea what he’s talking about. “You’re brainwashin’ his kid, keepin’ him locked in that mansion of yours like a fucked-up wicked step-mother.”

Ralph likes that one. “Good one, Ernie.”

“Shut up, Ralph, I work alone.” Ernie turns his focus back to me.

I can feel the anger mounting inside of me. “Just who the hell do you think I am?”

Ernie and Ralph exchange looks. “Evan Chandler, right? You own that bar down the street—”

“Oh my fucking God!” I don’t think I have ever been as angry in my entire life as I am right now. “I’m one of Joe’s sons, you stupid assholes!”

They look at each other again, then back to me. “Yeah, right. I’m gonna need some I.D., bub.”

“Fine. I’ll get you some. Don’t shoot.” Ernie lowers his gun a little as I slowly reach into my pocket and take out my driver’s license. “Here. See for yourself.” I show him the card. I can literally see the color drain from their faces when they realize they just beat up the wrong guy. It would be sort of hilarious if I wasn’t currently in unfathomable pain from a broken nose and various other body blows.

“Michael...Jackson?” Ernie sputters out. “You don’t look nothin’ like—”

“Skin disease,” I say with a tired sigh, pushing my sleeve up to show them proof. At this point, I am so far past the point of caring. I just want to go home and try to make my body stop hurting. “What else you want, a DNA sample?” Ernie frowns like he doesn’t appreciate the sarcasm, but considering that he and Ralph just attacked the wrong man, I figure they’re due for some snark. He hands me back my driver’s license in silence. I pocket it and spread my hands. “*Now* do you believe me?”

Ernie swallows thickly and starts backing away. “Look, man, Ralph was just doin’ his job—”

“Well, maybe he ought’a consider a career change.” Ralph nods as if he might do just that. “And tell my father I said he can go to hell!”

They back away from me until they're out of the alley, then they scurry away into the night, Ralph sort of stumbling behind Ernie.

It's a short walk back to the bar, so I use the rest of the adrenaline still surging through my veins to get me there. I let myself in and dial Joseph's office number with the phone in the back room.

"Michael, good to hear—"

"What the hell do you think you're doing?" I snarl at him.

The smugness in his voice makes my stomach churn. "I take it Mr. Chandler received my message?"

"No, Joseph, *he* didn't." I allow him a moment to connect the dots. "Give up? It was me! Your stupid goons attacked me thinking I was Evan!"

He sighs. "Oh man, I gotta fire those kids. No wonder Dom let 'em go."

"What the fuck is wrong with you? You think this is supposed to get me to come home?"

"Watch it, Michael. What happened to you was an unfortunate accident, but I won't have you speak to me that way—"

Fury reigns in my head, drowning out rational thought. "What if it happened to Evan? Would it still be an 'unfortunate accident' or 'just business'? Why do you think I'm gonna want to come home if you hurt the people I love?"

"You know I didn't want you to go there in the first place! If your mother hadn't twisted my arm, I never would've let you go," he argues. "You promised you'd come home in six months to a year—"

"It hasn't been a year yet!" I shout back. "I still have time left!"

Joseph laughs a bitter sound. "Why you beggin' me to give you two more months when you were sayin' you'd never come home last time?" I swallow hard, pinned in place by his logic. "You're stalling. If I give you the next two months, you'll say you wanna stay longer 'cause you don't want them goin' through the anniversary of her death alone. If I give you 'til Christmas, you'll say you wanna spend the holidays with them again. You're just gonna keep finding excuses to stay there."

"Why should I need a fucking *excuse*?" I screech, feeling my throat spasm. "Why isn't it enough that I'm in love and want to stay? You're the one who said I needed a plan for my life! You're the one who said if I found someone to settle down with that you'd let me move out and start a family! You never said there were stipulations to any of that!"

“You’re betraying the family, Michael,” he growls. “A man must never turn his back on his family!”

“I’m expanding my family! Why can’t Evan and Jordie be a part of it too?”

“Mr. Chandler stole you away from us!”

“No, he didn’t! Did Carol steal Marlon from us? Did Nathaniel steal Rebbie? Evan isn’t stealing me!”

Joseph grunts. “That’s different.”

“No, it’s not. We’re together. I love him. He loves me too.”

“So, you’re takin’ care of him?” Joseph asks in a way that makes the hair on the back of my neck prickle. “I thought you didn’t wanna do that no more. It wasn’t in the deal.”

“It’s not like that,” I grit out. “He loves me.”

I can almost see the angry slant of his mouth. “You can’t get caught up, Michael. The man’s mourning his wife, that’s all.”

“Why’s it so hard for you to believe that me and Evan love each other?” This conversation is making my head hurt even more. Blood drips from my nose, and I wipe it away with the sleeve of my shirt.

“Because I know you! You’re makin’ up a big lie just ‘cause you wanted to run away—”

“Maybe if you weren’t such a hard-ass, I wouldn’t think about runnin’ away!”

“I gotta be a hard-ass when I’ve got world-class fuck-ups like you and Jackie to deal with!”

“What the hell does Jackie have to do with this?”

“He’s the reason you’re there in the first place.”

My breathing stops. I feel like I’ve been bathed in ice. My entire body jumps at the prickle of realization.

Jackie had killed June.

“Why did you—I didn’t need to know that…”

“You better toughen up if you’re gonna be in this business, Michael—”

I slam the phone down, furious with him and his idiotic code of morals. Why doesn't he just marry the family business if he loves it so fucking much?

I exhale an angry sigh and pour myself a glass of whiskey, trying to dull the throbbing in my face and body. The longer I sit here, the more I'm able to pinpoint places of acute pain. My middle is sore, the back of my skull throbs, and my nose is the crux of my agony. But the pain from each of those spots is rippling outward like radiation from a nuclear blast. New words need to be invented to encapsulate the pain I'm in. I really need the warmth of Evan's voice and arms right now.

I finish my drink and clean myself up a bit in the bathroom before I take a cab home. There's nothing I can do about the blood staining my crisp, white shirts, but this is New York, so the driver doesn't even bat an eye. It's a little after four in the morning when I walk through the front door. All the lights are off. The couch is vacant, so Evan must be in bed. I stumble up the stairs and into my room, shutting the door behind me. The cold air of the bathroom prickles my skin. I strip off my bloodied clothes in a hurry and turn the shower on. I step inside, letting the water pour over me while I try to control my frantic breathing.

If Evan sees the bruises, he won't be angry with me. I know this. But I also know his over-protective rage will blossom and bloom in his chest, and the chain of violence will ripple outward.

I do the best I can to focus on something else, washing my body and letting the heat infuse itself into my muscles. I hear the door click open and then shut, and instantly I'm cursing myself for forgetting to lock it. Evan's voice is low and seductive when he says, "Sorry, Michael, I couldn't help myself. Just knowing you're in here, all wet and—" He stops suddenly, and I feel dread sink in my stomach, knowing he's seen my bloody shirts discarded on the bathroom floor. "Michael, what happened?"

I try to make my voice work. "Just a nosebleed. This dry air, man."

There's a short, hollow silence, filled only by the sound of the shower. "You're home late. You didn't get into any trouble tonight, did you?"

"No, it's no big deal, babe. Did you want somethin'?"

His voice is warm again with the curl of arousal. "You."

Shit, there is no way he's not going to see the way my face screams assault. Unless I ask him to flick off the lights before he joins me. But we've been together enough times that my vitiligo won't be an adequate excuse anymore.

Out of time. Evan slides the shower door open to see me facing the wall. I feel the chill of his hand on my shoulder blade, and then the cold press of his naked body against my back. His other hand drifts down to my hip, pulling me closer. I moan contentedly, and his mouth's kissing

a line up to my neck, behind my ear. He drapes my hair over my shoulder so he can kiss more of me. I tilt my head back, unable to fully control the way my body reacts to him, and that's when he stops and his touch turns to steel.

“Michael, what happened?” His hands force me to face him. I try to swallow, but my mouth is too dry. “Who did this to you?”

“Evan, it's nothing, I don't—”

“The hell it is!” I reach up to hide the beginnings of discoloration on my nose, but Evan gently takes my wrist and pulls my hand away, wanting to see the full extent of the damage.

“Don't touch it! Don't touch it,” I warn him, shaky and panicked.

I can feel the heat in his gaze as his eyes rake over my body. “Tell me who did this, Michael. They'll never touch you again.” He lifts a tender hand to my cheek, cradling it in his palm like I'm made of glass.

“It was an accident. They thought I was someone else,” I stutter out. “But I'm fine.”

His now-warm hands settle on my shoulders, and his eyes meet mine, filled with aggression for my assailants. “The fuck you talking about, ‘fine’? Look what they did to you! Was it some of my guys?”

I try to shake my head, but it hurts too much. “It was all one big misunderstanding. Don't worry.”

“Michael, you come home with bruises and blood everywhere, you can't expect me not to worry.” He rests his forehead against my own. “Just say the word and they will be destroyed forever. You won't believe what's gonna happen to them. It'll be beyond their wildest nightmares—”

I raise a hand and press my fingers gently to his lips. “If I tell you, you gotta promise not to do anything. No violence, no vendettas, nothin'.”

“Can I get someone else to do it?”

“No, Evan.”

He heaves a rough, heavy sigh. “Alright, fine. I won't lay a finger on 'em,” he grates out, like it's taking everything he has to make this promise.

I bask in the warm slide of his hands around my waist. “My father sent some people to hurt you,” I confess, feeling the fierce sting of tears at my eyes. “But they screwed up and hurt me instead. They came outta Dom's place, so after they left I went back inside and called my father. He told me it was an accident and that he hired them from Dom to rough you up.”

He clenches his jaw. “Of course he’d tell you that. He’s not gonna admit he sent guys to fuck up his own kid.” His thumbs find my cheeks, brushing away the salty streams of tears. My face sort of spasms in a wince at the pressure.

“He didn’t send them for me,” I tell him. “They thought I was you since I came outta the bar.” Evan doesn’t say anything, just stands there with one arm braced against the tile, his fingers curled into a fist. His anger travels over my skin like a tangible thing. “Do you think it would be best if I went home?”

His fist slams into the tile near my head, but I don’t flinch. My heart does a nervous jump in my chest, still reflexively reacting with panic at the hum and burn of his rage. “No, Michael. That’s not even an option.” I reach up to wrap my hand around his bicep, appreciating his strength. I can feel the tensing of his muscles beneath my fingers. “I—I mean, if that’s what you want, I won’t stop you. But if you wanna stay, there’s no way in hell I’m letting you go.”

“Are you sure? Joseph’s not gonna stop here.”

Evan nods slowly. “I know. I’m not afraid of him. Whatever he does to me, I can take it.” He watches my face, his expression softening a little at the sight of me. He brings his hand to my face, tilting my chin with the slightest pressure before brushing his thumb over my bottom lip. “God, what did they do to you?”

I wrap my hands around his wrist. “Evan, I’m okay. We’re okay.”

19. And Then There Were None

Evan

It's not okay. Not one goddamn bit.

I helped Michael shower and managed to get him into bed with minimal fuss about me doting on him. I know he's not some fragile, easily broken doll, but, Christ, the bruising on his face practically screams at me that he absolutely is.

Michael protested that he's fine, but I helped him into bed and laid beside him while he told me the details of what happened. When he mentioned that he'd hit his head exceptionally hard, I insisted that someone check on him every few hours to make sure he doesn't have a concussion. He didn't really like the idea, but I stroked his hair while he argued with me and brought him some heavy-duty painkillers that knocked him out like a light. I would have kissed him good night if Michael hadn't sort of shoved me away, his face too tender for intimacy. I'm gonna have to find a new hobby for the next couple of weeks.

When I'm absolutely certain that Michael's asleep—his body sprawled out on the bed with one foot trailing the floor—I go downstairs to make a few phone calls.

My first call is to Dr. Mark Torbiner, an anesthesiologist who'd worked for my father. He agrees to come over to the house and watch Michael, making sure he doesn't die while I'm out on errands. He also agrees to bring him some Toradol, a non-narcotic equivalent to Demerol.

My second call is to Joseph Jackson.

“Joseph, it's Evan. You know, the guy you sent two of your goons after. Oh wait, they didn't attack me. They beat up your son instead. A plus parenting, by the way.”

Joseph sighs with an overblown sense of frustration, like he's already tired of the accusation. “That was an accident.”

“No, sending guys after me in the first place is an accident!” I can feel myself slowly losing control. Pull it back. It will only benefit me to be diplomatic here. Joseph is Michael's father, after all. “Look, what can we do? How can we work this out? I want to reach a mutually beneficial agreement where no one else needs to get hurt.”

“Then send my son home.”

“He doesn't seem like he wants to go. C'mon, man, you know you can't get kids to do what you want 'em to. Tellin' 'em not to do something is pretty much a sure-fire way to get 'em to do just that.”

“Michael's a grown man, and—”

“Exactly. And he’s made his choice to stay.”

“It’s the wrong one.”

“Maybe it is, maybe it isn’t, but bad choices are a part of life.” Joseph makes an angry sound. “It’s fair to say that you love Michael, right? You want him to be happy?”

“Of course.”

“So why would you want to go this far, spend this much time and manpower and resources, send guys out to hurt him or the people he loves—why would you want to put him through that?”

“I don’t wanna do any of that, but he’s forcing my hand. I’m trying to protect him from you.”

“What are you talking about?”

“I had no idea you were gonna use him in your web of sex games. Neither did Michael, otherwise he never would’ve gone there. He’s done with all of that. If he tells you he wants to stay, it’s ‘cause he feels trapped.”

Sex games? What the hell is he going on about? “What? No! I would never—” I stop before I bury myself too deeply. “That’s not what’s going on. Did he tell you that he feels trapped here?”

“You think I don’t know my own son? He called me a couple’a hours ago screamin’ at me for what happened.”

“As well he should have.”

“I know my son, Mr. Chandler, and never in his life would he have talked to me that way if somethin’ hadn’t changed in him while he’s been livin’ with you.”

“So, what, he picks up a few choice words? Big deal.”

“Michael would’ve never thought about betrayin’ his family if he hadn’t met you.”

“Well, Joe, I’m flattered that you seem to think I’m awesome enough for Michael to ‘betray his family’—”

“I think you brainwashed him,” Joseph accuses, “or got into his head somehow so he wouldn’t think about leavin’. You’ve got him thinkin’ he can’t go home.”

“That’s absolutely ridiculous—”

Something dark creeps into his voice. “Look, I’ve never given your family any trouble before this unfortunate accident. I respected you. But now I wonder if you were controllin’ your wife the same way you’re controllin’ Michael.”

Anger flares up in my chest like a volcanic eruption. “Go fuck yourself. As of now, all your business here is done. Consider yourself cut off from the entire East Coast.”

Joseph scoffs a nasty laugh, sounding way more smug than he has any right to be. “I don’t think you have that kind of power anymore, Mr. Chandler. The tides have changed.”

I open my mouth to challenge that before I realize that he’s right. The Cascio family has ascended to the top of the ranks now. The two thugs who beat Michael up were at one time under the employ of the Cascios. I really need to call them before Joseph does.

Joseph’s already hung up on me during my brief moment of contemplation. So I make my third phone call of the day.

Ray’s voice is leaking irritation and exhaustion. “The fuck do you want?”

“I got a job for you later. You available?”

“Fuck off, Evan, it’s five in the morning.”

“What part of later do you not understand?”

Ray just makes a groaning sound I assume is a yes and hangs up on me.

My next call is to Dominic Cascio. It’s probably too early to call him, but the Cascios will be the first family Joseph turns against us.

“Yeah?”

“Dom, it’s Evan. Listen, two of your guys—Ralph and Ernie—beat up Michael Jackson outside your place a few hours ago. You know anything about that?”

He sighs. “Oh jeez, those fuckin’ idiots? I fired them last week. Always causin’ trouble.”

“So it seems.” Makes sense why they’d be on Joseph’s payroll now, and maybe speaks some about Joseph’s intentions—if he knew they were fuck-ups, he might have figured Michael could have taken them in a fight. “Know where I can find ‘em?”

#

Ray’s not too happy to be leaving the house at six in the morning, judging by his expression while we’re en route to Ralph Chacon’s Brooklyn apartment. Dominic Cascio had given me the

names and addresses of the two low-lives who'd beaten and battered Michael, so I figured why not pay them a visit?

"Oh, don't give me that look. You're the one who agreed to go with me," I point out.

Ray sort of shrugs like he can't argue with that. "Yeah, well, I wasn't told it was gonna be on such short notice."

"Right before I called you, this thing was already set in motion. It's out of my hands. I don't have any way to stop it, so we gotta move quickly."

"The hell are you talkin' about?"

I'm not in the mood for a lecture about how I shouldn't have rescinded Joseph's business ties in New York, so I edit my explanation a bit. "We're takin' care of a couple'a guys. Ernie Rizzo and Ralph Chacon. You heard of 'em?"

"Yeah, they work for Dom, right?"

"Not anymore. They jumped Michael a few hours ago. Busted his nose, fucked him up bad." I want their deaths so savagely I can actually taste it in the back of my mouth.

The look on Ray's face tells me he's turning my words over in his head, trying to figure out how two idiots attacking Michael equals such a small window of opportunity. But maybe he's just chalking it up to my terrible rage. Wouldn't be the first time. "Shit, let's get 'em."

I raise an eyebrow. "Wow, really? No 'you got me up at five a.m. for this crap' speech? I'm impressed." Because, seriously, Ray is a total drama queen, and the fact that he's not fighting me on this points to his ever-increasing maturity.

"Yeah, well, if the little man can call Michael family after what he's been through, maybe I ought'a too."

Of course Jordan would be the one to get through to Ray. Ray's got a soft spot for Jordan, though he's rather misguided in the way he shows it—offering the kid beer, letting him in on the ways of our world. But I can't exactly blame him for it. That was how Dad was with us; he thought letting us do "cool," adult things made him a good dad because we liked him for it—at least, at the time we did.

"You're gettin' soft on me, aren't you?"

"Yeah, yeah, shut up," he grumbles. After a few moments of comfortable silence, Ray starts up again. "So, I've been thinking—"

"That explains the beads of sweat."

I'm fully prepared for him to reach over and punch me, but he doesn't. "I've been thinking about askin' Nat to marry me."

This is not the kind of thing I want to hear while I'm driving; I almost stomp my foot on the brake and send us through the windshield. "No shit, really? Who would'a guessed you'd think about settling down?"

"Evan, you gave up your 'I'm-shocked-by-your-life-choices' card the minute you stuck your dick in Michael."

I shrug, because he's not entirely wrong. "Seriously though, are you really?"

"Yeah, I was thinkin' about it." He rubs the back of his neck, a familiar nervous gesture. "I wanted to look at rings for her, but, I dunno, I feel like I need a second opinion. I don't wanna go with any of her friends 'cause I want it to be a surprise—you know none of them can keep their fuckin' mouths shut." He sighs sadly. "Makes me wish June was still here, y'know?"

I feel a twinge of pain. "Yeah, she would have loved that. They were good friends."

"Hey, you think Michael'd be interested?" he asks after a moment.

"You're just asking because you think he's gay, aren't you?"

"Yeah, I am," he says with a laugh.

I shake my head. "Never change." There's a moment of silence, and I'm honestly surprised that Ray doesn't fill it with a sarcastic jab at my manhood. Well, somebody's gotta do it... "Would you think me less of a man if I offered to go with you?"

"I already think you're less of a man."

I clap a hand on his shoulder. "You're a terrible person." He doesn't argue with that.

Ralph Chacon lives in a building that looks like it's decaying. This gives me hope that we'll be able to break in without too much resistance. The lock on the front door buckles underneath the force of my kick. I take out my thirty-eight. The weight feels good and comforting in my hand. Ray shuts the door behind us as we venture deeper into the dark abyss of the apartment.

"Oh, Ralph, it must be your lucky day! Has a mark ever come to you and made it this easy?" I hear rustling sounds down the hall to the left. My head snaps toward the noise. Amidst the darkness, I can make out a huge silhouette. This must be our guy. "Tell me, did Michael get a few good licks in before you crushed his nose?"

Ralph stupidly tries to talk his way out of this. "That was an accident, man! We thought we had the right guy!" His shape is moving frantically, and when Ray and I get into the bedroom

we see he's packing a suitcase. There's plenty of floor space, only the bed in the middle and a couple of weight racks against the walls.

"Goin' somewhere?" I press the barrel of the gun to the back of his skull. "Yeah, I'd skip town too if I beat up the son of the guy who sent me. I gotta say, I'm not too happy to find out you fucked up my friend." I snap my leg out and kick the back of both his legs. He drops to his knees like a marionette with its strings cut. "Do you have any idea how fucked you are? Not only did you piss off Joseph Jackson, but you also pissed me off. Y'know, the guy you were *supposed* to go after—Evan Chandler."

Ralph gulps in a way I thought people only did in cartoons. "Look, let's talk, okay?" he croaks. "It was all one big misunderstanding. Just ask Ernie!"

I chuckle to myself. I'm not surprised he decided to sell out his colleague. For most people, their loyalty lies solely with whoever has the power. The vow of *Omerta* means nothing nowadays. How times have changed.

"Oh, I intend to." My finger curls around the trigger, and I want so badly to kill him now. But then I see Michael's battered, bloodied face in my mind's eye.

Ralph does not deserve something so simple as a bullet to the head.

I motion for Ray to take over while I stroll to the weight rack along the far wall. "Say, Ralph, you look like you know your way around these things." I grab one off of the rack and heft it into my hands. It's solid, sturdy, and it could crush his skull like an eggshell. "What do you think this weighs—twelve, thirteen pounds?" Ralph doesn't look over his shoulder, still frozen in place with Ray's gun trained on his head. "Why don't we find out?"

I swing the weight at his skull and hit my target. There's a crunching sound like beetles being stepped on, and he howls in agony as his body hits the floor. I feel the surge of adrenaline coursing through my veins. I'm in my element now, and it isn't a good one.

Ralph struggles, but he's no match for my rage. I plant my heel into his back as I gear up for another swing. The weight bashes into his head. Blood splatters across the room. Ralph stops moving.

"Is he dead?" Ray asks casually, like we're discussing something completely mundane.

I pause to examine the bits of brain matter pasted on the end of the weight. I can feel the weak rise and fall of his back beneath my foot. "He's gettin' there."

Ray sighs. "Alright, you made your point. Let's go."

"Are you fuckin' with me? If you could'a seen what he did to Michael—"

“But Michael’s still alive,” Ray argues. “Hell, he’s in tip-top shape compared to this poor bastard.”

“You’re not seriously suggesting we let him go, are you?” I ask him, but Ray’s wearing his pacifist face that tells me he absolutely is. “Shit like this is exactly why Dad didn’t want you in charge.” A small, silent part of me knows that he’s right, but the red haze of my anger has too strong a hold on me. I see Michael’s battered face again. I bring the weight down onto Ralph’s shattered skull one last time. His head explodes under the force. I wipe a few stray drops of blood off of my cheek. “But, unfortunately, I don’t have much choice.”

#

Ray looks all scowly and put out on the drive to Ernie Rizzo’s place. “You didn’t have to kill him, Ev.”

I roll my eyes. “Goddamn it, Ray, spare me the altruistic moralizing bullshit, alright? The guy was scum. The world continues to spin on without him.”

“I’m not disagreeing with you, but then what does that make us? What makes him so different than you or me?”

“We dress better?” I joke, but in my head I’m mulling over his words. I had gone too far tonight, that much is certain. I’ve gone too far more than once, and that’s how I know it’s time to stop doing this. Stepping over the lines, busting heads to earn and keep respect—it hollows you out.

“Y’know, it’s sorta funny. You scoff at my moral outrage, but what about Michael’s?” Ray says.

“There’s a lot that Michael doesn’t know.” But I imagine it wouldn’t be too hard for him to figure it out. He’s already seen me controlled by rage, compelled to kill, and I wonder if it haunts his sleep. June had loved the power I wield, treated it like a fire to stoke; Michael has the same power but chooses not to use it for sin. My love for him and Jordan is indefensible if I’m not willing to make myself worthy of them. “But tell me this: would you trade a common thug’s life for Nathalie’s?”

“You know I wouldn’t.”

“A million guys like him aren’t worth the life of even one person like Nathalie, or June, or Jordan, or Michael.”

We drive in silence for a while before he speaks up again. “You actually serious about handing me the keys?”

“As a heart attack. I’ll probably leave you a hell of a mess to clean up, but you always did love a challenge.”

It's light out when we reach Ernie Rizzo's apartment. He lives in a marginally better neighborhood than Ralph Chacon, though that isn't saying much. I'm about to kick open the door when I notice it's slightly ajar. I take my thirty-eight out and look at Ray. He nods, a silent promise to cover me. I think about my options. I don't like any of them. The creeping feeling of dread in my gut should paralyze me, make me walk away, but fear does funny things sometimes.

So I go inside. We walk into the living room and freeze.

"Well, shit."

Ernie Rizzo lays dead on the floor, a fresh puddle of maroon red pooled around his head. There's a bullet hole right between his eyes. No sign of a weapon near him. If it was suicide, he wanted to make sure it looked like a hit.

The inexplicable need to leave *right now* grips me. My heart thumps manically in my chest.

"Looks like Joe thinks the same way you do," Ray quips.

I start backing away. "We need to get out of here."

A familiar voice sounds behind me: "Whoa, not so fast, you guys."

I whirl in the direction of the voice, my gun at the ready. I feel my heart in my throat when I see the man's face. "What the fuck are you doing here?"

Victor Gutierrez stands there, pointing a gun at my head. "You first."

I try to quickly analyze the situation. We're in middle of the living room, too far away from the front door to attempt an escape without taking a bullet. We outnumber him, but I really don't want to take that risk. It's a long shot, but maybe I can reason with him. "Ray and I got business with Ernie. Well, not anymore. Your turn."

"So did I. As you can see, our business was concluded." He points to Ernie Rizzo's corpse with his gun. In that moment, I could fire two bullets into his chest. But I freeze, and then the moment is over.

"Who are you working for? Or was this personal?"

Victor looks at me. "Nobody told you? I'm on Joe's payroll now."

I can't believe what I'm hearing. "Joseph Jackson?"

“The one and only.” A proud smile grows on his face like a vine. “Joe was all too eager to bring me over to his side after your little tantrum. Is that always how you conduct business—knock the other guy around when he outsmarts you?”

“You didn’t outsmart me. You lied.”

“You destroyed my apartment,” Victor says.

“You have sex with children!” I over-enunciate that because, seriously, he has sex with children.

He takes a step closer. I try to focus and stay level-headed through the haze of pure panic. “I gotta say, Joseph’s not too happy with you.”

“Yeah, I can imagine. But that’s his business. He sent you to whack Ernie. It’s done.”

Victor shakes his head. His usually placid face is taut with emotion. “Not exactly. I know it’s not on the menu, but delivering your head on a platter to Joe ought’a move me up a couple’a ranks. Higher than I ever was with you.”

I swallow back the bile rising in my throat. Standing before me is another consequence of my fierce anger. Had I not been so furious and hateful with him when I’d let him go, perhaps he wouldn’t have enlisted with my greatest enemy.

Fear knots in my gut. “Let’s talk about this, Victor. Put the gun down.” I think about how Ralph Chacon had said something similar in his last moments. The threat of death is the greatest equalizer. Every man, no matter how tough, will try to talk his way out of it when he’s staring into the promise of unfathomable pain.

“What, you gonna shoot me?”

“Nobody’s shooting anybody. We can work this out.”

“How ‘bout a show of good faith?” Victor suggests. “Put your guns away, then we’ll talk.”

I can see Ray in the mirror on the far wall behind Victor. Ray notices that I’m looking at him and gives me a subtle nod. I really hope like hell he has a plan, because I don’t like the idea of Victor being the only one armed here. I stick my gun in its holster, putting my hands up and trying to look as non-threatening as possible. “Alright, I’m unarmed. Now let’s talk this out—”

Victor points the gun at Ray and pulls the trigger. My brother’s body drops to the floor like a target in a shooting gallery. His gun clatters onto the carpet.

“No!”

Instinct, rage, and pure hatred take over. I take out my gun and fire twice into Victor's knees. He goes down, but not before he shoots again. The bullet hits me somewhere in my left arm. I feel the sting, and I know it must hurt, but with the murderous need for revenge swirling in my head I'm almost beyond pain.

Kill the bastard. It's a mantra now, pounding in my brain.

I kick the gun out of his hand and sent it scattering. He tries to drag himself across the floor, clawing away with his hands. Time's slowed down now. I feel like I'm trudging through molasses. It's been maybe two or three seconds since Ray was shot. I crush the bones of Victor's hand underneath my shoe. His face loses color. I bend down and wrap a hand around his throat to cut off his scream of anguish. His eyes bulge. I can feel my strength slowly ebbing away from the bullet wound, but Victor's lost too much air now to put up much of a fight.

I could choke him here and now, drain the life out of him with my bare hands, but it seems so merciful in comparison to everything this scumbag's done to me and my brother. I want Victor to suffer, to beg for me to kill him.

When his face is a horrid shade of purple, my hold slackens, and I stand up. He gasps for breath, his body still trying to find an escape. I swing my leg back and kick him in the face. I feel the bones break from the force, the flesh splitting open as his neck twists in a way it was never intended to. His head lolls to the side and puts the grisly wound on display. The toe of my shoe smashes into his face again. And again. And again.

His face is almost unrecognizable now. But it's not enough.

"Please," Victor moans in pain, coughing and sputtering as his hands blindly swipe at my feet. I stare at him with abhorrence. I take my thirty-eight and push the barrel into his blood-filled, swollen mouth.

"I told you I'd kill you."

I pull the trigger.

Part Two

20. Forget About It

Michael

Someone's jostling my shoulder, shaking me awake and speaking my name. I pry my eyes open, squinting at the too-bright moonlight pouring in through the spaces in the curtains. The other side of the bed is cold and empty, the blankets neatly smoothed over. Either he didn't sleep here last night or he made the bed when he got up; this is a guy who didn't know how to wrap Christmas presents until I taught him, so the latter option seems unlikely.

It feels like my entire body's been crushed beneath a semi truck. Everything hurts and I want it to stop. "Evan, go back to sleep." I force one eye open and see a man sitting at my bedside that is absolutely not Evan.

He chuckles. "Memory loss?"

I groan in realization. What the hell is Mark Torbiner doing in my bedroom?

"Evan asked me to check on you every two hours," he says. I didn't realize I'd vocalized that last thought. "Do you have a headache? Nausea?"

"All of the above, to varying degrees." I'm still looking at him with one eye open. I feel like a goofy pirate.

"Do you remember your name?"

I sigh. This is sort of ridiculous. "I remembered yours. Just go, Mark. I'm fine. I didn't even pass out or anything. Evan just overexaggerates."

"I guess you don't want any of the Toradol I brought then," Mark says with a shrug. He's using reverse psychology and I hate him for it.

Keeping myself upright and my eyes open is way too difficult for me. I curl back into the blankets. "That sounds like a good drug," I murmur. "Did he tell you I broke my nose?"

"He may have mentioned that, but it's not exactly hard to miss."

I wince. I imagine I must look a sight. "Give me the shot," I whine, my arm reaching out weakly. "Everything hurts, and you're kind of a jerk for keeping it from me."

He reaches down at his feet and digs around for what I presume is the sweet, wonderful pain-killer. I close my eyes, tired and fading fast before I even feel the distant, unpleasant pinch.

I wake up again two hours later, the neon numbers on the clock near the bed informing me that it's seven a.m. I feel like I'm going to throw up. Everything's worse somehow. Mark's

still sitting at my bedside, a book in his lap with large letters on the cover I can't read through my blurry eyes. "More," I ask groggily.

He gives me water instead, which is wonderful for my dry, desiccated mouth, but it doesn't help the whole pain situation. "You're still in pain?" he asks.

I nod, swallowing the rest of the water. "Are you gonna quiz me again?"

"Evan would be very upset with me if I let you die."

"Yeah, we don't want that," I say without a trace of sarcasm. "Where is he, anyway?"

"He said he had some errands to run."

I answer all his silly questions, and he gives me the other half of the dose. I doze off for another two hours before Mark wakes me up again at nine. The sunlight is irritatingly bright, but it doesn't hurt like it did before. "Where's Evan?" I mumble from underneath the blankets.

"I don't think he's home yet," Mark says. "How's your head?"

I make a noise that I hope communicates pain.

"Do you need another dose?"

I give him a look that sort of hurts my face. He gives me another thirty milligrams and I'm out until eleven. I wake up to see Mark gathering his things. "You're leaving?"

"Don't worry, I left you some pain pills that should last you a week or two." There's a glass of water and a bottle of pills on the nightstand. "Feel free to call me if you need something stronger."

"Is Evan home?" I ask around a yawn.

Mark shakes his head. "I don't think so. If he is, he didn't say anything to me. I guess he didn't expect to be gone this long, but you should be alright. You survived the night." He flashes a "humor me" smile.

I wonder where Evan is. "Well, thanks. Evan will be glad I didn't die."

He laughs. "I'm sure he will. See ya, Michael."

I lay down for about another hour before I finally get up. I gulp down one of the pills he'd left me, and that's when I see the note addressed to me in Evan's familiar, elegant handwriting:

Went out with Ray on some errands. Be back soon.

Below that is the name and number for a doctor to set my nose, as we'd discussed last night before I'd fallen asleep. I'd brought it up to Evan, trying to seem casual, but I wanted to make sure I could get the bone reset and keep the swelling down before he saw me again. I've had my nose broken a couple times in the past, so I'm almost accustomed to the pain and the different way I have to breathe before it's fixed.

I walk down the hall to my room and find my bathroom. What I see in the mirror horrifies me. My nose, eyes, and mouth are grotesquely bruised, as if stained by purple-black ink. I quickly apply make-up to conceal the discoloration; no need for Jordan to worry about me.

Jordan's downstairs on the couch watching cartoons. His head swivels in my direction when he hears my footsteps coming down the stairs. "Where's Dad?"

"You didn't see him this morning?" He shakes his head. "Did you eat?"

"I'm not totally helpless," he says. I take that as a yes. I call Nathalie and ask her to cover my shift at the bar, stretching the truth a bit by claiming I'd broken my nose out of my own clumsiness. She swallowed the story and wished me well. Then I called the doctor and made an appointment an hour from now; he must be in debt with Evan something awful to fit me in on such short notice.

I left Jordan at the house—albeit not without a refresher course on the rules of being home alone, at which Jordan rolled his eyes—because I assumed Evan would be home any minute. When I leave the doctor's office with my nose reset, it's around three in the afternoon. Jordan's still home alone when I get back. I don't like this. There's a nervous, gnawing feeling in my gut, but my head tells me I'm probably overreacting. Mother always said I'm a worrier.

I'm trying to slink up the stairs so I can reapply my make-up before Jordan sees the bruising. "Did your dad call?"

"No, he's still out," Jordan answers, trying not to sound like he's worried, but I can hear the subtle quiver in his voice. "Are you going to work tonight or—holy crap, what happened?"

Damn it. "I fell off a ladder at the bar last night. It looks worse than it feels." Not entirely an understatement.

He grimaces; the discoloration must be worse now. "Dad usually says something like, 'you should see the other guy.'"

Yeah, that sounds exactly like something Evan would say. "My injuries don't have any exciting stories behind them, sadly."

Evan doesn't come home for dinner. I try calling Ray's home phone, but I don't get an answer. I call the bar, hoping Nathalie might have heard from either of them. She says no. Dread wraps around my chest in tight bands, but I struggle to keep my anxiety hidden. Jordan's

troubled enough, and if he sees that I'm worried too—an adult who's supposed to make everything okay again—his fears will multiply exponentially.

The endless what-ifs plague me while I'm cleaning up the kitchen. What if my father sent someone more competent than Ernie or Ralph to go after Evan? What if they were in an accident? What if they're tied up in someone's basement, being tortured for God knows what?

I might be a worrier, but I'll be damned if I don't have a good reason to be worried now.

The phone rings. Jordan and I both freeze at first before we look at each other and scramble for it. I get there first, pulling the I'm-the-adult card and answering the phone. Jordan waits at my side, bouncing nervously from one foot to the other.

"Hello?"

"Michael?" It's Evan. He sounds more tired and worn than I've ever heard him.

"Evan? Are you okay? Where are you?"

"I should have listened to you," he moans around a sob.

"Are you hurt? Do you need me to come get you?"

More sobbing. "Why didn't I listen to you?"

I swallow hard, feeling the icy prickle of dread again. "Baby, please, tell me where you are and I'll come get you."

He takes a deep breath. "At the hospital."

"Are you okay?" Panicked adrenaline gushes through me. I try to clamp down on it, needing the ability to think clearly. "Are you hurt?"

"Ray's dead," he says in a voice that sounds impossibly feeble.

I shake my head numbly. Tears push at my eyes. I want to collapse, fall to the ground and cry, but I do nothing, too stunned to really process it. "Oh—oh God, are you okay? Do you want us to come there?"

His voice is instantly hot with fury. "No, Michael, listen to me, do *not* bring Jordan here."

"Are you crazy? He's gonna want to be with you—"

"I don't want him here," he says stiffly.

His words knock the air out of me. "How—how could you not—He needs his father!"

“Because I’m admitted too, okay?”

Horror seizes my chest. My mind floods with paralyzing, unhelpful reasons as to why he might have been admitted to a hospital. “Are you alright? Please tell me you’re alright, Evan.”

“I’m fine. It’s nothing.”

I breathe a sigh of relief. Almost instantly, my cognition returns, and I start processing what he’d said when I first answered the phone: *I should have listened to you.*

What could he have meant by that? What could he have done that might have ended up getting Ray killed?

Unless...

He went after Ernie and Ralph after I’d told him not to. I’d made him *promise* he wouldn’t, but the dumb jerk went off and did it anyway! Evan, you stupid, impetuous child, your temper could have gotten you killed! Didn’t you stop to think what that might do to me or Jordan? Now I have to tell your son that someone else he loves is dead because of your volatile anger.

The accusations are bitter on my tongue, but I hold them back. Evan sounds empty, hollowed out, and I know he’s cursing himself with far more vitriol than I ever could. So instead I ask, “What do you need from me?”

“Just—just take care of Jordie ‘til I get back,” he tells me. “Whatever happens, you promise me you’ll do that.”

It takes me a moment to find my voice. “Oh—of course. When will you be home, you think?”

He sighs a tired sound. “Maybe tonight. I don’t know.”

“Okay.”

“I gotta make a few more phone calls.”

Nausea rocks my stomach, and my throat tightens with dread. “Y—yeah, okay, call me if anything changes. Be safe.”

Jordan stares at me expectantly when I hang up, his entire being emanating fear and panic. “Michael, what’s going on? Is my dad okay?”

I exhale and shut my eyes in pain. I hate myself for what I must do now. “He’s fine. At least, he says he is. But...”

“But what?” I can hear the way his demeanor shifts into numbness, like he senses the impending bad news and is putting up some sort of emotional shield to keep himself from shattering.

“I’m sorry, Jordie...but your uncle Ray didn’t make it.”

As soon as the words leave my mouth, I realize they’re the worst things to say. He looks like he’s going to cry. Jordan is too young for this; he’s already dealing with the loss of his mother and the crippling fear of losing his father. This is not right, damn it.

He stands there, staring off at something in the distance, suddenly looking worn and weary. When he’s finally able to speak, he asks, “What happened?” His voice is completely flat now, sounding about as hollow as I feel.

“I—I don’t know. Your father didn’t tell me.”

Jordan nods slowly as if that explains everything. I pull him in for a hug, but even as he wraps his arms around my waist he feels far away. My heart crumbles into dust.

#

Evan

Larry drives me home from the hospital that night. I stare out the window, vacant and frighteningly even, hiding away from the pain clawing inside of me. “I’ll take care of everything,” he says reassuringly.

I nod and say nothing. I trust that he will; he’d done the same for me when I’d lost June.

Relief washes over me when we arrive at my house. He drops me off without a word and drives away. When I get inside, Michael and Jordan are waiting for me in the living room, their faces looking like they’ve been punched in the gut. Jordan rushes at me and throws his arms around my waist, infusing my tired and worn limbs with much-needed warmth.

Michael hangs back for a moment, watching me. He knows. He knows my brother’s gone because of me, because of my blind, explosive rage. But he’s too kind to stab me with guilt now. That will come later.

Michael comes over to me and wraps me in a hug. I can feel the way his hands ball into fists around my shirt, the way he holds me so tightly, as if he’s afraid of letting go and losing me. “Go be with Jordie,” he whispers. “I’ll be in the bedroom if you need me.”

I nod brokenly, wanting so badly to ask him to stay. How does he expect me to comfort my son when I need someone to keep me together? But instead I stay silent and let him go.

Jordan, maybe sensing my weakness, doesn’t ask for much of me, just needs my presence while he tries to fall asleep. He lays there curled in the blankets while I sit on the floor, my body

leaning against the frame of the bed as if it's the only thing keeping me upright. Jordan reaches out and puts a hand on my shoulder. "It's okay, Dad."

I blink back a fresh wave of tears while agony rips through me. He shouldn't have to do that. I should be the one saying that to him. When did he get so much stronger than me? Before all this happened, Jordan was a normal kid, self-centered in that endearing yet irritating way every child is. But I'd made him grow up too fast, made him take care of me when I fell apart after June died. "Jordan, I'm sorry."

He shakes his head. "It's okay. We'll be okay. Don't worry about me."

Always trying his best to keep me from crumbling. God, Jordan, when did you lose your innocence? June's death had been a sudden rip, something that tore our lives apart and changed us in an instant. One day we were happy, the next we were empty. But this is different. I can't look back and pinpoint the moment where Jordan's childhood unraveled into this awful, burdened thing. Maybe I could blame it on losing his mother if I didn't know better. June's death had forced Jordan to take on her role so I could survive, but the cracks in his spirit were already there long before that. Every time I came home drunk or came home with my shirts bloodied and my knuckles bruised. Every time I got too angry.

Like a loose thread being pulled.

I look at my son in his bed, his eyes closed from exhaustion. I think about how much I love him, how I'd be willing to destroy my own life to protect him. I think about how I almost left him an orphan today.

I close Jordan's bedroom door quietly when I leave a little while later. The lights are off, and I fumble my way through the hall to my bedroom. Michael's waiting there for me, wearing one of my old, threadbare t-shirts. It hangs on him in a way that makes him look small and delicate—well, moreso than he usually does. Michael's frailty makes me want to be strong for him, but I'm too drained and weary to even try now.

His gaze slides toward me when I sit on the bed. He opens his mouth to say something, but I cut him off. "Don't. Just don't. I already know it's my fuckin' fault."

He looks as if I've just slapped him. "I wasn't gonna—"

"Yeah, you were."

His mouth presses into a hard line, but he doesn't argue with me. "Will you tell me what happened?"

"You can probably figure it out."

"I want to hear it from you."

I stare down at the bed, following the swirls on the comforter with my eyes, too ashamed to look at him and see the disappointment there. “It was my fault. I went after the guys who beat you up. I took Ray with me. I wonder if it would’ve mattered if I took someone else.” I think about that for a moment. “Anyway, the first guy—the big guy—went down easy. He was trying to get outta town. Maybe somebody was after him. But the second guy...when we got there the door was open a little.” I wonder about that now, remembering the twinge of hesitation I’d felt. I should have heeded it. I should have kept my promise to Michael and left them alone, but since when do I ever listen? “We get inside, and the guy’s dead. Shot between the eyes. We gotta go now, so I try to get us back to the door. But Victor’s there.” I can tell Michael wants to reach out to me, but he’s holding back for some reason. “He’s got a gun on us. It’s my fault for beating him up and trashing his place. After what he said to you...”

Michael swallows and reaches for my hands. I let him take them.

“Anyway, I try to talk him down, but he won’t listen. He says your father scouted him after I got rid of him, sent him to get rid of the guys that roughed you up. He said Joe’d respect him if he killed me.”

Michael squeezes my fingers.

“He wants us to put our weapons down first. I got no idea if it’ll work, but Ray gave me the go-ahead. So I put my gun away. That’s when...” I don’t give voice to it, but Michael knows what follows. “I think Ray did it on purpose. He was trying to give me an opening. Maybe he saw that Victor wasn’t putting his gun away when we did. Maybe he knew Victor was gonna kill me, so he took my place. I don’t know. It’s all sort of a blur.” I can’t say any more, agony ripping through me at the memory.

Michael blinks rapidly, his head ducked so I can’t see the tears welling in his eyes. “Is he—is he still out there?”

“No.”

Michael understands.

“I can’t talk about this anymore.” I hate how feeble and weak I sound. But remembering the day’s events has sent a crippling wave of torture through me, and I need to drown it out somehow, or at least keep the rest of the emotional tsunami at bay.

Michael squeezes my fingers again and nods. He’s being so empathetic it actually hurts; I almost want him to twist the knife and scold me for disobeying him. But he doesn’t do any of that, just holds my hands in his.

“How’s your nose?” I ask him after a minute or two have passed.

“Fine. It’s a clean break, shouldn’t be too hard to heal.”

“That’s good.” I want to reach up and touch his face, but he’s so tender I don’t risk hurting him.

He lets me get undressed and helps me with my shirt, not even raising a fuss over the thick, white bandage on my left arm. I lay on my right side, and Michael cuddles up close at my back with his arms around me. I feel the hot flare of his breath against my neck while his fingers trail over my arm, focusing on the bandage.

“It’s fine,” I murmur into the pillow. “I’m stitched up. Don’t worry.”

“He shot you.”

“I shot him worse.” I manage a smile. Michael only holds me tighter. The heat from his palms feels good on my skin. “Michael, I’m so sorry. I should have listened to you, but my goddamn anger got in the way. I wish I was stronger than this.”

“You’re the strongest man I’ve ever known.”

I wonder about that.

21. The Fall of Evan Chandler

Michael

Jordan and I are playing *Super Bomberman* in the basement when he asks me, “What are we gonna do about Dad?”

I think about that for a moment. A week has passed since Ray was killed, and Evan’s been living in a nearly-tangible cloud of guilt and misery. He’s stayed in his bedroom day and night, lost in his grief, his eyes vacant as he stares out the window. I’ve taken turns with Jordan bringing meals up to Evan’s room so he’ll eat—we’ve been met with mixed success. When he refuses, he doesn’t lash out, just swallows a bite or two and leaves me or Jordan to finish the rest. Everything about him now is eerily calm, and in many ways it’s worse than witnessing him throw tantrums or cry hysterically.

“What do you think I should do?” Jordan should have some insight since he saw what June’s death did to Evan.

“Try talking to him?” He shrugs. “He doesn’t really listen to me. Maybe you could say something that’ll get through to him.”

Evan hasn’t exactly been listening to me either. “Was he like this before?”

Jordan knows what I meant. “Not really. He was more...emotional. He’d cry. He’d get pissed. In a way it was better ‘cause he actually seemed like he was alive. Now he’s just...not moving.” My mind begins to wander down plenty of tumultuous paths, but I can’t afford the distractions now, so I tuck them away for later when I’m alone with my thoughts and regrets to keep me company tonight. “Maybe he stopped taking his medication.”

That’s a possibility. “I’ll try talking to him. If I can get him to show any sort of emotion, we’ll be on the right track.”

That night, Evan’s still sitting in his chair, staring out the window when I come into the bedroom. I cross the floor and shut the curtains. “Are you coming to bed?”

He shakes his head slowly and makes a sound I presume to be a no.

I sit beside him in a nearby chair. This one has a few of his shirts draped over the back of it. “I think it might help if you talk to somebody. It doesn’t have to be a professional. It can just be me if you’re more comfortable with that.” I swallow thickly, wondering why I get myself into these situations where words are perilous things. “You can yell at me if you want. You can get mad and throw things if you think that’ll help. I owe you that much.”

Confusion crosses Evan’s face very slowly. He turns his head to look at me. “You think I blame you?” His voice is rough and laden with ache from disuse.

“I know you do. And it’s okay, I understand you need to—”

“I don’t blame you,” he snarls. “But I know you blame me.”

“Wh—what? Why?”

“Don’t make me spell it out for you.”

The realization hits me. He thinks I blame him because I’d told him not to go after Ralph and Ernie, that Ray’s death is some sort of punishment for not listening to me. “No, that’s not—no, I would never blame you. Do you really think that I’m the kind of person who would do that?”

He winces. “It’s not—no, okay, you’re not that kind of person, but how can you look at this and not think, ‘you fuckin’ idiot, I told you not to go but you went anyway. You got what you deserved’?”

I balk at the tragedy of it all, that Evan thinks so little of himself that he feels this supreme sadness is justifiable. “Evan, listen to me, this is not your fault. Okay? You gotta know that. I don’t blame you because everyone’s responsible for their own actions. Maybe you made the wrong decision, maybe you didn’t. It doesn’t matter. Because Victor made his decision to harm you and your brother. I blame him.”

“This isn’t the first time I’ve fucked up and gotten someone killed.”

I close my eyes. “They pulled the trigger, not you.”

“I gave them their targets.”

I could argue with him all night about this, and he’d never change his mind. He’s dead-set on his self-loathing. It breaks my heart, really. I just shake my head in disagreement, and Evan stays quiet.

After a moment of silence, he speaks again. “Y’know, my father was out on a job when he got killed, too. It didn’t happen immediately. A couple of thugs from a rival Family got a hold of him, beat him like an animal. Crushed his leg and his spinal cord. Ray was there too, but they didn’t want him.” Against my better judgement, I reach out and slide a hand up his arm. He doesn’t recoil away from my touch. “He died a few days later in the hospital. You know what the last thing he said to me was? ‘Take care of your brother.’” He sighs, and I feel the knot of tension in his muscles. “I let down every single person I care about. What can you possibly say to make that right?”

“You haven’t let me down,” I tell him honestly. “Not even Jordie. He wouldn’t be so worried about you if you hadn’t earned his love and concern.” Evan studies my face for a while. I’m not sure what he sees.

“Ray was gonna ask Nat to marry him, y’know,” he says when some time has passed. “I was ready to hand the business over to him. Things were gonna be different for all of us.”

They are, though not in the ways he'd hoped. I squeeze his hand, letting him draw strength from my support. We sit there in comforting silence for a few minutes before Evan moves to stand up.

"I think I want to take a shower," he says. I nod in agreement. This will be a good step for him, something to pull him out of the darkness, if only a little bit.

"You need me to help? I'm good with my hands." I try humor.

He gives me a small smile. It's not as wide or exuberant as it used to be, but it's there, and it's more than he's given me in some time. "I'll be okay."

It takes him a while, but eventually he comes to bed, his hair damp from the shower. Neither of us say a word, choosing instead to lay together in comfortable—albeit sad—silence. His left arm has healed a bit, the bandage removed to expose the stitching below his shoulder. I trace my fingers over it, a tangible reminder that I could have easily lost him that day too. "How does it feel?" I murmur, curled against his chest.

"S'fine. I'll manage." He tucks the blankets tighter around us and lets his arm rest on my waist. His warm breath in my hair is more soothing than I'd thought. "Your father paid for half of the funeral, y'know," he says after a quiet moment.

"Did he tell you that?"

"Larry did." Evan sighs.

"I guess he feels guilty about it."

"Imagine that," he says bitterly. My gut reaction is to defend Joseph, but taking his side would do no good. I have no idea what my father's planning, if covering half of the funeral is a power play or a gesture of atonement for an honest accident. He'd sent Victor to clean up the mess he'd made; Evan and Ray were simply in the wrong place at the wrong time.

I hold Evan closer. "Do you think you might be hungry in the morning?" I ask, hoping it's not too obvious that I'm trying to distract him. "I'll make you something special for breakfast if you want."

"Surprise me." He smiles, bringing my head to his chest and resting his chin there. "Thank you, Michael."

It sounds like a thank you for sticking by his side even in his worst of moods, for enduring his emotional ups and downs—a thank you for everything.

"No problem."

#

Evan

I meet with Joseph a week later at Aldo's. I have no fear Joseph will just simply shoot me here, because the Jacksons and Cascios are tight-knit allies, and Dominic Cascio wouldn't want that kind of trouble in his own establishment.

You can never see inside this place, even in broad daylight. I wonder if the windows are actually painted black to save money on tinting. I step inside and quickly survey the area. There's only two other people inside besides Joseph, and I have to wonder if they're plants of his. Surely he couldn't have assumed I'd just show up all by my little self. He would want to be protected on the off-chance I came in with no intentions to have a pleasant conversation.

Joseph sees me and raises his hand in a casual wave. I do not oblige him, instead sitting across from him at his booth. "I was just about to come pay you a visit," he says, sipping at a dark red wine. "Care for a glass?"

"I don't drink."

He lifts an eyebrow in surprise. "That's not what I heard."

"Yeah, well, people change."

He shrugs. "You tried the veal? It's the best in New York."

"Cut the pleasantries, Joseph. I'm gettin' sick of your people knockin' off my family."

"Then I suggest you stop interferin' with my business." That is not where I saw this conversation going. Joseph folds his hands and sets them in front of him. "Your possession of my son is strictly a business matter. I let Michael stay with you 'cause he's a shrewd businessman. He would help you get back on your feet—and he did." Michael had worked miracles with the bar. I wonder if Joseph knew that Michael would go above and beyond the call of duty. "But he's a far more valuable asset with his family than he is to you."

I bristle at that. "I don't see Michael as an *asset*, Joseph. He's a part of my family—a family whose numbers are shrinking much too rapidly, thanks to you."

Joseph lets the insult roll off. "Michael's set to inherit the business when I pass on. Tell me, how's he gonna do that if he's livin' here with you?"

"Well, we could move," I say with a shrug. He gives me flat eyes. "C'mon, you've got five other sons. You're tellin' me none of them wanna follow in dear old Dad's footsteps?"

"Michael is best suited for it."

"Well, he ain't too interested. You might wanna think about bringing in a pinch hitter."

Joseph leans in a little. “What you’re tellin’ me, Mr. Chandler, is that I can’t operate my business. You’re imposing your will on me. I’m not a man that takes too kindly to that.”

“Technically, you’re imposing your will on me too, and I happen to share the same scruples.”

“But you don’t want Michael for any business matters. Your interest in him is purely”—he searches for the word—“*physical*.”

I’m about to argue when I hear Michael’s voice behind me. “What are you doing here?”

Joseph’s face breaks into a wide smile. “Good to see ya, kid. You’re lookin’ well. Gained some weight, I see.”

Michael blushes angrily and slides into the booth beside me. “What are you doing here?” he asks again, ignoring my presence.

“Evan and I were just finishing up our discussion about you comin’ home.”

“You both know I’m not going,” Michael says firmly.

Joseph raises an eyebrow but doesn’t look all that surprised at Michael’s response; I wonder if he thinks my presence here is the reason for Michael’s vehement denial. Joseph might prefer to get Michael alone and see if his answer changes when I’m not in the room.

“I’m sorry, but I actually like it here!” Michael explains. “I’m happy with Evan and Jordie. They make my life wonderful. This isn’t a matter of Evan refusing to send me back. He’d do it in a heartbeat if I said I wanted to leave. But I don’t. I want to stay.”

Joseph looks at him with fatherly pity. “Michael, don’t let yourself end up like LaToya.”

Almost instantly, Michael’s posture stiffens, his eyes filled with shock, then fury. He slides out of the booth and stands up. “Joseph, give my love to Mother. I will visit on occasion, but I live here with Evan now.” He storms out without a word, pushing the door open and disappearing into the heavy, black night.

I wonder what the hell Joseph said to Michael that made him so furiously angry. Joseph played it smart; he said something that only he and Michael would understand, keeping me out of the loop so I couldn’t argue. I’ll have to find a way to coax the story out of Michael later.

“Well, you heard the man,” I say, spreading my hands. “No deal.” I stand up to leave.

Joseph sighs a weary breath. “That’s a damn shame.” He glances over to a man at a nearby table and slightly raises his eyebrows toward the front door. The man nods, gets up and leaves.

“What, you gonna shoot me now? ‘Cause that’s definitely gonna get Michael to come home.”

“I don’t appreciate the sarcasm, Mr. Chandler. I’m not gonna shoot you. I’m a businessman, not a thug.”

“You and Michael have that in common.”

Joseph smirks knowingly. “Why don’t you ask him about Detroit sometime?”

More code. More secrets. I hope Michael will unlock them for me. “Goodbye, Joseph.”

“Oh, we’ll be in touch,” he says calmly, taking another sip of wine as I walk out the front door.

#

Michael’s in bed when I get home that night, his hair still damp after a shower. He looks up at me, smiles a little, and settles back into the pillows. I wonder if a direct offense will be best, or if I should loosen him up with affection before I ask the hard-hitting questions. What the hell, let’s be direct. “What was Joseph talking about when he said he didn’t want you ending up like LaToya?”

Michael looks jarred by the question, but he doesn’t turn away from me. “Why do you want to know?”

“‘Cause I wanna know why he doesn’t want you staying here.”

“He didn’t tell you that?”

I sit beside him on the bed. “I’m not stupid, Michael. That was his way of communicating something to you that he didn’t want me knowing about. So let me in on it. Help me get into his head.”

Michael sighs, props his head up on his palm while he looks at me. “My sister LaToya is married to a guy named Jack Gordon. He’s...incredibly abusive. He cut her off from her family for years, kept her under his control. He wouldn’t let us speak with her.”

The name sounds familiar; I can vaguely remember hearing it associated with diamond fencing and drug smuggling. Well, the big picture is starting to come together now. Joseph had accused me of brainwashing Michael and June before, but it had slipped my mind in the wake of Ray’s death. This theory makes a hell of a lot of sense from Joseph’s standpoint.

“Is there any way we could get him to see that’s not what’s going on with us?”

Michael chews his lip for a moment. “I don’t know. The only thing I can think of is if I meet with him alone, but who’s to say he won’t assume you’ve got guys watching?”

“And he’d probably take you home by force...or try to.”

Michael nods.

My next question hesitates on my tongue, like somehow I subconsciously know it’s going to strike a nerve with him. I measure the words in my head, trying to come up with a combination of them that won’t wound him. Each time, I get it wrong. I decide to plunge in head-first. “Your father told me to ask you about Detroit.”

Michael’s shoulders wilt, and he shuts his eyes tightly, like a child trying to make a bad dream go away. “He *would*.”

“Michael, I’m not gonna walk out on you if you did something bad. I mean, look at me—I’ve done tons of shit I’m not proud of. I’ve got no room to throw stones.”

“That’s different. I knew the kind of guy you were when I met you.”

“What do you mean, ‘the kind of guy’ I was? You tryin’ to say somethin’?” I tease.

The corner of his mouth pulls up into an almost microscopic smile. “What was your first impression of me, Evan?”

“Do you want the truth, or do you want the version that doesn’t make me sound like a total pig?”

That gets a laugh. “Be serious. Like, what kind of person did you think I was?”

“You were interested in helping me and Jordie, so I thought you were caring, altruistic in a way that kind of makes me want to throw up.” I give him a playful smirk.

“Right. So what if you learned something that...challenges that perception?”

I shrug and place a hand on his shoulder. “Try me.” He turns his gaze away from mine, feeling undeserving of the unconditional love there. I tilt his chin so he’ll look at me and see that I love him, that whatever I’m about to learn here will not change that.

Michael closes his eyes and relaxes into my touch before he nestles deeper into the blankets. I lay beside him and put an arm around his shoulders. It’s slow, but he finally gives in and begins to confess. “My father got his start through connections to a big-time Detroit mafia boss named Berry Gordy. He was good to us. I sort of saw him as a father figure. My brother Jermaine married his daughter Hazel. So when we moved to California, we were supposed to continue working on his behalf. Well, you know my father. He doesn’t take orders from anybody. He went rogue, built up his own reputation and rackets. My brothers worked for him when they

were old enough, except for Jermaine. He was on the fence about the whole thing, ‘cause he was married to Berry’s daughter.”

I nod, encouraging him to continue.

“One day, my brothers came home all busted up. I was about nineteen, maybe twenty at the time. Anyway, they were all bloody and beat up. They didn’t know who sent the guys, but Jermaine was with them, and he didn’t have a scratch on ‘im, just a real guilty look on his face. That’s how I put it together that Berry sent them. At first, I was heartbroken. Berry Gordy was like my second father. I couldn’t believe he sent people to hurt my brothers, my family.”

I scoot closer to him and grasp one of his hands in mine.

“So, I took a little trip to Detroit on my own.” His eyes tighten in silent agony. “I went too far. I was almost like a different person when I got mad. I was young, just startin’ to learn how to make explosives. I planted a bomb there just to scare them, but...” He trails off, closing his eyes again.

“Something went wrong.” The shock of the revelation doesn’t come. Somehow, I’m not surprised.

“I ended up killing two guys. I only found out what happened when I got back home, but I didn’t feel guilty over it. I was still mad as hell at them for what they did to my brothers. Nobody knew it was me, except for my father. If he ever told anyone, I never heard a word about it. But Joseph took me aside in his office and really let me have it, telling me that isn’t how we do things, and that our family had done wrong and Berry was right to be upset with us in the first place. Since Joseph had to jump through a lot of hoops with payoffs to the cops and Gordy himself, that put me in debt to my father. I owed him big.”

“So, what, did you promise you’d take over the business or somethin’ back then?”

He shakes his head. “I worked for him as a recruiter. If he wanted to do business with someone, but the guy wasn’t really interested, Joseph sent me out to persuade him.”

“Well, shit, that doesn’t sound so terrible. Why didn’t you—”

He interrupts me with a pointed, tragic look. “My methods of persuasion were, uh, sort of unorthodox.”

I open my mouth to ask him to clarify that when it hits me. That’s why Joseph had allowed Michael to come here in the first place—he saw it as another debt to clear. It’s why Joseph had accused me of using Michael for sex games. It explains how Michael is so impeccably skilled with his mouth.

“He whored you out?” I ask in bewilderment.

Michael squeezes his eyes shut. “It wasn’t like that. Besides, I owed my family.”

“How did he even know you would...” I trail off, missing something.

Michael picks it up. “Joseph knew I was interested in men. He caught me once.” Christ, the Jacksons make my family look like the fuckin’ Brady Bunch by comparison. “My father had a reporter in his pocket who worked for the newspaper, and he’d come around to the house every now and then. I had sort of a crush on the guy; he was older than me, so maybe Joseph thought he was into me ‘cause I was about sixteen.” He shrugs and looks away. “The details aren’t important, but Joseph caught us, and that’s how he found out. Let’s just say he was less than thrilled about it.”

I think about how all of this ties in to why Michael’s here with me now. “But he still used it to his advantage.”

“As long as I lied to him and promised I preferred women.”

I understand now why he’d felt so pressured to go out on that date after his father had asked about it. “And now he’s finding out that’s not exactly true.”

Michael nods.

I let out a deep breath. “I hate to break it to you, but this doesn’t really change anything. I mean, we figured those were your father’s motives about gettin’ you home.”

“What about me?” he asks in a hurt voice. “Have you been paying attention at all? I’ve lied to you since I’ve known you!”

I scoff. “Oh please, Michael, this is nothing. It’s none of my business. I mean, I’m honored that you trust me enough to tell me, but it’s not like I have a real right to know.”

“I thought I should be honest with you. Joseph probably would have told you anyway.”

That’s debatable. I’m willing to bet that Joseph would rather hang the threat of a secret over my head.

The phone on the nightstand rings. I motion for Michael to wait a moment and answer it.

“Hey, Ev,” JD starts, “you might wanna head down to the bar—er, what’s left of it.”

“What are you talking about?”

“It’s on fire.”

#

He wasn't kidding. The bar is a burnt-out shell, reeking of smoke and decay by the time I get there. I'm glad Michael isn't here to see this; he'd probably start crying. This place meant a lot to him, maybe even more than it ever meant to me. My only regret is that I've lost even more of June now.

By the time we congregate at Larry's high-rise office, the sun's started to ascend in the sky. My weary eyes remind me that I haven't slept. Larry opens the mini-fridge below his desk. "Need some caffeine?"

"I'll be fine."

"Suit yourself." He shrugs and pours himself a Pepsi. "Man, no offense, but your life kinda sucks."

"Yeah, it kinda does."

"Well, don't worry, I'll take care of this," he assures me.

"You don't really believe it was an accident, do you?" JD asks.

I've been wondering about that. The police and fire departments had declared it accidental, caused by faulty wiring. If this had happened on its own, my other life tragedies notwithstanding, I would have bought that explanation. Now, I'm not so sure. "I have my doubts."

"You got any names?"

I run a list of potential suspects through my head. For some reason, Dave Schwartz's name pops up. I can see how Dave might want revenge on me after I'd sent Ray to knock him around a bit. The assault compounded with all the other slights I've racked up over the years with him paints a pretty convincing picture of someone who might have a problem with me. However, the timing is odd. Dave and I had our falling-out about a month ago. Why would he wait so long to retaliate? Maybe he waited to throw me off. If he was able to keep his affair with June a secret for five years, he'd be able to sit around for a month before making his move.

But something about that theory doesn't fit right. JD watches the expression on my face change as I mull it over. "What?"

"I was thinking it might have been Dave, but—"

"Dave Schwartz?" Larry asks in amused disbelief. "The wimpy guy from the rent-a-wreck?"

"That's the one." I look at their incredulous faces. "He's capable of more than you think."

"Maybe we ought'a open the books for 'im," JD suggests. "His rent-a-wreck generates a bunch of cash—"

“No! He has no loyalty.”

They don't argue with me.

“So why do you think it's him?”

I'm not ready to expose that wound to them just yet. “He's got problems with me. I could see him doing it, but...”

“But what?”

“It's not personal enough for Dave. He wouldn't go after the bar. He'd want to come after me personally or destroy my home. An attack on my business is a message.” I freeze, too many realizations raining down on me at once. My place of business had been attacked. Not my home or my person or even someone close to me. Strictly business. But who would have a vested interest in destroying that?

What you're tellin' me, Mr. Chandler, is that I can't operate my business. You're imposing your will on me. I'm not a man that takes too kindly to that.

Joseph.

The timing makes perfect sense now. Is it really a coincidence that when Joseph's in town my bar goes up in flames? I think not.

I remember how he'd signaled to the other man in the Cascios' restaurant that night. He'd only done that after I'd refused to send Michael home. Of course Joseph wouldn't attack my home—he'd run the risk of harming Michael. Torching the bar after hours would serve its purpose as a threat without endangering anyone.

“It's Joseph,” I say bluntly. “He's sending a message: you harm my business, I harm yours.”

“How'd you harm his business?” JD asks.

“Joseph claims that Michael staying here is me telling him he can't run his business. So, basically, if Michael stays, I'm screwing Joseph over.”

Larry and JD exchange meaningful looks before turning their gazes toward me. I think there's pity there. This is officially not okay. JD shifts uneasily in his chair and looks at Larry again before heaving an overly-dramatic sigh. “Okay, fine, I'll say it. Look, Evan, I don't wanna be ‘that guy,’ but don't you think maybe you should just go ahead and give Michael back?”

“Fuck you.”

He holds his hands up as if warding off my words. “I know, I know, it’s not the most ideal option, but—”

“I’m not giving Michael up.” I fix them with an icy glare. “I haven’t fought this hard and lost this much to just give up now.” The mere idea of surrendering Michael disgusts me.

“All I’m sayin’ is it might be the best way to make sure you and Jordie stay alive.”

I want to retaliate with something like “have you ever been in love,” but I know it would only fall on deaf ears. They wouldn’t understand. They have no concept of it, and the fact that Michael’s another man just makes it a colossal joke to them. I say, “Or we could just wipe out the whole Jackson family.”

Larry raises an eyebrow. “You think Michael would go for that?”

I don’t know what the hell to think about Michael anymore. “If Joseph’s got our backs against the wall, he would.” They’re staring at me like I’ve just grown wings. “Look, I have tried everything. I have appealed to Joseph in every way I know how. I’ve appealed to his intelligence, I’ve appealed to his emotions. Michael’s even told him over and over that he wants to stay. None of it made a difference, none of it, so what else am I supposed to do?”

They exchange looks again. I don’t like this surreptitious communication going on between them, like they’ve decided something about me in my absence. “Is Michael *really* worth goin’ down for?”

“Absolutely,” I answer with no hesitation. “You wouldn’t roll over and give up if it was someone you loved. Why are you willing to watch me do it?”

“Because we don’t want to watch you die,” Larry says. “We’ve buried enough people already.” I don’t say anything. “Look around you, Evan. You ever think about how much this job’s cost you?” Of course I have; I think about it every night before I fall asleep or on the nights when worrying leaves me restless. I think about it every time I remember June or our lost child or Ray or my father. I think about it when I look at Jordan and Michael and realize they’re all I have left.

“I’m not giving up. I’m gonna fight for Michael.”

“I’m not sayin’ you can’t. You got most of the East Coast behind you. But when the dust settles you’ll be the one holding the smoking gun. You’ll make more enemies. You kill Joe Jackson, even *you’re* not walking away from that,” Larry says. “If that’s what you want to do, go ahead, but you’ll have to do it without me.”

My heart sinks in my chest.

JD nods grimly. “Sorry, Ev, you’re on your own here.”

No, no, no. They can't leave me. "You guys, hold on, let's talk about this."

JD sighs and stands up. "There's nothing left to talk about. You want to run head-first into a long, destructive war. That's not what I signed up for."

"Oh, that's right, you're here for the great dental plan." I roll my eyes. Neither of them appreciate my sarcasm. "Look, what if I don't actually kill him?"

"Do you intend to return Michael to his family?" JD asks me.

I bite back the urge to say that Jordan and I are Michael's family; it would only be frivolous and unhelpful, highlighting exactly why they cannot trust my judgement. "No."

"Then I bid you good day, sir."

I make a face. "Really?"

JD shrugs as if to say "what can you do?"

"What makes you think Joseph will let me live even if I give Michael back? What's stopping him from killing me anyway and making an example out of me?"

"You're too high-profile. He can't risk the other Families turning on him if he kills you, especially if you complied with his demands," Larry says.

I sigh, feeling totally drained. "Don't walk out on me now. Please."

Larry's mouth is a hard line. "I'll continue handling your legal affairs until the matters are resolved. But after that, our business together is concluded. You're my friend. I love you and Jordie dearly, but I won't sit by and watch you destroy everything you've worked for."

These are the consequences of the path I've chosen. I struggle to remember how to breathe properly. "Then I guess this is goodbye." We shake hands one final time. "It's been real."

JD places a hand on my shoulder as I turn to leave, watching me with an indecipherable expression. "Have a good life, Evan."

Or what's left of it.

The drive home is a struggle for control. My eyes blur with tears the entire way, my chest hitching with silent sobs. I'm barely able to put on a poorly-formed mask of composure before I get inside the house. Michael sees through my façade almost instantly, and he's at my side, righting me. "What happened? Are you alright?"

I nod furiously, my throat in knots. When I can speak again, I say, "I'm fine, Michael. It's just stress. I think my lack of sleep is catching up to me." I scrub a hand over my eyes to wipe away the evidence of tears. "Where's Jordie?"

"Playing video games, of course," he says with a smile. "I gave him a little break 'cause he's been helping me around the house all day." I close my eyes a second too long and start to drift. Michael takes my face in his gentle hands. "Baby, go upstairs and get some sleep." I rest my head against his shoulder, and then he begins to carry me up the staircase. The last thing I feel is the soft, cool pillow against my face.

22. Wanted Men

Evan

I wake up abruptly in the middle of the night, feeling small, warm hands on my shoulders and a voice whispering, “Dad! Dad!” Jordan’s standing by the bed, shaking me awake.

I roll onto my back and fight to open my bleary eyes. “What?”

He keeps his voice low. “There’s someone downstairs.”

I shoot up in the bed. I’m on auto-pilot, throwing on my shirt and shorts and grabbing a gun out of the dresser. Michael’s stirring now, and when he sees me loading the chamber he comes to my aid. “What’s going on?”

“There’s someone downstairs,” Jordan says in a whisper. “I heard a noise, then I looked out my window and saw a car parked outside.”

I hand Michael a gun after loading my own. “Stay here with Jordie.”

His eyes widen in horror. “Evan, no, I can’t let you go down there alone—”

“Michael. Do it.”

He does as I ask and guides Jordan over to the right side of the room. They can escape using the window in the bathroom—if things get that bad. And then it’s only about a block to the nearest neighbor. If they use the trees as cover, they’ll make it without being seen. But for now, Michael stays here guarding Jordan.

I slip out of the bedroom and inch the door closed behind me. I can hear faint rustling and footsteps downstairs. Whoever’s there isn’t being very discreet about their presence. Either they’ve assumed no one’s home or they don’t care.

Maybe there’s more than one of them.

I press myself against the staircase wall and listen. I hear noises coming from the living room again. I’m still frozen on the stairs. I think back to what happened with Ray, how I’d been stupid and ignored my gut instinct to walk away. I can’t let the same thing happen here. I have to stay alive to protect my son.

When I reach the bottom of the staircase, I peek my head around the corner very slowly, catching a reflection of the living room in the television screen before I hide back behind the wall. The couch cushions are tossed haphazardly onto the floor, torn apart with what might have been a small knife. Picture frames on the wall are askew, and the doors on the entertainment center are thrown open. That’s all I can gather from the quick glimpse of the distorted reflection.

I see a shadow creep along the wall in front of me. With the light coming in from the glass doors to the backyard, that means the intruder is mid-way between the living room and the kitchen. He's also in my blind spot. I won't be able to sneak a look at him without potentially giving away my hiding place.

The proximity of the sounds tell me there's only one intruder inside the house. From the way he's ransacked the place, I'm assuming he's looking for money or drugs. If that's the case, he'll probably go upstairs to check the master bedroom, and if he does...

The shadow moves along the wall. I hold my breath and wait. He turns away, giving me an ideal opportunity to sneak up behind him without being seen. I creep around the side of the staircase, tip-toeing through the small hallway leading into the kitchen. I turn the corner and aim the gun at the back of his head. "If you so much as twitch, I'll blow your goddamn head off."

The intruder freezes. "Don't shoot, man. I don't want any trouble. They just sent me to trash the place. I ain't killin' nobody."

I feel the air leave my lungs. I recognize the voice. "Don't tell me you're one of Michael's brothers." He slowly puts his hands up and turns around. When I see his face, I instantly recognize him. "Goddamn it, Randy. What the fuck are you doin' here?"

"Joseph sent me to check on Michael and toss the place."

"Why didn't you just drop by for a visit like a normal person?"

I hear a soft voice speak up from the stairs. "Evan, baby, no, no, don't shoot! That's my brother!" My gaze slides over to Michael, but my head doesn't move. I can't risk giving our intruder that much of an opening, even if he is one of Michael's brothers. Michael's unarmed, and he pads through the kitchen and into the living room, embracing his brother in a warm hug. "Oh God, Randy, it's so good to see you!"

"You too, Mike! You're lookin' well!"

I clear my throat. "Sorry to interrupt this touching family reunion, but you don't have any guys parked outside, do you?"

Randy looks at me. "No, man, it's just me. Joseph said you were keepin' Mike hostage here or somethin', so he sent me to mess up the place."

Michael's shoulders slump. "No, no, Evan's wonderful! He would never hurt me."

"I had no idea, Mike. Just followin' orders."

Michael comes over to me and pries one of my hands off of the thirty-eight to entwine it with his. "Yeah, Joseph's been threatening us because he wants me back, and he thinks Evan's got me trapped here. But I'm happy with him. I don't want to go home."

Randy looks confused for a moment. “You two are...” He makes vague hand gestures I assume are supposed to mean something.

Michael nods enthusiastically, his dark curls bouncing as his head moves.

“Oh man, who would’a thought?” He chuckles to himself. Michael does not find this as amusing as Randy. “This is great! Wait ‘til your brothers get a load’a this: Joseph’s very own Golden Child’s gone rogue and left the family.”

Michael squeezes my hand tighter. I squeeze back. “Michael didn’t leave the family,” I say. “He just happens to like livin’ here with me better than livin’ at home. And considering the way his father treats him, can you really blame Michael for wanting to stay here?”

Randy fixes me with a glare. “Uh, excuse me? You’re the problem here, dude.”

“Right, I give him the life he wants and I’m the problem—”

Michael interrupts me with a gentle elbow to the gut. “Baby, shut up and let me talk to him.”

Shutting up.

“I didn’t leave the family,” Michael explains. “I’m expanding it, the same way our other siblings did when they got married and started a family! I’m sorry that Joseph doesn’t want to see it that way, but why should me and Evan and Jordie be responsible for that?”

“No, Mike, you abandoned us. Have you done anything for the Family since you’ve been here? Have you even done anything for him”—he gestures to me—“that isn’t a sexual favor?” I bite back a retort. “Do you even know what’s goin’ on back home? Don’t you think there might be a little bit of truth to what Joseph was sayin’? Only you’re not brainwashed, you’re just selfish. You just do whatever you want. Doesn’t matter what anybody else thinks.”

Michael visibly bristles at the comment but says nothing.

“Course Joseph’s got issues with you. You get to lounge around while we do all the heavy lifting, then you got the nerve to whine about it,” Randy continues. “You don’t abandon your family like that. I don’t care if you’re datin’ some dude—most of us are married with kids, and you don’t see us bailin’ on family duties.”

“But you can bail on your wife and kids as much as you like,” Michael sneers. “Why are you even here anyway, ‘cause you’re followin’ Joseph’s orders? Are you that desperate for his approval?”

Randy sighs, tries another avenue. “I know you won’t do it, but if I were you I’d just come home. Joseph’s real upset.”

“Too bad for him.”

“Look, Mike, I know how you feel—”

“Do you? I see how you treat your girlfriends! In fact,” Michael sort of shoves me out of the way as he takes a few steps toward Randy, “every single one of you treats your wives and girlfriends like shit! Even Joseph is callous and awful with Mother! So tell me, Randy, how the hell would you know how I feel? How would you know what it’s like to love someone so much you could never think of hurting them?”

Randy rolls his eyes and crosses the living room. “You always did have a flair for the dramatic. Not to mention a hell of a stubborn streak.”

Michael snorts an angry breath. “Goodbye, Randy.”

“Be safe, brother, ‘cause this is only the beginning if you make him mad. You know that.” Randy shuts the front door behind him as he leaves.

Michael’s shaking with fury, his fists clenched at his sides. I place my hands on his shoulders. Only now do I see the outline of the gun hidden beneath his oversized shirt. “Where’s Jordie?”

“In the bedroom. He’s safe.” He goes upstairs to show me. “Jordie, it’s okay. You can come out.” The bathroom door opens, and Jordan pokes his head out. It takes him a moment or two to commit to leaving his safe spot.

“Did you guys shoot anybody?” he asks as we’re dismantling the guns and putting the pieces back into the drawer.

“Nah, wasn’t necessary,” I tell him casually. “You know I’m good at scaring people away.”

Jordan fixes me with a glare. “Is that why most of my friends never come back here after hanging out once or twice?”

I feel the knife twist in my heart. “Yeah, probably.”

“Jordie, do you want to sleep in here tonight?” Michael offers.

Jordan shakes his head adamantly. “No, thanks, I’m cool. Don’t worry about me.”

I shut the drawer and turn to him. “Are you sure? I’ll make Michael sleep on the floor if you think it’d be weird.” Michael elbows me in the ribs.

Jordan chuckles at my pain, looks away for a moment while he thinks it over.

“It’s okay to be scared, y’know,” I tell him. “Everybody gets scared once in a while, even me and Michael.” I pause. “Oh God, especially Michael.”

Michael narrows his eyes and elbows me harder. This time we both laugh.

“Why don’t you and your dad sleep in here, and I’ll go in your room?” Michael says.

“No, it’s okay,” Jordan says. “You can stay.” He lets me and Michael get settled first before crawling in between us. “Think of me as a wall, okay? That means no funny business.”

“Okay, forget the clown costumes then.”

Michael makes a loud, forced groan. “Evan, your bad jokes are physically hurting me. Please stop.”

“I knew it, you just want me for my body.”

“Yeah, hairy Jewish guys are really in this year.”

“I will seriously throw up in this bed,” Jordan threatens. “Are you guys always like this?”

“Usually, yeah,” Michael says. “We laugh a lot when we’re together.”

“Well, duh, that’s ‘cause you’re both naked.” I feel really ashamed for laughing at that. “Can we go to sleep now? Because I would really like that.” Jordan curls into the blankets and lays on his stomach. “Or are you two gonna keep being gross?”

“I’ll try to keep my hands off your father,” Michael says.

I grin. “Maybe I should take off my shirt.”

“Maybe you should just threaten to.”

Jordan sighs theatrically into the pillow.

#

The next morning I wake up with my arm slung around Michael’s waist. I move closer, reducing the gap between our bodies, and pull him to my chest. He hums an appreciative, sleepy sound at my sudden embrace. “Are you awake yet?” I murmur at his ear. He makes a noise that might be a yes. I let my hand drift between his legs and squeeze his already-hard cock through his pajama pants. “Ooh, good morning to you too.”

He grunts and pushes his hips into my hand. “Evan, don’t.”

“Are you sure?” I grind my dick against the curve of his ass.

Michael sucks in a breath through his teeth. “If you get me started I won’t be able to stop.”

“And that’s...bad?”

He turns his head to look at me over his shoulder. “Yes, ‘cause I’m pissed off.”

“I fail to see the problem here, Michael. Unless you’re pissed at me and this is a warning for the safety of my genitals. In which case, thank you, but I’m still interested.”

He huffs an angry sigh and sits up, pushing his hand through his hair. I can practically feel the tension emanating off of him. “I need to be alone for a little bit,” he says, and the detached tone he uses makes me think twice about making a masturbation joke. “Can you do that for me?”

“Yeah, sure.” I hop out of bed. “I’ll go check on Jordie—” My hand’s wrapped around the doorknob when I realize my mistake. Jordan had slept in here with us last night. And he isn’t here now. If he’s downstairs... “Oh fuck.” I race down the hall to his room. No sign of him. Shit. I take the stairs two at a time and swing around the bottom of the banister to see Jordan searching the refrigerator for sustenance. “Jordie, what are you doing here?”

He looks up at me over the open door. “I live here, remember?”

“Y—yeah, but I didn’t think you’d be up so early.”

“It’s noon.”

Well, then. I’m not really sure how to respond to that, so I sort of shrug in an exaggerated way. He shuts the refrigerator door and sighs, finding nothing of interest. He looks through the cabinet before grabbing a pack of Oreos; he’s got that expectant air about him like he’s waiting for me to say something about it. I watch him for a moment, and he breaks down with guilt.

“Dad, look, I think I’m allowed to have Oreos for breakfast considering we just got robbed last night.”

“We didn’t get robbed.” I really need to learn when to shut the fuck up.

“Then what...” He trails off, gesturing behind him to the remnants of the living room.

“They were looking for something. They didn’t find it.”

“Yeah, obviously.” He picks up one of the ripped-apart couch cushions off of the floor before putting it back on the couch. “At least the TV still works,” he says, flipping the television on to watch cartoons.

Kids. They bounce back quicker than adults, that's for sure.

"You're, uh, you're not scared they'll come back, are you?"

He gives me a half-shrug. "Not really. Nobody messes with you."

I really wish I hadn't shared so many exaggerated tales of my reputation with him. I chuckle, but there's a twinge of hysteria to it. "Yeah, you got that right."

We sit together on the couch for a while and mindlessly flip channels.

"Why is everyone in infomercials so bad at everything?" Jordan asks while we're watching an infomercial sub-human attempt to cut bread with a doorstep. "Seriously, it's like no one can perform even the simplest task without screwing it up hilariously."

"Can you imagine the actor's credits for those things? Like, if you were in an infomercial and wanted to put that on your resume, how would you even do it? It's not like they play a character with an actual name. You'd have to put down 'Woman Who Doesn't Understand Cling Wrap,' 'Guy Trying to Navigate His Own Backyard,' or 'Kid Who Can't Pour Milk.' That's just tragic."

Jordan pulls a face that says he's unimpressed. "But, dude, you'd get to make a mess of everything and get paid for it. How awesome would that be?"

"Not awesome enough to warrant 'Guy Trying to Cut Bread With Wooden Doorstop' on my acting resume."

We don't say anything for a few minutes, content with the comfortable silence between us. Then Jordan cleaves my heart anew with, "Hey Dad, am I gonna have to do what you do when I grow up?"

The expression on his face is painful, because he looks like he's trying very hard not to influence my answer in any way through pleading eyes. "No, Jord', you don't have to. Actually, I'd—I'd rather you didn't."

"How come? Mom wanted me to."

My throat locks up. "I know she did, but...your mom and I didn't always agree on things. We both love you so much, but we had different ways of showing that. Sometimes it made us angry at each other 'cause we both felt we were right." It's difficult to put into words how much I don't want him going down the same path I did. "But you got the choice I never had; you don't throw something like that away. I wish I could do something else."

"Why can't you?"

“It’s complicated.” I lean back into the couch. “I’ve thought about it a lot, what I would do if I could get out.”

“What would you do?”

“Write movies, of course,” I say with a smile. “I’d be honored to have you help me.” Jordan nods and smiles back, but it’s weak. “What, you think it’s totally uncool to have your dad as the other half of a writing team?”

“No, it’s just...” He shifts in his seat, tucks his legs beneath him. “Promise you won’t be mad?”

“...I’ll try my best.”

“I don’t wanna write movies,” Jordan says. “I only did it ‘cause it made you happy.”

I’m not sure how to feel about our constant role-reversal. Kids are supposed to be selfish. Parents are supposed to be the ones who do things they don’t want to for their children’s happiness. I’m touched and honored that he’d do such a thing, but the cold finger of guilt prods at me, reminding me why I shouldn’t feel anything warm in the cockles of my heart.

“I’m not gonna make you do anything you don’t wanna do,” I tell him, “especially if you’re only doing it to make me happy. If you wanna go into the business when you get older, that’s fine. But don’t do it ‘cause you think I want you to.”

He nods thoughtfully.

“Do you have an idea of something you’d rather do?”

He shrugs. “I dunno, I got a lot of options.”

“Yeah, you do.” We sit together quietly until I speak again. “Hey, Jord’, why don’t you call one of your friends and see if they wanna hang out?”

He gives me a suspicious look. “Uh oh, what are you planning?”

“Me?” The most innocent lion to ever lie with a lamb. “Nothing, I just figure you could use the downtime.” A little white lie, but I plan on either having sex with Michael all day or to discussing retaliation on Joseph, and Jordan wouldn’t want to be around for any of that.

“But I want my dad more,” he says in a sickeningly-sweet way.

I roll my eyes. “Gee, I wonder what you could possibly want.”

“Give me twenty dollars.”

“No.”

“I’ll take back all the nice things I said just now.”

I huff a sigh, like forking out twenty dollars is such a huge sacrifice on my part. “My own son extorting me. Where did I go wrong?” I wail dramatically.

“I learned from the best,” he says, pocketing the cash.

My brow knits in distress. “Oh, Jord’, I’m sorry, when did I ever teach you—”

“You?” He makes a face like he’s just tasted something sour. “No, I was talkin’ about Uncle Ray.” He laughs and moves for the stairs. “You? Please, you can’t even get Michael to watch the movies you want anymore.”

“He’d rather watch *E.T.* over *Aliens!* How can there be justice in a world like this!”

Jordan’s out of the house an hour later, opting to see *Jurassic Park* with some friends. I take the opportunity to go upstairs to check on Michael. He’s sitting on the edge of the bed with his head in his hands. If he hears me come in, he doesn’t show it.

“Michael, talk to me. What’s wrong?”

He exhales a deep sigh before raising his head to look at me. When I move closer, I can see that his eyes are watery and red-rimmed. “I’ve been trying to think of ways to fix this.”

“And?”

Michael doesn’t say anything for a while, just sits there looking lost and vacant. I pull him to my chest and hold him there. He breathes a deep sigh but offers nothing more in the way of knowing the thoughts in his head.

“Can I help?” I ask, my voice soft against his skin. My hands find his, and he squeezes a little too forcefully.

He shakes his head in a slow, deliberate movement. After a moment, he says, “Can I tell you what the worst part is?”

I have no idea what he’s talking about, but I say, “Sure.”

“The worst part of all of this is that I can see the life we could have together,” he says, his voice trembling with emotion. “I can see us raising Jordie and maybe more kids, and loving each other and being happy. But we can’t, and it’s killing me.” He swallows and takes a deep breath, waiting until his voice is even before he speaks again. “I think I have to go home.”

This is an acceptable option, something I had wondered about before. But I have to be sure it's not permanent. "For how long?"

"I don't know," he says, but I know a kind lie when I hear one. It's going to be a one-way trip. "I'll come back—if you still want me."

What a ridiculous notion, assuming I would no longer want him. Thanks to Michael, my life had changed irreparably. *I* was changed. The entire fabric of my family has been altered past the point of recognition simply because Michael exists. "Of course I will."

The hard wall of his back loosens up the slightest bit, and he relaxes against me. "Evan, I'm so sorry, baby. I wish there was something we could do. I think..." He trails off.

I press my lips to the back of his neck. "What? You can tell me anything, you know that, right?"

He nods weakly, gathering the strength to speak. "I think I always knew it would end up like this. Maybe that's why I loved you with everything I had, 'cause I knew it wasn't gonna last forever."

"It will. *We* will. Trust me, Michael, I will find you a way out of this." He snuffles and wipes his eyes with the back of his hand. "This isn't your fault, okay?"

My words tense him right back up, and he tears himself out of my embrace, his eyes fierce with a world of hurt. "How can you say that? Look what I've done! All of this is because of me!"

"No, it isn't," I tell him, trying to find the right thing to say to soothe his fury. "It's because of your father. Don't blame yourself. There was nothing you could've done."

"You'd still have a brother if I had never come here."

I feel the sting of his words but try to shake it off. One thing about Michael is that he knows exactly where to aim when he wants to wound you. I drag in a breath. "Maybe. Maybe not."

"What else do you have to lose before you realize that I'm poison?" He's trying to get angry, but it still sounds like a plea for me to blame him, to give him more reason to bury himself in the foolish conviction that returning home will set things right. "What's it gonna take? Will you finally get it when something happens to Jordie?"

Another carefully-worded wound, this one cleaving right through my heart. To lose my son... The thought is incomprehensible because it's impossible. "No one's even gonna touch Jordie. I'll kill anyone who tries."

Michael's mouth twists the tiniest bit, and he looks away for a moment, knowing that he has no argument for that. How well he knows that I would give my life so that my son could live. When he looks back at me, his eyes are harder, more focused. "I have to keep you safe. Just like you have to keep Jordie safe."

"No, Michael. I'm not losing you too."

He tries to glare at me, but his true emotions are beginning to bleed through his angry mask. I can see the subtle creases of worry in his brow and the pain in his eyes that I'm arguing with him. He wants to sacrifice himself, to be the noble one. But I'm not going down without a fight. "This isn't your decision to make."

"So, what then, you're just gonna take off? Just like that? For someone who thinks he's ruined my life, you sure are eager to leave me alone to fix it." I feel a stab of guilt for hitting him in a weak point, but there will be time to lick my wounds later.

"Jordie needs you," he begs me.

"Oh, give me a break—don't make this about Jordie. This is about you and me."

"I'm trying to protect you! All I've ever been trying to do since I got here is help you!"

I hold him in place with an icy glare. "And this is your way of *helping* me—by ducking out after you get my brother killed? Too little, too fucking late, Michael! You could have walked out when your father demanded that you come home. You could have left when he fucking threatened me to send you back, or even when he sent some hired muscle to beat the shit out of you! But, no, you had to wait until your family racked up the body count before you thought about going back home!"

"He didn't send someone to beat me up, Evan," he grits out through his teeth, correcting me. "It was supposed to be for you."

I scoff a laugh. "Oh, right, 'cause that's *so* much better. And why're you sticking up for him now? You've spent all the time you've been here telling me what a crappy father he was and how different you are from him, but now all of a sudden you wanna split hairs?"

"Because you're trying to misrepresent it so you can somehow prove a point! And I *did* think about leaving. Remember? I asked you if you thought I should, and you said no."

"So now it's *my* fault?"

"N—no, that's not what I meant—"

"How the fuck else did you mean it?" I snap. "You're unbelievable. Are you actually blaming me for all of this? You know how far they're willing to go; at the first sign of trouble

you should've run back home, instead of waiting until it took my brother getting killed before you realized they're not exactly above using murder as a means of communication!"

"You fucking hypocrite! You're in the exact same business as they are, so don't stand here preaching to me like you're so above it all! Ray died because of your goddamn temper, Evan, not because of my family!"

I clamp my eyes shut, feeling his words like the sting of a slap across my face. "I thought you said it wasn't my fault. Didn't you say I should blame the guy who shot him instead of myself?" Michael looks horrified. "Well, your father sent the man who shot him. So yes, your family is responsible." I have to believe that, because I don't want to live with the alternative. "And you know I want out of this. I was going to hand the business over to Ray before that option was destroyed." Michael lowers his head. "You're letting your father win, Michael. You're a grown man; it's time for you to grow up. Don't let him dictate how you should live your life."

"You want me to let *you* do it instead?"

"Wasn't the entire reason you came here because you wanted to get away from him? What do *you* want out of life? Don't you have any aspirations that don't involve avoiding your father's wrath?"

"You know I do," he almost whispers.

"Then chase after that. Don't spend your whole life trying to placate him like he's some angry zoo animal. What kind of life is that?"

"What kind of life is it if you lose Jordie?"

He keeps jabbing that dagger into my side, and it's starting to piss me off. This isn't about Jordie at all, not really. He's grasping at straws here, using my son as an excuse to be a total fucking moron. "What kind of life is it to lose your wife and your brother in less than a year? Your fucking family got June killed!" Michael opens his mouth like he wants to protest, but I stop him. "Yeah, I know, you 'had nothing to do with that,' but the fact of the matter is, you're the one whose family got Ray and June killed, okay? So don't even insult me with your holier-than-thou 'I'm not like them' attitude! You've got just as much blood on your hands as they do." I can't be bothered to rein in my anger anymore. I don't care if it hurts him. "Don't act like you're blameless, Michael, because the way this looks to me is that you're using me up for your own selfish needs and then fuckin' disappearing after you've caused enough damage to satisfy you. You came here to take over the business, to prey on my depression and loneliness after June died, and then you get another family member killed before you duck out and go back home. Don't we mean anything to you at all?"

"Of course you do!" he wails, tears pouring out of his eyes. "The only reason I'm leaving is because I love you!"

“Well, you know what? That’s bullshit, because if you really love somebody, you don’t want them to get hurt. Are you really gonna pretend that making me fall in love with you and then losing you won’t completely destroy me? Maybe you could leave and I’d have a good cry and go on with my life if I hadn’t already lost so much, but we’re way past that now. Way past that.”

“I—I just want you to be safe. I’m trying to protect you!”

“You don’t have any right to do that, Michael. You don’t get to decide for me what’s right to do or what will protect me, okay? That’s my decision to make.”

“If I stay, they’re gonna see that as me turning my back on them. I can’t do that, Evan.”

“Why not?”

“What—”

“No, seriously. Why not? After everything you told me about your father, why the hell would you wanna go back there?”

He looks away, guilty of some unspoken offense. “Look, I don’t *want* to go back. I love you both so much. I don’t want anything to happen to you. If I don’t go, he’s gonna come after you and Jordie.”

“Okay, one: he’s probably gonna come after us anyway. You wouldn’t be here arguing with me if going home would change anything; you would’ve already left. And two: staying away from the family is not a good way of indicating that you care about your family. It’s a copout, and you—”

“That’s exactly it!” he exclaims, scrubbing a hand through his hair. “As much as I love you and Jordie, they are still my ‘real’ family. And if I stay away from them and live with you two, they’re gonna think I don’t care about them anymore.”

“Well, at least you could talk to them, right? As long as you’re talking, nobody’s gonna get hurt. When the talking stops, that’s when people get hurt.” He shuts his eyes and winces, like he’s expecting to be punished for something. “You *have* at least been talking to them, haven’t you?”

“Not—not really,” Michael admits, his gaze fixed on the floor.

I’m trying very hard not to react like I’ve just been punched in the stomach. Suddenly, there’s this horrible feeling shredding my gut like I’ve swallowed knives. “Michael, don’t tell me you got my brother killed because you wouldn’t make a fucking phone call. Please don’t tell me that.”

“I don’t think it’s that simple,” he says, shaking his head, trying to dispute it. “And—and they came to see me here a few times, y’know? It’s not like I never had any contact with them at all.” He shifts nervously beneath my glare.

I want to scream. I want to throw things against the wall and curse him for being so fucking stubborn and passive-aggressive because, goddamn it, he really did get Ray killed all because he wouldn’t pick up the fucking phone every other week or so and call his stupid family.

Michael doesn’t need any harsh words or gestures to understand my rage; I can see the gears turning in his head as the realization sinks in. He gets this horrible, lost expression on his face and sinks into a sit on the bed, his head buried in his hands. “Oh my God....”

It’s hard to be mad at him when he looks so broken and hurt. No one’s face should be able to do that. I don’t know what to feel anymore. It’s like the anger’s been cut out of me. I sit beside him and wrap an arm around his shoulders, trying to stop his tears and the subtle shaking from his quiet sobs. “Michael, look, you’ve gotta sit down and talk about stuff, because my feeling is that if you just talk anything can be worked out. But as soon as you cut off communication, you only frustrate the other person. And that—that makes you wrong, because you make things worse that way. You’re saying to them, ‘I don’t care enough about you to sit down and talk.’”

Michael nods, but there’s something empty behind his eyes. “I didn’t want this to happen.”

“I know you didn’t.” I tuck a stray curl of hair behind his ear. I fight the urge to be harsh with him, knowing that mindlessly tossing out hateful words will get us nowhere good. “You didn’t do it on purpose, I know, but when you cut off communication with your father, he interpreted that as me controlling you, keeping you away from them. He told me once that you would never have ‘betrayed’ your family if you hadn’t met me. So yeah, to him, the lack of communication translates to me being controlling and keeping you under my thumb.”

“Just like LaToya,” he says quietly.

“What I want you to do is call your father and tell him, in straight-up layman’s terms, what you want from him and what you’re going to do. So there’s no way he can misinterpret it. And whatever he says, we’ll just go from there.”

“I don’t know what I’m gonna do.”

“I think you wanna stay, because if leaving would solve everything you’d be gone by now.” He nods, wracked with guilt so it just looks sad. “Then stay. Please.” He doesn’t pull away or flinch when I reach for his fingers and entwine them with mine. “You want me to be safe, but I want to live my life with you and Jordie. That’s what makes me happy.” He blinks back a fresh wave of tears. “This isn’t a ‘cut your losses’ type of thing, okay? If you want me, you have to stay. Otherwise, walk away; I’ll love you forever and support you and wish you well. But don’t think about showing up out of the blue when you get bored. Either we do this together or you let

me go for good. Those are the rules. If you want to stay with me, you gotta understand that's the only way I can survive. That's how I live."

Michael watches me with curious eyes, searching for any sort of contradiction or loophole in my offer. He looks away, biting his lip as he hesitates. The longest couple seconds of my life tick by, then finally he answers in an almost inaudible whisper: "What would we do...if I stay?"

I feel a shred of hope swell in my chest. "We can run away somewhere. Start over—all of us."

"Do you really think we can do that?" He traces his fingers over the inside of my arm.

"It's worth a try." I lift his wrist to my lips and kiss the veins there. "I'm so sorry I said that stuff to you, Michael. This isn't your fault."

He closes his eyes. "I don't blame you for saying it. In a way, you're right, but I'd probably feel the same way if the situation was reversed."

I can't imagine being the one to bring his world crashing down around him. I shudder at the thought and press my mouth to his, thankful that he's agreed to stay. As long as I have him and Jordan, I can survive. "Now, you're gonna call your father and tell him you're staying."

#

Michael

"Do I really have to do this now?" I ask Evan as he hands me the phone off of the nightstand near the bed. "Shouldn't we wait 'till tomorrow when I've got a clear head?"

"No, you're doing this now. I know you, Michael; if I let you put it off you'll just keep finding ways to delay it." His voice is stern, but I can hear the gentleness underneath it. I know he's making me do this for my own good. That knowledge helps steel me as I dial the number and wait through the rings.

Joseph's voice on the other end of the line chills my blood. "Hello?"

I lick my lips, trying to find the courage to speak. "Joseph? It's me, Michael."

"Michael? What's wrong? Are you comin' home?" His excitement is almost palpable.

"Nothing's wrong. That's—that's what I wanted to talk to you about." Evan takes my free hand, giving me strength. "I want to stay here with Evan and Jordie. I want you to stop sending people to hurt him and his family. I want you to leave him alone. He's suffered enough." Evan's expression doesn't change, but I feel his fingers squeeze mine, his knuckles bloodless white.

“Are you out of your damn mind?” Joseph snaps. I can hear the snarl of disgust in his voice. “Just what the hell do you think you’re doin’, Michael?”

“I *think* I’m doing exactly what you told me to do: help him out, do whatever he wants, make him happy. You can’t blame me for actually liking the guy.”

“You forgot the part where I told you to come home after six months. I gave you a bit of extra time ‘cause I figured he needed it, but it’s been long enough. We need you home.”

“Well, Evan and Jordie need me here more. And I think it’s absolutely disgusting that you’re sending people to hurt him and his family—to hurt *me*, even—”

“That was an accident,” Joseph protests. “They were supposed to rough up Evan.”

I roll my eyes, scowling at him even though he can’t see me over the phone. “Oh, that’s so much better. You killed his brother, Joseph.”

“No, Victor did that. I didn’t tell him to.”

“Yeah, well, in a legitimate business, you’d be held liable for it.”

“I think you know I don’t play by the rules. But Michael, you had a hand in it too.”

Ice floods my veins. “What?”

“If you would’a just come home like I told you to, I wouldn’t have had to send someone out there to rough Evan up, much less send a guy to clean up their mess.”

It doesn’t hurt any less hearing it from my father than it did when I heard it from Evan. I take the blow with a minimal amount of cringing. Evan watches me with a curious expression, noticing me twisting the hem of my shirt with my free hand. “No, don’t you dare—” I swallow thickly. “You did that. That’s all on you.”

“Your actions have consequences, Michael,” Joseph says in that detached tone of his.

I shake my head, feeling thick drops of tears pooling at my eyes. “No, not like that.”

“The world is tough and cruel, and I’m trying to teach you that, but you just keep runnin’ off to your own little world where you think you won’t have to deal with that kind of stuff. But guess what? It’s everywhere. And it ain’t gonna stop just ‘cause it’s too hard for you.”

“Yeah, you’re right, the world is cruel, but it’s not okay to make it worse by inflicting more pain.”

“I’m teachin’ you a lesson—”

“No! You’re being unreasonable!” This time, it’s my hand that squeezes Evan’s. “I’m not staying here because I’m trying to be rebellious or because I want to run away, or because you think he’s controlling me. I love him!” The admission feels lame and rehearsed on my tongue. “He makes me feel good, better than I’ve ever felt in my whole life!”

I hear him scoff. “It hasn’t sunk into your thick skull yet? He doesn’t love you. He’s never gonna want what you want. It’ll ruin him. You’re just means to an end, a way for him to further his reputation and his business.” I know that’s a lie; I can feel the truth reverberate in my soul when Evan looks at me or touches me. “Don’t you think he might’ve been tryin’ to gain status by shackin’ up with a Jackson?”

“You always knew how to build up my self-esteem,” I sneer.

“It wouldn’t be the first time someone in this business used somebody else.”

“Yeah, you’d know all about that, wouldn’t you?” Evan hears the contempt in my voice and places a warm hand on the small of my back, righting me.

I can almost see Joseph’s agitated frown. “I had to protect my family.”

“Well, I’m gonna do whatever it takes to protect mine—meaning Evan and Jordie.”

He takes a deep, angry breath, and I feel the storm coming before he speaks the words. “I’ve heard a lot of stories about him. I know the kind of man he is. You think he would still want you if he knew all your dirty secrets?”

“He knows. Doesn’t change anything.”

“All right, Michael. Let me tell you how this is gonna work.” I picture Joseph leaning back in his chair, his fingers steepled in that way of his when he means business. “You stay with him, and we’ll hunt him down—and when we find him, broken bones will be the least of his worries. Or you can come home and contribute to your *real* family.”

“If I come back, will you leave Evan and Jordie alone?” Evan gives me a look that says “don’t you *dare*,” but I place a reassuring hand on his to let him know I’m merely negotiating.

“I can’t guarantee their safety, but I’m sure something could be arranged.”

My heart sinks in my chest. “That doesn’t sound like a yes, Joseph.”

“It ain’t a no, either.”

“Then I’m staying.”

“Fair enough. You’ve made your decision. Now you must reap the consequences.” I feel tears prickle in my eyes as the finality of my choice sinks in. I don’t regret staying with Evan,

but I fear what I may have unleashed upon the people I love. Familial discord always ends messily, especially in this business.

I hang up the phone numbly, my mind still processing the conversation with my father. Evan's warm hands snap me out of my reverie when he reaches for my fingers. "You're staying?" I nod in reply, unable to trust my voice enough to not betray me. "Let me guess: he's not too happy about that?" I shake my head. "Well, that's what we expected, right?" He waits for an answer, but all I can do is stare blankly at our hands entwined and blink back tears. "Michael, talk to me."

"We—we can't stay here," I say carefully into the silence. "We have to go."

"Go where?"

"I don't know. Somewhere he won't find us."

Evan scoffs. "C'mon, I'm not afraid of him or his hired muscle."

"You saw what happened to Ray." I can tell immediately that was the worst thing to say. Evan's teasing smirk disappears, replaced by something sad and heartbreaking. "You're gonna be next. And if Jordie gets caught in the cross-fire..." I shut my eyes in pain. I hate hitting him in the spots where the wounds are raw and bleed too easily. It's too skeevy for me, too close to emotional manipulation.

Evan rubs his eyes, suddenly looking exhausted. I'm already thinking of our escape plan; the cogs have begun to turn in my head.

"If we make it look like a break-in, that might throw them off our trail, make 'em think we've already been taken care of."

I can tell Evan really doesn't like this idea. "I'm pretty sure your father might not want *you* dead—just me."

"He'll just think I ran off. Maybe I wasn't there when his goons came around. He's not gonna think I'll come back home after finding something like that."

"This plan really hinges on nobody questioning anything. You don't think the first set of guys that show up here aren't gonna wonder who got there before them and finished the job? You don't think your father's gonna want to know which guy put a bullet in my head?"

I cringe at his words. "It's not like you don't have other enemies."

"Yeah, no one's stupid enough to fuck with us like that. Only Joseph has that perfect mix of steel-plated balls and flagrant stupidity."

His constant negativity is starting to piss me off. “If you’ve got a better idea, I’d love to hear it.”

“If we do it immediately, it’s gonna look like a set-up.”

I don’t like the thought of waiting around, constantly looking over my shoulder for the silent assassin that will steal Evan and Jordan away. “So you wanna stay here for a bit?”

“Just long enough not to raise suspicion. Give it a few days.”

“In a few days, we may not have to do anything. Joseph’s thugs’ll do it for us.”

“At the very least, we’d know they were coming?” Evan offers, trying to be helpful.

“But not when. Or where. Or how. They might not even come to the house. They could grab you or Jordie if either of you ever goes outside for any reason.” His mouth twists in silent frustration as he tries to come up with a decent argument. “Face it, if we stay here, we’re trapped.”

“I do know someone who owes the family a favor. I might be able to cash in on that and have him hide us for a bit.”

“Anybody I know?”

“Maybe. His name’s Barry Rothman. Ray told me that he’s basically Satan in a Rolls-Royce.”

“That’s...descriptive. Is he a lawyer, by any chance?”

Evan snorts a sarcastic laugh. “Oh, ha-ha, very funny.” Then he looks sort of ashamed, his voice low as he admits, “Yeah, yeah, he is.”

“Ha! I knew it!”

“He works for mob families, mostly. Ray worked with him on a few jobs a while back.”

“Evan, do you have any friends that aren’t total sleazeballs?”

He pulls a face, looking offended at the accusation. “I have you.”

I’m not sure whether to laugh at that, to be charmed by his clumsy attempt at being romantic, or be self-deprecating. I go with option three. “I don’t think I qualify.”

“Aw, c’mon, I’m sure you’re only like...twenty-five percent sleazeball at most.”

“A quarter sleazy—you sure know how to flatter me.”

He smiles sadly. “So no, I guess I don’t have any wholesome friends. Everyone I know is money-hungry, murderously violent, or generally awful. Present company excluded, of course.”

“I don’t think you’re any of those things.” Evan looks up, tilting his head in confusion. He doesn’t seem to know what to say to that, so he just stares at me. “You’re a decent guy. Even if you’ve done some bad things, you’re trying to be better. That’s more than most people in this business can say. The fact that you want to get out speaks volumes about how good you are.”

He gives me a weak smile, as if he doesn’t see the truth to my words but wants to appear appreciative. “All right, I take it back. You’re only twelve percent sleazy.”

I lean over and press my mouth to his, grinning around the kiss. He makes a small, soft noise in the back of his throat, and his hands reach up to cup my face. I feel his breath ghost over my lips when I pull away slowly. “So, tell me about this Rothman guy.”

“I’ve actually never met him. I’ve only heard the horror stories Ray told me.”

“And this is the person we’re gonna be stayin’ with?”

“Well, not literally *with* him. I figure he’s got a vacation home or something we could use. I’d have to call him and ask what he can do for us.” I hand him the phone, but he shakes his head. “I don’t want anybody tracing the call or finding out where we’re going.” He thinks for a moment, then makes an exasperated groan. “Oh, this is gonna suck.”

23. Partners in Organized Crime

Evan

“I still don’t understand why you can’t just use a pay phone,” Michael grumbles, his arms folded over his chest in childlike defiance as we walk up the driveway to Dave’s quaint, unassuming home. The street reeks of middle-class suburbia.

“I don’t want to risk being seen. You’re right, they could snatch me up while I’m out on the streets. Dave’s a two-timing, lying piece of shit, but he’s also a civilian. Joseph wouldn’t risk killing an ‘innocent.’ Everybody’d be against him then.”

“You should have brought something to smooth things over, like a bottle of wine or a sirloin steak.”

“Too bad Hallmark hasn’t unveiled their ‘sorry-I-had-my-guys-beat-you-up-for-fucking-my-wife’ line of cards yet. Except I’m not actually sorry.”

Michael pouts in that way of his when he’s trying very hard not to laugh at my humor. He’s getting pretty good at it.

I knock on the door, hoping it sounds friendly enough. How the fuck does a knock even sound friendly? After a couple of seconds, the door inches open, and Dave peers out at us. He doesn’t look too happy to see me, but then again I’m not jumping for joy to see him either. “What do you want, Evan?”

“I need a favor.” The words are like gravel in my throat, sharp and jagged, and I try not to choke on them.

“Uh-huh.” He gives me flat eyes. “You sent your gang to beat me up.”

“You fucked my wife for five years; be glad I didn’t send ‘em to kill you.”

Something dark flickers across Dave’s face. “What do you want?”

“I need to use your phone.”

He furrows his brow. “Seriously?”

I glance around the street for any suspicious activity. “Yeah, will you just let us inside?”

“Are you in trouble?” Dave asks with a sigh, as if he’s heard it all before.

I push past him and lead Michael through the foyer, locking away my disgust at being here. How many years had June and I visited this house and stood under the same roof where he’d been fucking her? I swallow back the bile that rises in my throat.

Dave's still blathering on. "Are you in some sort of trouble with the cops or—"

"None of your goddamn business, okay?" I glance over at Michael, who's surveying the living room. "Keep him company, would ya?" Michael gives me a look like he'd rather be covered with live snakes. I cross the room to find the study at the end of the hall. After checking the phone for obvious listening devices, I dial the number I'd scribbled out before we left home. "Barry, it's Evan."

"Who?"

"Evan Chandler."

"Not ringin' a bell."

"You know, Ray's brother—Ray Charmatz?" The name catches on my tongue a little.

It takes him a moment to put the puzzle pieces together. "Oh! Evan! How are ya?" Like we're best pals all of a sudden.

"I need a favor. I got some nasty people after me. Long story, but I need a place to stay for a bit while I work out a plan."

"Who's crazy enough to come after you?"

"Joe Jackson," I groan.

"Jesus, kid, what'd you do?" I wonder if he calls everyone "kid," because I'm willing to bet that I'm older than he is by about a decade.

"Look, I'll explain everything later. Do you have somewhere I can stay?"

"Sure, sure, anything for Ray. You know where my office is, right?"

"Sorry to break it to you, Barry, but we've never actually met."

"Really?" He barks a laugh. "I feel like I know you from all the wild stories Ray's told me."

"Nothing too wild, I hope. I have a reputation to uphold." He laughs at that too; I think he's been sniffing gas. "Listen, I'm gonna be bringing my son and a friend of ours with me too. Is that okay?" I really don't want to mention the fact that this "friend" is one of Joseph Jackson's sons just yet, but I know Barry will understand the mob-speak—Michael can be trusted.

"Yeah, sure, go ahead. I'll put you up in one of my condos." He gives me his office's address, which I scribble down. "Remind me to pour you a drink when you get here."

I don't bother dampening his fun now by telling him I don't drink. "Thanks. I appreciate it."

"No problem. Tell Ray I said hello, would ya?"

That knocks the breath out of me, and pain swells in my chest. Instead of clamping it down, I let it crescendo until it spreads through my body, feeling entirely too deserving of it. "Yeah...sure thing." I hang up the phone, staring blankly at nothing in particular while the room seems to wobble around me. I briefly wonder if this is an earthquake before I realize that I'm shaking. That's why the room is moving. Panic bubbles up inside of me, like some deep, hidden recess of my mind has overflowed like a science-fair volcano.

I'm sitting on the floor before I know it, my back against the solid, oak desk as I try to remember how to breathe properly. I don't understand why I'm reacting like this, why I'm suddenly falling apart at the slightest provocation. But while I try to see through my blurry eyes, I realize that this is one of the rare moments I actually have by myself. Of course I've gotta keep my game face on for Jordan and Michael; I'm around at least one of them every moment of the day.

But not now.

And that's why the whirlwind of emotions from the past few months is spewing outward. I was right to hide this from them. They don't need to see me suffer.

It's awful at first, waves of guilt and regret and helplessness crashing into me like angry tides. I let myself get tossed around, my chest shuddering with silent sobs. After about thirty seconds of agony, I start breathing deeper, fighting for control. Focusing on inhaling and exhaling takes precedence over the tumult of anxieties swimming in my head. The tears begin to slow, and I wipe my eyes fiercely, hoping to stem any more waterworks. When I feel like I have a formidable reserve of strength, I force myself to stand up and cram all the stress and worry and unfocused anger back into whatever internal suitcase it came from.

#

Michael

Dave's house is quaint, spacious, and most likely covered with a invisible film of slime. Obi-Wan Kenobi was actually referring to this place when he said his famous "wretched hive of scum and villainy" line. The flare of panic on Dave's face tells me that he's reading my glare of disgust pretty well. He's refusing to look at me, busying himself by messing with things in the room so he doesn't have to face me.

I go for the jugular. "Why did you do it?"

I expect him to play dumb and ask "Do what?" but he doesn't. Smart move. He huffs a sigh and braces himself against the kitchen counter. "C'mon, Michael, does it really matter?"

“Yes, it does. If you won’t tell Evan, at least tell me.”

He finally looks at me, but the panic is gone, replaced by bewilderment. “How can you do it? How can you willingly turn a blind eye to the kind of shit he does?”

I shrug. “Coming from a mob family usually helps.” His mouth twists into a frown. Guess he didn’t like that answer. “Look, I don’t approve of this stuff, okay? But he’s trying to be better and make an honest life. That’s admirable. You can’t help who you love, and—” I stop myself. “Don’t you dare use that to justify what you did. She was married, Dave.”

“I know,” he says with a sad exhale of breath. “Believe me, there wasn’t a day that went by where I didn’t feel ashamed over that. But you do what you have to, and sometimes you make the wrong move, and sometimes your emotions make you do it.” He looks up at me again. “But you gotta understand something. It takes two in these kind of decisions, alright? June made her choices too.”

“Evan was your best friend,” I snarl.

“And June was his wife!”

“So, what, just because she made a bad choice means you have to enable it? It takes two, remember?”

“She wasn’t happy with Evan. She was gonna cheat anyway. Why shouldn’t it be with me?” I can’t believe what I’m hearing. Dave stares off at nothing in particular. “I knew pretty early on that Evan was screwing me over with that ‘protection’ bullshit. You know how much money I lost because of him?” I’m tempted to play the world’s smallest violin, but I refrain. Mature. “And when I didn’t pay, he’d send his Mafia goons to wreck my lot. But through all of it, he pretended to be my friend.”

Would this unfaithfulness have hurt Evan so much if he’d really been pretending? Being betrayed by one person you trust is bad enough, but two?

“So when June and Evan started drifting apart, she would talk to me about it at the bar.” He shrugs as if that answers everything. “The whole mob thing was a turn-on for her, but Evan was too volatile, and they’d always end up arguing. She told me once that living with Evan was like playing a non-stop game of ‘What Benign Thing Will Set Evan Off Today?’”

I can almost see where she’s coming from with that—I’d played that game for the first couple of weeks I’d lived with Evan—but knowing how fresh the pain of the tragedies he’d suffered was, his frustration was almost understandable.

“I just gave her the things he wasn’t.”

I roll my eyes. “Don’t try to make yourself into a saint. You’re disgusting.”

He doesn't flinch at the venom in my words. "Go ahead, Michael. Call me whatever you want. It won't change what he is."

"What are you talking about?"

"Evan is poison. He's an evil guy. I'm sure you've seen it."

"Oh, come on, that's going a little far."

"Open your eyes. He hurts people; it's his full-time job!"

"Okay, I don't disagree with that, but you know how people can have two different personalities: one for work, and one at home."

"He's poison, Michael. Believe me. Why do you think June miscarried?"

I have no idea where he's going with this. "Because she had trouble getting pregnant, right?"

Dave just shakes his head. "Not her."

I turn the words around in my brain, trying to figure out what they're supposed to mean. How would Dave know June's fertility problems weren't *hers* unless...

A whole lot of things make sense all at once. My guts are gnarled in rage and horror. "The baby was yours," I gasp out.

He nods, slow and solemn, looking absolutely destroyed. "She was so terrified that Evan would find out the truth. Maybe the stress alone did it, or maybe she couldn't fathom maintaining the lie and had an abortion. I don't know."

"Or maybe you pressured her into an abortion. You knew if Evan ever found out the baby was yours, he'd kill you."

Dave gives me a crooked smirk. "See how quick you are to assume he'll be violent? What does that say about him?"

"When it comes to my family I'd probably do the same thing."

He spreads his hands. "So now you know. Did it fix anything?" The silence is almost painful. Dave says nothing and turns away, shuffling up the stairs.

I have my answers. I have the truth. I'm not sure I want either of them.

Evan

When I make my way back into the living room, I see Michael sitting on the arm of the sofa, staring at the carpet with tired eyes and a frowning mouth. Something about his expression conveys more than just his usual pouty distaste. I feel pain well in my chest at the sight of him so distraught.

I don't, however, see Dave anywhere, and that worries me. "I told you to keep him company. Where the hell is he?"

Michael furrows his brow impossibly further. "I dunno. He went upstairs." His bottom lip quivers slightly, and I move to brush my thumb over it, to somehow shoulder some of his pain. He rests his forehead against my middle, wrapping his arms around my waist and inhaling deep until my scent fills his lungs. I feel his hands fist in my shirt and cling for dear life.

"Don't worry, okay? We'll get through this together."

He takes another deep breath, his chest hitching a little bit before he gains control of his lungs. When he finally pulls away from me, his expression is less frustrated and ornery. "I've been thinking."

"About?" I cup my palm around his cheek, feeling the warmth of his emotions against my skin.

"'Bout how we're gonna do this. You think my father and his goons don't know the car you drive? Or the plates?" I actually haven't thought about this. He raises a salient point. "Dave owns a car-rental place—"

"No."

"—and he owes you big—"

"No!"

"Why don't we just take one off the lot?"

I was not prepared for him to take the conversation in that direction. "Are you suggesting grand theft auto? Wow, Michael, I didn't know you had it in ya."

He stands up, keeping his arms linked around my waist. "There's a lot of things you don't know about me," he says with a sad smile. "Just let me take care of this, okay?"

The thought of Michael trying to acquire anything through intimidation is actually really hilarious. "Michael, no offense, but I think I've got the skills for making demands via terrible rage."

“You’ve got your talents, and I’ve got mine.” He grabs my hand and walks me out the front door.

It’s only when we pull into the lot of Dave’s rent-a-wreck that this actually starts to sink in. “You’re really going to steal us a car?”

Michael looks at me like I’ve just asked the most inane question in the history of mankind. “Yeah.” He pops the door open and slides out. “Take your pick.”

“Whoa, you’re not kidding.” I get out of the car to follow him. “Seriously? This is a thing that’s happening?” Stealing a car is kind of badass, and badass is in no way a word that describes anything Michael’s ever done.

“Just pick something so we can get outta here.” Michael sounds like he’s bored with the entire ordeal.

“I don’t...really care what it looks like,” I say with a shrug. “You’re the one who didn’t think Dave’s car was good enough to steal.”

Michael looks annoyed that I’m not making a selection. He crosses the lot and stands by the driver’s door of a black Dodge Charger—a ’68 model from the looks of it. He reaches into his pocket and pulls out some sort of device that he jams into the lock. In as much time as it would have taken with a key, the door is open. Michael slides into the driver’s seat, upside down so that his head is between the pedals. His long legs are hooked around the top of the seat, and it’s practically impossible for me to not stare at his ass.

“When’d you learn how to do this?” I wonder aloud in an attempt to distract myself from the serpentine arc of his spine and stomach.

I watch his fingers work around the wires. “Evan, if you have to ask, you probably couldn’t handle the answer,” he says as he gets the car running. “And are you telling me you’re the head of a mob Family and you don’t know how to hotwire a car?” Michael pulls himself up and fixes me with a skeptical look.

“Of course I know, but I didn’t think *you* did.” It sounds really awful when I phrase it that way. “I mean, with everything you’ve told me about how you don’t like what your family does, I didn’t think you’d actually know how to do the stuff.”

Sadness flickers over his face for a split-second before he realigns it into something happier. “I guess I learn by osmosis.” He climbs into the passenger seat and looks at me expectantly. “C’mon, let’s get this in the garage before Jordie comes home.”

On the drive home, we discuss how we’re going to break the news to Jordan. Neither of us come up with any options we like. Of course we’re going to have to take him with us. I don’t have anyone I trust enough with a task like keeping my son safe except myself. And even if I did, Joseph would probably know to look there first.

But how do you tell your child that you're being hunted and you're uprooting him from everything he's ever known for God knows how long?

I'm not looking forward to having this conversation.

When we get home, Jordan's in the kitchen reheating some of last night's stir-fry. He sees us come in together and sort of laughs. "Did you guys go on a date or something?"

Michael smiles as convincingly as he can. "Yeah, we're sappy like that."

"So, how was the movie?" I'm trying to be casual and I'm burning a lot of calories doing it.

"It was great. Dinosaurs ate people. Jeff Goldblum was quirky and awkward." He pops open the microwave and pulls out the styrofoam container. I'm suddenly very thankful that he was out with friends today; no one would be stupid enough to try to grab him or hurt him with innocents around.

"I would definitely not be opposed to you hanging out with your friends for the next few days," I tell him.

"Why?" He gives me a suspicious look. "Do you two want the house to yourselves for...grown-up activities?"

"Those are my intentions, yes." In my defense, "grown-up activities" could mean sex or staging a crime scene; he wasn't very specific.

Jordan looks like he's trying very hard to wipe those mental images from his memory. "Ew, okay, yeah, don't worry, I won't be here much."

"And Jord', next time I don't want you coming home by yourself."

"I didn't, Cody's mom dropped me off."

"I know, but you were here alone for God knows how long until we got back. If something happened to you—" I might be slipping into panic mode a bit. *Ease it back.* "Next time, call home first and make sure either me or Michael is here before you come home, okay?"

He narrows his eyes a little in suspicion, but otherwise puts up no arguments. "Yeah, okay. Sure." He takes his box of take-out and plops down on the couch, switching on the TV to Nickelodeon. Great. I lead Michael through the kitchen and into the formal dining room where Jordan won't be able to eavesdrop on us.

"I don't think we should tell him now," I begin.

Michael looks at me with irritated disbelief. “You were the one lobbying to tell him when we were in the car.”

“I know, I know, but since I had to tell him to go out with his friends more and not to be home alone, if we lie to him he’s just gonna figure it out. I can’t lie to my son, Michael. Not about something like this.”

I’m expecting him to argue back with something about how I’m ruining Jordan’s childhood by exposing him to all of this, but he doesn’t. “Then when do we tell him?”

“Tomorrow maybe? Doing it tonight would be too much for him right now.”

“I’m not opposed to being honest, Evan, but what are we supposed to say? ‘Hey, Jordie, your dad’s officially got a price on his head, and you’re probably not safe either. Road trip!’” He looks at me like I’m an idiot. “See how awful that sounds?”

“Well, I’m sure we could polish up the wording a bit.”

Michael blows out a breath that makes the loose tendrils of hair dangling in front of his face sway in its breeze. “Alright, we’ll wait. But we can’t just spring this on him, okay? We gotta give him some time to process it.”

“I can do that.” I take his hand. “I got everything set up with Rothman. We can meet him at his Chicago office, and he said he’ll put us up somewhere.”

“How long?”

“I don’t know. I’m sure we can get as much time as we need. He was really fond of Ray.” I lose focus for a moment. “Anyway, I figure we can work with him to set up a plan on how to get Joseph by the balls. He’ll know what to do. He’s got guys that can look into stuff.”

Michael tries a nod. “What if it doesn’t work?”

“It’s a step in the right direction, at least. And we’ll be in a better position than when we started.”

He squeezes my fingers and brings himself closer. I kiss his hair, breathing in his scent and trying not to think about how many more times I’ll live to do this. Right now, I have my family.

I spend most of the afternoon tying up loose ends with Larry over the phone. He seems suspicious of my sudden thoroughness pertaining to the insurance for the bar, but he doesn’t voice it. I give him full authority to sign the insurance check over to Nathalie, as well as any funds Ray had to his name. It’s the least I can do for my almost sister-in-law.

That night, when Jordan's asleep in his room, Michael and I break into the wall safe in our bedroom and pack our bags. Michael is quicker at the task than I am, sitting on the bed with his bag already stuffed with clothing while I'm still sifting through my closet space. Just knowing this will likely be the last time I see any of my things fills me with a need to take all of them with me. Everything in this room, this house, has a memory behind it—often a fond one—and I can't bear to leave them behind.

“You should take that one,” Michael says softly, pointing to a black collared shirt hanging in the closet. I fold it and push the shirt into my bag.

“Oh, you like it?”

His cheeks flush. “Yeah, it's what you were wearing when I first came here.”

“Really? Man, I can't even remember what I ate for breakfast most days. Why do you remember that?”

His cheeks flush pink with chagrin. “Cause you looked good.”

“You only want me for my body,” I say with mock indignation. He giggles and shakes his head. “Hey, Michael, what was your first impression of me that day?”

“I thought you were a smug, status-obsessed hypersexual with a fake tan.” I gape at him, and he laughs out loud. “I was wrong! You don't have a fake tan.” I throw a balled-up t-shirt at him, making him squeal laughter and fall back against the mattress as he pretends to be wounded by the assault of fabric. He picks up the shirt and examines it. “Aw, I like this one too,” he says, tossing it into my bag.

“Why, got another obscure memory attached to it?”

“As a matter of fact, I do.” He sticks his tongue out at me. “Well, it's more like an observation. You seem to wear it a lot, so it must have some sentimental value.”

“Yeah, June really liked it, said it showed off my ‘broad, manly chest.’ Her words, not mine.”

He giggles again. “See, if I said that you'd say I was objectifying you.”

“Cause you're a pig sometimes.”

He pretends to look offended, but the curl of a smile at the corners of his mouth says that he knows I'm right. “I've got some extra space in my bag, if you want to bring a little bit more along.”

I take him up on his offer, which allows me to bring the tin of mementos I keep under my bed. There's not much in there—some of June's jewelry, our wedding rings, a few stacks of

Polaroids and more recent photographs, coins from our trip to Paris, some old baseball cards of mine and Ray's, Dad's lucky bottlecap, and various other knick-knacks that don't seem like much, but to me they're irreplaceable.

Michael reaches for the tin, eager to inspect its contents. "Can I?" he asks, looking at me for permission.

"Michael, we're going on the run together. At this point, we have no secrets." I give him an encouraging smile. "Go ahead."

He takes off the lid and instantly goes for the pictures, his fingers plucking out the photographs and browsing through them. The first few are of June and Jordan together, dated a few years back. I don't remember taking these pictures; it must have been Ray. Or Dave, I wonder with a full-body shudder. Next comes June, clad in an old New York Jets t-shirt of mine with her long, dark hair twisted up into a bun, holding two-year-old Jordan. Michael understandably "aww"s. There's several more pictures of June and Jordan, sometimes together, sometimes separate. Then a couple of Ray. I feel my eyes blur.

The next photograph is of June, but I distinctly remember this one because it had been taken during her second pregnancy. She'd cut her hair shorter; it looked good on her. I think back to that exuberant smile, how happy she'd been to be pregnant again, how I'd ruined it all and destroyed our last chance at fixing our marriage.

"A few years before she died, June got pregnant again," I tell him in a small voice, my hands on his shoulders as he leans back against my chest. "It was gonna be a girl..."

It takes him a moment to speak. "Did you pick out a name?"

"Lily." I feel a small pull in the center of my chest as I slowly sink into the black hole of grief.

"I'm so sorry, baby," he says, placing a hand atop one of mine that's wrapped around his waist, as if the touch might siphon some of my pain. I close my eyes and rest my chin on his shoulder. I feel the slight movement of his arms as he looks through more pictures. Then he exclaims: "Oh my God! Who's this dork?"

I open my eyes and groan when I recognize the photo. "Oh, goddamn it," I grumble under my breath while Michael's laughing. It's an older Polaroid, the hues slightly sun-faded. But Michael doesn't realize that the dork in question is me. Or maybe he does and he's just being an ass about it.

"Is that Ray?" he asks through giggles. "I see some family resemblance there. And there's June..."

"Michael, that's—"

“No way, is that *you*?”

There’s no way I’m getting out of this one with my dignity intact. This is a pretty incriminating photo.

“Yeah, that’s...me.”

He can’t stop laughing. “Man, puberty hit you all at once, huh?”

“Puberty? I was thirty.”

Michael’s laughing so hard he’s probably going to have a six-pack by the end of the night.

“It’s in my best interest to just stop talking right now, isn’t it?”

His levity dies down in a slow fade. “Wait, this looks like it was taken in the seventies.”

“So?”

“So you said you were thirty here.” He gives me a bewildered look over his shoulder. “How old *are* you?”

“That information is confidential.”

“I could just look at your driver’s license,” he taunts. “Or do math.” Panic squeezes my insides. “Let’s see, if you were thirty here, that means you were born in—”

“The Bronx.” I interrupt his train of thought by kissing the back of his neck. Michael “aww”s again. “Why does that get an ‘aww’?”

“Cause it’s cute how you think I won’t figure this out.” He looks at me like this conversation is entirely my fault. “I thought you said we didn’t have any secrets.”

I scowl at him. “Does it really matter to you?”

“No, I guess not,” he mumbles. “I just don’t think it’s fair for you to know my age but I can’t know yours.”

“Will you call us even if I let you laugh at the rest of my old pictures?”

“Let me,” he chuckles, flipping to the next photo in the stack. This one’s another old snapshot, this time of me and Ray at the bar before June and I bought it years later. There’s absolutely no way Michael’s not going to laugh at this.

And indeed he does, giggling and snickering while trying not be too obvious about it. A wasted effort, because I'm tuned to the bells of his laughter. "Oh man, okay, so that's Ray, yeah. He doesn't look too different now. Man, were you a late bloomer or what?"

"You're not the only one who's gotten a few adjustments." I tweak his nose and brush my thumb over the cleft of his chin.

He tilts his head up to kiss my cheek. "Don't worry. This doesn't change anything. I'd still do you."

I snort a laugh. "That's...actually really comforting."

He's quiet for a moment while he examines the picture. "Hmm, this was taken in '74."

I squint at the photo, trying to decipher how he figured that out. "How can you tell?"

"Cause that sign in the back there says 'Muhammad Ali Wins Championship.'"

"So?"

The look Michael gives me is completely unnecessary. "In '74, Muhammad Ali won the heavyweight boxing championship."

I stare at him, a blank expression on my face. "How the hell..."

"My father's a huge fan of boxing, and he took me and my brothers to see him some time after that match." Michael takes advantage of my total bewilderment to do the math. "That means you're..." He stops, actually turns his body so he can look at me with the proper amount of shock. "You're forty-nine years old?" His face goes through some sort of horrified wince.

"I distinctly remember you saying my age didn't matter to you." If Michael leaves me after all we've been through—after all we're going to do—because of this, I'm going to throw myself out the window.

Michael does a poor job of backpedaling. "It—it doesn't, I'm just...surprised. I mean, that's not what I would have guessed."

"What would your first guess have been?"

He shrugs. "Thirty-five?"

"Oh man, butter that toast, Michael."

"Maybe forty. Forty-five at the absolute highest." He nods like the answer just came out of his mouth and he happens to agree with it.

“You’re second-guessing, aren’t you?”

Michael looks really offended, which would be hilarious on any other occasion. “No, that’s ridiculous, Evan.”

“Then why do you have that horrified look on your face?”

He realigns his features until they make up a more neutral mask. “I’m just...surprised. I hope I look that good when I’m forty-nine.”

I shrug. “Won’t matter to me. I’ll be dead.”

Michael actually gasps and slaps my arm like he’s trying to squish a mosquito. “No! Don’t say things like that!”

I have to smile at his dramatics. “Alright, sheesh.”

We look through the rest of the pictures, and Michael tries very hard not to laugh too much—a task which he ultimately fails. When we finally get settled into bed, it’s about one in the morning. Michael’s laying on his side, impossibly close to me as his mouth moves against mine. His tongue is shy and chaste, tracing over mine when it comes near but taking no initiative of its own. His fingers are curled in my hair, his hands taut with unquenched need.

“What is it?” I ask around his mouth.

He grips my hair a little tighter as he answers, “I want you.”

“You can have me.”

“It wouldn’t be...inappropriate?”

I smile. “I can’t think of anything more appropriate.”

He lets me take him, and we move together unhurriedly. Michael’s all warmth and appreciation, humming soft sighs against my mouth and digging his fingers into my back as I move inside of him. Basking in his thankful moans, I wonder how many other men have seen him this way, his head tipped back in ecstasy, his lips parted in praise. How many other men have felt his hands in their hair, dragging down their backs, gripped around their thighs? How many other men have heard their names slip past his lips?

He pulls me down to him so he can kiss me, and our mouths sort of clash together awkwardly, making him giggle around my lips. I realize it doesn’t matter how many others have had him before me. They’ve never had him like this, soft and real and exuberant with love. They’ve never earned an honest smile from him, one born from joy and elation. Sex with them was a performance, something hard and demanding, all heat with no gentleness. But here, it’s real, a tender, honest thing that radiates love.

When Michael comes, he's never been more beautiful, his hair a tangled mess and his mouth wet and open and red as he moans his gratitude. The tight pull of him sends me over the edge, my fingers clenched around the sheets to avoid bruising his skin. Michael doesn't wait for me to catch my breath. He brings my face to his for another kiss, thankful and greedy, and I feel the smooth slide of his bare legs as he unhooks them from my hips and slides them into the spaces between my own.

"I love you," he whispers in a warm flare of breath over my mouth. "So much."

"God, you're a sap."

He laughs and kisses me again. "But you love me."

I sigh happily. "Yeah, I do. I really do."

24. The Sins of the Father

Evan

That morning, Michael and I lay tangled together in bed while we create the half-truth we're going to tell Jordan. His chest rises and falls, still coming down from the edge of our morning session. Loose curls stick to his damp forehead, and he cuddles closer, resting his head on my chest.

I let out a long sigh. "I don't wanna lie to him, Michael. I have to—I have to be better than this."

"Sometimes I wish my father would have lied to me."

Sometimes I do too. "I want him to look back when he's older and think, 'Yeah, he was honest, he had integrity, he had respect. I could trust him. He never lied to me.' All that kind of stuff. June and I used to fight about this all the time. She wanted Jordie to get into this kind of life, and I was trying to keep him away from it, at least until he was old enough to decide for himself. I didn't want her pushing him into anything that could damage him, but...maybe I should have? Maybe he'd be able to handle this easier if he grew up in it, y'know?"

"Maybe, maybe not. But this isn't the kind of thing you can be trained for, Evan. Look at us." For two people who grew up into this life, we're not really well-prepared for it. "Do you think he hates you?"

"Not entirely. But I can see that he's withdrawing from me."

"It doesn't seem like he is. He wanted to sleep in our room that night—"

"Because he was scared."

"And you're his dad. You're his role model."

I scoff a laugh. "No, I'm not. Not anymore." Not since Michael came along. Maybe there's a little bit of resentment in that thought.

"In the long run, you are definitely his role model."

"There isn't gonna be a long run if things go on like this, Michael. If it goes on the way it is, he's doomed."

Michael lays a hand on my chest. "I don't want to lie to him either, but...what if it's not technically a lie?"

"I don't want Jordie growing up to hate me."

“He won’t. He might hate you for a while, but then some day when he gets older he’ll thank you for it. You’re trying to protect him, Evan. He’ll grow up and respect that.” My fingers play in his hair. “Y’know, when I look at you I see the man my father could have been. Jordie’s incredibly blessed to have you.”

I thank him with another bout that leaves him sated and aching.

After a shower and a clean set of clothes, I seek out Jordan. I end up finding him in the basement playing video games. “Hey, Jord’.” He makes a sound I assume is supposed to be a “hello” around a mouthful of potato chips. “Is that your breakfast?” I ask, frowning at the oversized bag.

He shrugs. “Why not?”

I sit beside him on the flimsy, worn couch. “Can I talk to you about...some things that are difficult?”

“Sure.” He pauses the game and turns to face me, giving me his full attention.

“So you know how your Uncle Ray died, right?”

“He was shot?”

I nod solemnly. “Yeah, well, I was with Ray when it happened, and now I think the person responsible will try to find me since I witnessed it—I could get him in a lot of trouble if I told anyone who it is.” He blinks twice, probably trying to see where I’m going with this. “So, Michael and I decided in order to keep us all safe—and that means you too—we’re gonna get a car from Dave and just leave town. All of us together. We can go visit an old friend of mine in Chicago. You’ve never been there before. It might be fun.” I give him a pained smile, and he mirrors the expression, trying to seem unfazed. “I don’t know if we’re gonna come back. We might, we might not. It depends if we find someplace we like better along the way.”

Jordan looks like he’s thinking it over. “When do we leave?”

I scratch the back of my neck. “Well, we were hoping to leave today...” I wait for his exclamation of protest that never comes. “Is that—is that okay?”

“Yeah, should I start packing?”

“If you can. When you’re done, you can put it in the car in the garage.” I watch his face for signs of discontent. They’re there, of course, but he’s frighteningly complacent. He’s not crying, and he doesn’t look like he’s on the brink of a tantrum. “If you want, I can give you some money and you can go see a movie or something with your friends.” The unspoken “for the last time” part of that sentence hangs in the air. “Michael and I have stuff we gotta take care of anyway.”

“I can’t tell anybody where I’m going, can I?” He says it in a way that implies he already knows my answer.

I shake my head. “I’m sorry, Jordie.” It’s an apology for everything, but somehow three words just don’t seem like enough. “I swear, I’ll make it up to you somehow.”

“It’s okay, Dad.” He looks at the worry on my face; I wonder what he sees there. “Do I have time to beat this level?” he asks, gesturing with his thumb at the TV screen.

“Yeah, go ahead.” I can at least allow him this.

“Cool, thanks.” He goes back to the game; I let him be and go to find Michael.

Michael’s in the kitchen making breakfast, a casserole by the looks of the ingredients and baking pan set aside. He’s staring into the fridge and frowning like it’s disappointed him somehow.

“What’s with the look?”

“We don’t have any green onions,” he pouts.

“Does it really matter?”

“I guess not.” He closes the refrigerator door, still frowning, as if cutting corners on the recipe physically pains him. Maybe it does; he’s sort of a perfectionist in a way that’s incredibly irritating sometimes.

Jordan comes upstairs from the basement a little while later to go to his room and pack. About thirty minutes later, breakfast is ready, and he’s carrying his bag and his backpack to the garage.

“You’re done already?” Because, seriously, there’s no way he’s finished in thirty minutes. I’ve seen how long it takes him to clean his room; sometimes it takes the entire day because he keeps getting distracted by all the stuff he finds that he’s forgotten about.

“Yeah. I was already, like, half-packed.”

“Were you gonna run away?” Not that I would blame him at all if he ever thought about it.

Jordan looks almost as wounded as I am by the thought. “No! Of course not. Uncle Ray told me to keep a bag in my closet with clothes and stuff so that if we ever had to leave in a hurry I’d be ready.”

It’s hard to resent my brother now for filling Jordan’s head with the harsh realities of his life. Jordan puts his things in the car in the garage.

“Did your dad tell you it took him, like, two hours to pack?” Michael asks when Jordan comes back.

“That was your fault,” I say accusingly.

Michael looks at Jordan with a knowing smile. “Cause I found a bunch of goofy pictures of your dad when he was younger.”

“Michael, don’t. My son thinks I’m at least somewhat cool. I don’t want to spoil that for him.”

“If it makes you feel better, Dad, I never thought you were cool.”

Michael pumps a triumphant fist into the air. “Yes! I’m the cool one!”

Jordan pulls a face that is absolutely unnecessary and hilarious.

“What, I’m not cool either?” Michael asks with a pout.

Jordan fidgets uncomfortably. “Well, I dunno. I mean, you’re both, like—you’re—you’re dads. Dads can’t be cool. It disrupts the entire balance of the universe or something.”

If Michael smiles any wider his face is going to turn itself inside out.

We eat breakfast together, then within an hour Jordan’s off to spend some time with friends. Michael watches me thumb through the thick stacks of bills we’d excavated from the bedroom wall safe the night before.

“How much do we have?”

“Altogether, we’ve got \$68,804.”

“Is that good?”

“I have no idea.” I stuff the money back into my bag between poorly-folded t-shirts. “Once we meet up with Barry, we should be able to figure out how long this is gonna last. In the meantime, we can always hustle pool”—I give him a grin—“or poker.”

He smiles. “So, we’ve got money, bags packed, a car...what else is left?”

“A quickie for old times’ sake?”

He raises a skeptical eyebrow. “Seriously, Evan? You have more left in you?”

“It’s like you don’t even know me at all.”

I manage to get him bent over the arm of the couch with his pants and underwear tugged past his hips, and Michael makes a low moan when I press my dick at his entrance, the smear of pre-cum at the tip just enough for me to slide inside of him. Every thrust makes him moan like a goddamn porn star, and even when I stop grinding my hips into him and just touch and tease, he makes these soft little sounds that compel me to pound into him again. He certainly knows how to stroke my ego.

Michael's in the middle of telling me how big my dick is when he bucks his hips back against me and grunts a moan that interrupts his compliment. "God, Michael, most people rate their favorite sounds as their kids' laughter or hearing their first-born cry for the first time, but"—I gasp as he rocks back against the small pulses of my hips—"I gotta tell ya, the way you groan like my cock is the only thing you've ever wanted in your entire life is definitely up there on my list."

He purrs and shoves his hips back to feel me deeper. We move together in a hot clash of need, and I'm grabbing onto him for leverage. Michael's hands scrape over the couch as he whines and moans, out of words entirely except my name. My rough, sharp thrusts bring him closer to the edge, and I can almost feel the spike of sensation in his body when he's about to come. I grab a handful of the dark tangles of his hair, pulling his head back to expose the skin of his throat. I slam into him until he breaks apart with a blissful cry, so tight around me that I'm forced over the edge, need and fury and passion echoing from me to him.

Michael gasps, spent and sated, trying to catch his breath after his orgasm wrecked him and left him dry. His body's slumped over the couch, his hips still in my hands. He looks—and sounds—good like this.

"I hope you enjoyed that," I say, "'cause it's gonna be just you and your hand for a while now."

"I'm sure we'll make time," Michael argues. "Your friend Barry can watch Jordie for ten minutes while we sneak off."

"Ten minutes? Does that include foreplay?"

Michael just sighs and slumps impossibly further.

Once we're dressed again, the task of staging our murders is upon us. Michael lets me break the windows—from the outside, as an actual intruder would do—and disrupt the furniture in the living room. He comes down from the stairs with our bags. "I opened some of the drawers in our room so it looks a bit more convincing."

"That's...good?" Seriously, how do you compliment a fake break-in and murder?

Michael opens one of the kitchen drawers and pulls out a pretty menacing-looking knife. My first thought is that he might be using it to rip open the remainder of the couch cushions, but he's walking towards me and holy shit I am not a throw pillow.

"Give me your arm," he says, holding his non-knife-wielding hand out expectantly.

I take a step back. "No! What the hell do you think you're doing?"

"How else am I supposed to get blood from you?" He rolls his eyes like we've talked about this before. Drawing blood was definitely not a topic we've previously discussed.

"Whoa, whoa, wait! Why the hell do we need blood?"

"To make it look like they killed you." His voice wavers almost imperceptibly around the word.

"Why does it have to be mine?"

"Say one of my father's goons comes here, finds the place ransacked with blood on the walls. My father's gonna want to make sure they didn't kill me."

I frown at the sight of the huge blade in his hand. "Is this really necessary? Can't we just break windows and toss stuff around?"

"Look, I'm not real happy about it either, but we have to sell this, Evan," he pleads with me. "Otherwise it'll all be for nothing. I'd do it myself if I didn't think he'd do some sort of test to find out whose blood it is."

"You really think he'd go through all that trouble to—" I stop. I would do the exact same thing if it meant knowing my son was alive or not. "All right, fine." I surrender my left arm to him, and he wraps his fingers around my elbow, holding me there as he steadies his other hand. "You're not gonna tell me to relax, are you?"

"Just the opposite, actually." He gives me a pained smile before resting the edge of the blade against my skin. I feel my heartbeat accelerate. This is a terrible idea. He's going to cut my goddamn arm off. "Here goes."

I shut my eyes and brace myself for the pain. When it hits, I keep my teeth ground together to trap any sounds of agony. Michael fears that he's hurting me, and to confirm it by screaming or groaning would only torment him further. He doesn't need to suffer with me.

Then it's over, the knife removed, and Michael's staring at the crimson oozing from the cut. He turns his head to look behind him, then wipes my blood on his hand before he walks carefully over to the sliding glass doors leading out to the backyard. He drags his wet hand down the glass and makes a hand-shaped smear on the door. I move to step closer to him, eager to

assist him with whatever he needs, but Michael shakes his head, coming over to me to dab more blood onto his fingers. He makes another handprint, this one on the wood floor.

“Turn your arm facing down and squeeze,” he tells me. I do as he says, watching the red drops spill onto the floor. “Now come over to me. Keep squeezing.” It takes me a moment to realize what his play is here: having me walk toward him creates directional blood drops, making it appear as if I’ve been shot and crawled or staggered my way to the back door. I’m beginning to learn that Michael is disturbingly creative down to the last detail.

Michael reaches down into his bag on the chair and takes out a handkerchief, pressing it against my cut once I’ve met him there at the glass doors. He doesn’t say anything, just pushes the cotton over the wound with gentle pressure, his lashes fluttering while he stares at his handiwork. When the bleeding ebbs, he tugs my sleeve down over my arm and rinses the blade in the sink. Then he washes his hands and tosses the knife into his suitcase.

I offer words to get him talking again, because he’s silent in a way that makes ice prickles in my veins. “Anything else?”

He shakes his head. “Just grab the rest of the bags.” He takes everything he can carry and walks down the hall to the garage door. I do as he asks, following him out and to the car.

“Just a minute,” I tell him after we’ve loaded the bags into the trunk. He nods, conceding, and I step back inside the house for a moment to take one last look at the place I called home for the last fifteen years.

#

Michael

Evan lets me drive for the first hour or so after we pick up Jordan. I don’t mind; it gives him time to decompress and collect his thoughts after most likely abandoning his home. This can’t be easy for him. I wonder how long he lived there, if June had been pregnant with Jordan when they bought the house, if Evan’s dreams of screenwriting had already died or just began to flourish. I need to stop wondering these things. I switch on the radio to distract myself. Evan doesn’t seem to mind, even though I’m ninety-nine percent certain he’d prefer Radiohead to Hi-Five.

I stop to refuel the tank at a gas station just outside of Jersey City. This is purposeful. Evan had refused to attend Ray’s burial—since June and his other deceased family are buried there; I feel that he ought to visit the cemetery just this once, because it might be the last time. Evan folds his arms over his chest, looking extremely uncomfortable to be here while I’m pumping gas. After a moment, he opens the door and slides out.

“Michael, why are we here?”

“I think you should visit.” He knows what I mean.

Evan’s mouth is curled in disgust. “No.”

“Why not?”

“What’s the point? June and Ray were cremated, and my parents have been in the ground so long there’s not even a body anymore. You want me to pay my respects to a couple’s headstones?”

“It’s about their memory.”

“I got memories. I don’t need to visit a slab of granite to remember my wife or my brother or my parents. Trust me.” I don’t say anything, choosing to stare ahead at the gas pump. He pushes a hand through his hair. “If I keep livin’ in the past, I’ll just end up in a grave here. I don’t know about you, but I’d rather stay alive.”

I drop the subject and let him drive. We take I-80 west after we’re out of Jersey City. Jordan keeps himself busy, sitting in the backseat quietly playing his Game Boy and listening to music via headphones; I wonder if Evan had hoped for this trip to be an opportunity to bond with his son.

“You okay?” I ask lamely when we exit the New Jersey Turnpike.

“I’ll feel a hell of a lot better when we get outta Jersey.”

We drive for about an hour when Evan says, “How come you’re not all mopey? You loved that house, Michael. I figured you’d sit there and stew in a fog of angst.”

I shrug. “It’s not the house I loved. It was sharing a place with you and Jordie where we could be a family. That’s what I want, and I’m sure we can find it somewhere else when this is all over.”

He shoots me a look of surprise. “Wow, that’s way too well-adjusted for me. You’re supposed to be the sentimental one.”

“I thought you said you were through livin’ in the past.”

Evan mouth-glares at me and turns the radio up.

There’s a long, seemingly limitless stretch of country road before we finally stop at a gas station tucked away off of the Ohio Turnpike. The road is poorly-paved, serving mostly as a truck stop rather than anything presentable. If I had a nickel for every semi-truck parked around here, I’d be a rich(er) man. Evan opts to refuel the tank and stock up on provisions while I stay in the car with Jordan.

“You doin’ okay back there?”

“Yeah.” He doesn’t look up, engrossed in Tolkien’s *The Fellowship of the Ring*.

“Are you hungry?”

He shakes his head. “I got chips and stuff.”

“That’s hardly a proper meal,” I say around a laugh.

Jordan shrugs, looking up at me. “It’s okay, Mike. I’ll be fine.”

“If you want us to stop for something, just say so, okay?”

He nods and goes back to reading. I take this opportunity to study the map. Staying west on I-80 will eventually put us on Indiana Toll Road, where we’ll pass through—

My heart stops for a split-second.

Gary, Indiana.

2300 Jackson Street wouldn’t be too convoluted a detour to make. Evan probably wouldn’t even notice, assuming I’m looking for a rest stop or gas station. I wouldn’t stay long, maybe just a casual drive by the house.

I wonder why my first instinct is to hide this from him instead of simply asking if we could look at the place. Evan is all paranoia and distrust, and he might suspect that Joseph may have planted some goons there thinking I’d drop by. But I wouldn’t stay, of course, just a quick look as we pass through—

I jump when Evan opens the driver’s side door and slides into the seat. He gives me a quizzical look, the corner of his mouth pulled up into a small smirk. “You with me, Michael?”

“Y—yeah, just looking at the map.” I put it back in the console. “Do you think we’ll make it there tonight?”

“We probably could, but I wanna get some shut-eye first. If we show up at Barry’s tonight, he’s gonna want to chat for a while. I’d like his first impression of me to be a good one, y’know?”

“Yeah, you get cranky when you’re tired.” He reaches down to hotwire the car. “Wait, babe, can I drive for a bit?”

“Sure.”

It’s dark by the time we reach the outskirts of Gary. Evan’s got the seat reclined, his back facing me as he tries to doze off. But the poor shocks on this car make that an impossibility for him. Jordan, however, could sleep through an earthquake; he’s sound asleep in the backseat with Evan’s leather jacket serving as a makeshift blanket.

“How far is it to the nearest motel?” Evan grumbles. “I need a shower and a bed that doesn’t have wheels.”

“I’m tired too, baby. Just give me thirty minutes, okay?”

“Fine, but you’re buyin’ dinner.”

I make a turn onto Route 12 which eventually feeds me right onto Jackson Street. Gary was not a visually appealing city when I grew up here, and even now it’s still grimy and poorly-kept. The trees flourish, but the lawns are sun-baked and withered. There have been changes and improvements in my absence, of course, but for the most part the town still looks post-apocalyptic. Broken *everything* litters the ground; wire fences are torn down half-way, and most of the businesses are boarded up and closed.

Poverty, thy name is Gary.

I slow to a crawl when I reach my old house on the corner. I’m already breaking my promise not to stop here, but nostalgia grips me and makes me step on the brake. Evan notices we’re not moving and raises his head slightly. “Food or sleep?”

I don’t answer, staring forlornly out the window at the dilapidated house that had once been my home.

“Michael?” Evan sits up and takes in our surroundings. “Jesus, what fuckin’ shithole are we in? I thought we were gonna find a motel.”

Without warning, I turn off the car and step out, my feet carrying me closer to the house. There’s a For Sale sign on the front lawn, swaying eerily in the gentle night breeze. I wonder if anyone’s lived here since my family moved out, or if it’s remained vacant ever since we set our sights on California.

It might not be magnificent like Hayvenhurst or Evan’s Staten Island home, but this house holds some of my happiest memories, before all the violence and crime turned my family into...something else. It’s strange to think about them here in this quaint little town in Indiana; the idea of my family having any type of normalcy seems discordant and bizarre now, like something reflected in a funhouse mirror.

I let myself linger there for a moment beneath the stars and the harsh gleam of the streetlights before going back to the car.

#

Evan’s happy once we’re settled into a motel past the Illinois state line. Jordan wakes up to eat and then goes right back to sleep. Evan is a little more difficult. He’s watching me with his “I know you’re hiding something” face, one he’s been wearing since we left Gary. I’d hoped he

might follow Jordan's precedent and go to sleep, but apparently our nutritious fast food dinner has given him enough energy to interrogate me.

We're sitting on the floor, leaning against the foot of our bed while we watch awful local television. "You'd better not be lookin' for real estate in this craphole," Evan says around a mouthful of french fries. "'Cause I *will* leave you."

"Gee, and here I was thinkin' you were absolutely not materialistic at all."

Evan makes a soft exhale that's supposed to be a laugh. "Where the hell did you get that idea? The Rolex I gave you for Christmas?" I give him a gentle nudge in the ribs. He peels the tomato slices off of his burger like they've offended him somehow. "So, you gonna tell me what that little detour was all about, or you gonna stay cryptic and silent?"

I shake my head and steal some of his Coke. He frowns at me. "Why don't you hush?" I tease him.

Evan grunts a rude noise in my direction before obliging my request and demolishing half of his burger. "Mm, still not as good as your cooking," he says, his mouth half-full.

"What do you want?"

"Why do you always assume I have ulterior motives when I say somethin' nice about you?"

"Because you usually do."

"Yeah, but I still mean it," he says, exasperated like we've had this conversation many times before. "It's not like I'm bullshitting you or anything."

"Well, as long as there's a bit of sincerity." I pull apart my McRib, chewing thoughtfully. An ad on the television displays the date of a week-long sale at some department store, and the realization hits me.

"You know it's, like, less than two months 'til our anniversary?"

Evan looks over at me, his eyes wide with horror, like this is some sort of test and I might break up with him if he doesn't pass. "Wait, what?"

"You don't remember? I came to live with you at the beginning of September."

He lifts his eyebrows. "Time flies, huh?" I make an affirmative noise around a few of his pilfered french fries. "So, wait, why is that our anniversary? We didn't actually get together until later."

"I think it's important. At least for me."

“How so?”

I shrug, wondering how to explain. “What are the odds we’d ever meet if our lives were the way they’re supposed to be? Call it destiny or fate, but everything about this just feels...cosmic.”

“You really think we were preordained?”

“It’s a hell of a coincidence otherwise.”

Evan nods thoughtfully, gazes off at nothing in particular. “I wanna tell you something, but you gotta promise you won’t laugh.”

“What is it?” I scoot closer to him, leaning against the strength of his arm.

“When June died, it felt like my heart was gone, like I was empty. But the moment I saw you, I felt alive again for the first time in what seemed like an eternity, and I knew that I could love you forever.” He sighs a gentle sound. “That’s part of the reason why I was such an asshole to you at first. You’d do or say something that made me want you, and the guilt would take over and shut that part of me off. Then I’d get mad at myself for feeling that way.” He breathes a soft exhale of regret. “My mind is an awful place sometimes.”

I’ve seen glimpses of the self-loathing he carries around. The full force of the deprecation and hurt he carries around must be unbearable. I have no idea how he does it without breaking.

“Well, at least it worked out,” I say. Always looking on the bright side of things.

“Yeah, for a while.” His frown suggests he’s moping again.

“C’mon, baby, don’t think like that. We’ll be okay.”

“You really think you would’ve come to live with me if you’d known in about a year’s time you’d be holed up in a shitty motel, living on fast food and paralyzing fear?” He’s trying to make a joke out of it all, but the levity falls flat. I can hear the guilt in his voice, and I wonder why it’s there. It’s my fault we’re living this way, not his.

“I like the company.” That comes out more carelessly than I’d intended, but Evan doesn’t seem to mind. He smiles, appreciative, takes another bite of his burger before he speaks again.

“Is this really what you want, Michael?”

“This won’t be forever,” I remind him. “We’ll get to your friend’s place, work something out, and we’ll be okay again.”

He huffs an angry sigh. “Do you really think we can do that?”

“It’s worth a shot.”

“I’m gonna need something a little more solid than that.”

I give him a reassuring smile before stealing a few more fries. “Don’t worry, I’ll come up with something.”

Evan sighs again, pushes a hand through his hair and watches me as if searching my face for any sign of doubt. “I know you want something more than this. Jesus, Michael, you should be able to have a nice house and a family, and your own bedroom that you don’t have to share with your freakin’ kids, and an air conditioner that works, and not have to sit in your car for eight hours a day, and be able to go out and do things as a family without worrying about being murdered.” Jesus Christmas, he barely remembered to breathe there.

But I’d had a taste of the life he’d just described, and it was the most wonderful thing I could have imagined. Sure, it wasn’t perfect, but that’s what made it feel real, like it was actually within my grasp instead of some unattainable fantasy. Now that I’d had that taste, I would fight for it.

“It won’t be forever,” I remind him again, hoping that he hears the conviction in my voice. “If we can’t find a way to get my father to back down, then I’ll...” I’m not really sure what I’m willing to do. Could I kill my own father? Would I? “I won’t let anyone hurt you or Jordie.” I reach over to lace my fingers with his, giving my words more weight. He lets me lean against his shoulder, and for a moment it’s tranquil, familiar, like we’re miles away from danger. “You know why I stopped at that house?” I ask after a comfortable silence. “That was where I grew up.”

“No shit, really?”

“What did you think the reason was?”

He shrugs. “Not that.”

“I know it’s dumb, but I wanted to see it again. I needed to be reminded that my family wasn’t always this way...”

“What were they like?” he asks, his voice soft as he rubs a hand over my back.

I snuggle into his chest, closing my eyes and letting his touch pull the tension from my body. “My brothers were really into sports. They used to play baseball when they could find a vacant lot. Tito was always good at fixing things, and he liked to show me how to take stuff apart and put it back together. We didn’t really have a lot of privacy in such a small house.”

“I’ll bet, man. How many siblings do you even have? Every time I feel like I remember them all, I meet a totally new one, and I don’t know what’s real anymore. It’s like they’re produced out of a factory or something.”

I snort a laugh into his nearly-empty Coke. “There’s nine: Rebbie, Jackie, Tito, Jermaine, LaToya, Marlon, Randy, and Janet.”

He counts them off on his fingers, stopping with a frown. “I think your math is off.”

“And me, of course.” I roll my eyes and sort of smack his arm. His hand snakes up to my hair, tangling in the long, black curls. “I think my parents really wanted us to be protected. I remember we weren’t really allowed to go out in the streets and play like the other kids. I guess they were afraid we’d get hurt. It’s not exactly the safest city.” I wonder if that desire to protect us—coupled with the drive to ensure we’d never have to struggle—influenced Joseph’s decision to establish our family name as something synonymous with power and wealth.

“I never had much of a real closeness with my father,” I tell him, finishing off the last half of my sandwich. “He was never the affectionate type. Sometimes he’d take us camping or fishing or teach us how to box, but...I ended up being closer to my mother.”

All this talk of family is making my head hurt, a pulsing throb like blood behind a bruise. Something in Evan’s expression tells me that he senses my unease. His mouth is softer, understanding, so I don’t feel too bad when I stand up, wipe my hands on my jeans, and make my way to the door. Evan looks devastated now—he must have misread me—and he scrambles to his feet to stop my stride. “Michael, wait, where are you going?”

“I’m just going out.” I feel like there’s something I missed here, another meaning behind his worry. “The pool looks nice, and it’s not like there’s anybody around.” He lets out a sigh of relief. “You can join me if you want.”

“Maybe later.” He places a hand on my back and slowly lets it fall away, his fingertips tracing my spine before I quietly slip out into the night. Despite our lackluster air conditioning, it’s still much warmer outside than inside. The muggy air is sort of stifling, and I strip off my clothes in hopes that the water will cool me down. This was a mistake.

The dry heat of the night isn’t made any more bearable by dipping in the pool. In fact, it might just be worse. The water is warm and still, the only ripples made when I move, and the pool itself is deceptively shallow. I feel like I’m standing in a kiddie pool; I have to hold myself up on the edge and let my legs float in the water for any sort of satisfactory swimming experience.

I tilt my head back against the clothes that I discarded on the concrete, and gaze up at the twinkling stars decorating the black sky. The air is thick and hot in my nose, and if I concentrate I can smell a faint trace of barbeque somewhere. My stomach gurgles, unappreciative of the thought. A McRib is hardly considered an adequate dinner.

Beads of sweat roll down my forehead. I kick my feet lazily in the water, watching the way the light shimmers over the surface of the tiny waves. When did my life come to mirror a Greek tragedy? I thought I had found a whole future, a family in Evan and Jordan, but my father

seems determined to rip my fleeting happiness apart. I should be exempt from his ridiculous melodrama; I've never had any intentions of going into the family business! Why should it matter if I want to date someone he doesn't approve of?

None of this should even matter at all, because I'm a grown adult! Why the hell does it matter to him if I want to come back home or not? If anything, he should be thankful I'm no longer an obstacle in his way.

I let out a sigh and swish my hand around in the water. I know I don't have the strength to leave them on their own. And even if I did, it wouldn't save them. Joseph's wrath would still follow Evan and Jordan and make them pay for my imagined slights. But I don't want to stay on the run forever. Evan is right: what kind of life is that? I guess in my family, wanting a normal, apple-pie life makes me the freak. Why doesn't my father want something more for me than this? I've only known Evan for about one year, but he's still got more concern for my future and welfare than my own flesh and blood.

The sound of distant footsteps makes me whirl around on instinct, my heart flailing wildly in my chest. I calm down considerably when I see that it's only Evan making a trip to the ice machine. "God, I ought'a put a bell on you."

He chuckles and shovels ice into a bucket. "Just a heads-up: the A/C in our room is so shitty it's almost unbelievable." He looks over his shoulder at me. "Give me a minute and I'll be right back."

I close my eyes and sink a little deeper into the water. I can hear him walk back to our room, close the door, then moments later come back out again. I turn to face him, and I'm rewarded with the sight of him pulling his shirt over his head. I keep my tongue in the vicinity of my mouth when he strips off the rest of his clothes and joins me in the pool. When he stands across from me, the water only comes up to his navel, and it's kind of hilarious.

"What the fuck? How is a normal person supposed to swim in this? Why is everything in this town so shitty?" He looks at me, then, as if reconsidering: "Present company excluded, of course."

I smile at him and spin to face the door of our room, just in case... He wraps me in his arms and pulls me with him to the other side of the pool. His mouth is warm on my neck where he kisses me, and his hands press me so tightly against his body, like the water can't even fit between us. For a glorious moment, I feel the illusion of safety.

The sweet smell of mesquite smoke grows thicker in the air, and I sigh needily, relaxing in his arms. "I can't wait 'till we get to eat real food again."

He chuckles at my ear, his fingers splaying over my stomach. "Well, Chicago's pretty notorious for deep-dish pizza." My mouth waters at the thought. "I suppose I could take you out sometime."

“Like, what, on a date?”

He laughs. “Well, yeah. It’s not like we’ve ever actually been on a real date before.”

Evan’s always raved about my cooking, so of course we never went out to eat together; Jordan, however, accompanied me a bunch of restaurants he thought I’d like. I’d left the cinema to Evan and Jordan, knowing how much movies meant to them. Any other typical “date spots” we’d gone to had included Jordan.

But my own misgivings about ruining Evan’s reputation kept us from ever going out together.

“Yeah, you’re right.”

“Then it’s settled. I’m takin’ you out on a date when we get to Chicago.” He says it in a way that implies he’s not taking no for an answer. But I’m not going to argue with him this time.

“What about Jordie?”

“I’m sure I can get Barry to watch him for an hour or two.”

“Make sure it’s not too fancy a place, ‘cause we didn’t really pack any formal occasion clothes.”

He laughs again. “Right.” I feel his mouth on the slope of my shoulder, sucking bruises into the skin. I moan happily and relax against his chest.

“Y’know, the most important thing to my father is family. He was always telling us how togetherness would make us strong. When I was real little, he took me and my brothers out into the yard and pulled some branches off of a tree to show us how difficult it was to break all of the branches at once. But when you pulled one away from the others, it snapped real easy.” I wish I could see his face to gauge how he’s absorbing this. It’s helpful, albeit hurtful, to be able to watch the interest drain from the listener’s face.

“Family doesn’t end with blood. I like to think you’re part of my family. You and Jordie are all I’ve got left.”

“I wish my father would see it that way.”

Evan doesn’t say anything for a while, just kisses me wherever he can, and I place my hands on top of his, appreciative of his affection. His teeth graze over my neck, and I shiver. “Hey, if you married some random broad off the street, your family’d have to accept her, right?” I nod. “So why don’t we just get married?”

I laugh at his naivety. “Gee, what a simple solution! Why didn’t I think of that?”

He reaches down and squeezes my ass. I let my body answer for me by rolling my hips back against his. He lets out a soft groan at my ear, and I can almost feel the want in his voice. "I could forge the marriage certificate."

"You really think my father's that gullible?"

He grunts a sound of dissatisfaction and holds me tighter against him. "Worth a shot." He stands up, lifting me to my feet along with him, and I turn to kiss his mouth, grabbing handfuls of his hair as I crush him closer to me. The chilly void on my skin where the water had been feels almost electric. His hands lay flat on my back, pressing me against his chest before he walks his fingers up my spine. My hips jolt at the sensation, and he moans into my mouth before dipping his head down to nibble at the skin of my collarbone. A rivulet of water trickles down my throat, and he follows its trail with his tongue. I moan soft sighs into the muggy air as his mouth moves over the curve of my throat. His hands hold my hips in place, grinding against me while his mouth finds my nipples. My head tilts back, and I can't help but groan at the soft pinch of teeth against sensitive flesh.

Evan nudges me backwards, using the buoyancy of the water to help push me against the edge of the pool. His hips rock against mine, and I can feel his arousal, thick and wanting against my thigh. I reach down to grab it, but he takes my wrists and splays my arms against the ledge, pinning me beneath his lust. "This is about you, not me," he murmurs, capturing my lips with his before I can reply.

"But what if I want to get you off?" I argue when the kiss is finished.

"You will," he says, and it feels like a promise the way he's grinding against me, slow and controlled, as if the slightest touch will break him. "But not right now." He loosens his grip on me, sliding one hand underneath my thigh and bending the knee so he can shove his hips closer. I let out an embarrassingly loud moan that makes him laugh. "Good thing this place is pretty much a ghost town."

"Shut up." I stick my tongue out at him and splash him. He doesn't seem to mind, opting to tickle my ribs, and I yelp against his fingers, unable to escape. My legs flail wildly, hooking around his waist and pulling him closer. I feel the friction when his cock slides over my belly, and apparently he does too, because his hands drop away to put distance between us.

A lifetime of insecurity makes me assume the problem is me, and I drop my gaze from his perfect body to the rippling water in front of me, embarrassed by my desire. Evan glides back over to me, careful this time, and presses his lips to mine, soft and gentle. His hands hook under my thighs, and he lifts me up onto the side of the pool. My heartbeat thuds in my chest at the sight of my nakedness, the realization that we've been humping in a pool while the stars watch. The sandpaper scratch of his stubble between my legs makes me moan, and I lay back against the concrete, staring up at the sky and sighing blissfully at the rough, wet kisses he plants on my thighs. I whimper and mewl at the heat of his mouth around my cock, my fingers curling in his hair as he hums around me. I hook my legs over his shoulders, and he doesn't seem to mind, just

keeps moving his tongue in tight, slow circles over the head of my cock and keeps licking and sucking and oh God—

My nails scrape over his scalp as I crest, all my thoughts gone as orgasm wrings me dry. He lingers at my cock for a moment before lifting my legs off of his shoulders so he can properly appreciate them with gentle kisses. By the time my thighs have stopped quaking, he's gone back to my cock, sucking the head before letting it drop from his mouth in a way that would absolutely make me hard again if I hadn't just come.

Evan doesn't say anything, just smirks at me, like that's all the non-verbal communication he needs to get by in life. And maybe it is; it's smart-ass enough to win any argument, yet also endearing enough to absolve him of wrongdoing and make any sexually-developed human being disrobe. I rise up and smirk back, but it doesn't feel right on my face. "What're you lookin' so smug about?"

"I think you might know the answer to that one." I stop his prideful banter with a kiss, and I feel him grin against my lips. Smug jerk. My hands thread through his hair and snake down his shoulders before he detaches from me, stalking over to the other side of the pool and getting out. "Don't be shy now," he teases, grabbing his discarded clothes and taking steps to our room. "It's my turn." I frown, wanting him near me, but the sight of the water coursing down his body compensates for that. I lick my lips, eager to taste his skin. I stand to follow him into the shower, where my mouth and hands make good on his promise.

25. Weekend at Barry's

Evan

I'm vaguely aware of something—or someone—nibbling my ear, kissing the line of my jaw. Through the sleepy haze in my brain, I deduce that it's probably Michael. His hands are warm on my shoulders.

“Wake up, baby,” he mumbles. “You said you wanted to leave around noon, ‘member?”

I groan a reply. “Can we fool around a little bit first?”

“Please don't,” Jordan says, playing his Game Boy in the other bed.

We're out the door in thirty minutes en route to Chicago. The sun is exceptionally bright today, making yesterday's dreary, overcast weather seem like a distant memory. Michael does a pretty good job of eating doughnuts and not getting any crumbs on his shirt or the interior of the car. It's actually really impressive.

When we get into the heart of the city, it's the closest thing to home I've seen since we left New York. There's a plethora of buildings that seems to go on for miles. Some are average size, but most of them are vast, multiple-story structures like the ones I'm used to. Michael gawks out the window as we pass by; Jordan remains unimpressed, having grown up with similar cityscapes. Michael's childlike wonder is endearing in the best of ways; I'm reminded of his awe when he first came to New York.

We pass a small pizzeria, boasting itself as the “Home of the Jumbo Slice.” Underneath the overpass bridge is another block of shops, ranging from banks to bakeries to restaurants. Barry Rothman's Chicago office is a grand thing on the outside. The exterior of the office is magnificent, with deep mahogany arches over the doorways and intricate carvings in the wood. On the opposite side of the street is a small convenience store, and a bar with windows dark enough to rival the Cascios' restaurant back home.

There seems to be two front doors. The first one I try is locked. The other one opens up and brings us into the lobby. Once we're inside, the mood changes. The commotion of the city almost seems worlds away, as if the walls are insulated against the noise. There's the quiet trickle of a water fountain attached on the wall. The receptionist, a young, red-headed female, greets us with a timid smile through the shutter; she looks like she's stuck in one of those booths in front of a movie theater where you buy the tickets. “Good afternoon.”

“We're here to see Mr. Rothman.”

“Do you have an appointment?”

“Not...exactly. I told him I'd be coming in today for a visit. We're from out of town.” I give her a warm, friendly smile. Not full-wattage, however. Don't want the poor girl disrobing.

“He’s pretty fond of my brother Ray. Just tell him Evan Chandler’s here to see him; he’ll know who you’re talkin’ about.” Mr. Big-Shot.

She picks up the phone and relays the message. I look around the waiting area. The outside may be ornate and decorative, but the inside sure isn’t. That’s when Barry Rothman bursts out of his office. He’s impeccably dressed in a pinstriped suit, his skin an almost leathery tan. His white hair and beard are streaked with gray.

“Evan, you son of a bitch, it’s great to see ya!” He offers his hand for a handshake and then pulls me in for a crushing hug, slapping my back with his free hand like he’s trying to dislodge something stuck in my throat. It’s kind of flattering to be greeted like this by a guy I’ve never had an actual conversation with until two days ago.

“His tan is almost as fake as mine,” I whisper to Michael as Barry leads us into his private office. Michael tries to stifle his giggles but fails miserably. “Thanks for seeing us on such short notice. I hope we didn’t inconvenience you.”

“Of course not! Always a pleasure to help out the famed Evan Chandler.”

Blush, blush. “Aw, shucks.”

“‘Famed’?” Michael says with a smile. “Just what did his brother tell you?”

“All kinds of shit. All Ray ever seemed to talk about was how much he looked up to this guy.” Barry says, gesturing to me with his thumb. “Say, Ev’, you wanna introduce me to your pals or what?”

“Oh, right, sorry. This is my son Jordan, and this is Michael. He’s a, uh, good friend of ours.” Calling Michael a “good friend” is like calling Niagara Falls a leak.

Barry scratches his beard. “Michael, huh. You look familiar. You from around here?”

Michael shakes his head. “California.”

“What’re you doin’ all the way out here, kid?”

“That’s...what we’re here for.” I’m about to start explaining how we got into this predicament when Michael interrupts me.

“Hey, Jordie, why don’t you go wait out in the lobby for a bit?”

Jordan picks up on our subtle cues and realizes he probably doesn’t want to be in the room to hear this. When we’re alone, we sit across from Barry in the too-small chairs in front of his desk.

“So, what’s this all about, Ev?”

I squirm a little, wondering how exactly to explain. “Well, I’m sure you’re familiar with my brother’s, uh, activities. I happen to be in the same business myself.” This isn’t coming out right. I sound like a goddamn moron. I clear my throat and try again. “You heard of Joseph Jackson?”

Barry’s open face slams shut.

“Yeah, that one. Michael here’s his son—”

He slams his palms down on his desk. “You shittin’ me?”

“I’m afraid not, Mr. Rothman.”

Michael gives him a pleasant wave.

“Please, call me Barry,” he says after a moment of reverence.

“Right, well, Barry, Joseph’s family was responsible for an...incident that left my family in a bad spot. So he sent Michael to live with me for a while and help out. Now, Joseph wants him back, but Michael’s not too keen on the idea, so Joseph is literally making our lives a living hell.”

Barry nods thoughtfully. “I see. What kind of threats is he making?”

“It’s gone past the point of threats. He burned down my bar and sent one of his sons to my house to ransack the place.”

“We wouldn’t be here if we weren’t afraid for our lives,” Michael says in a soft voice.

Barry fixes him with a compassionate gaze. “Why don’t you just go home, kid?”

Michael’s eyes dart to mine, as if seeking confirmation to reveal the depth of our relationship. I don’t know what he sees. “I—I don’t want to. I’m happy with Evan. But—but that’s not the point. I’m a grown man. My father shouldn’t be allowed to get away with this anymore.”

“What would you have me do?” Barry asks us.

“My brother raved about you, Barry. Said you were the nastiest, meanest son of a bitch he’d ever met.” Barry looks oddly flattered by this. “Surely there’s something you can do to stop Joseph from messing with us.”

Barry nods, taps a pen on his desk. “Joseph is, above all, a businessman. Have you tried making him an offer he can’t refuse?”

I give him flat eyes. "I'm really not in the mood for mob clichés, Barry."

"It might be a cliché, but that doesn't mean it's not true. You gotta make it more prudent for him to leave you guys alone than to come after you."

"You got any ideas on how to do that? Because it's my ass that's on the line and in danger of being, y'know, dead. Besides, Joseph views Michael staying with me as a business move. Michael was supposed to take over for him."

"But there's not a pressing time limit on that," Michael adds. "At least none that he's told me about. But my father would definitely use it to guilt me if he was dying."

Barry thinks about this for a moment. "You're forgetting the most obvious solution."

"Kill him?"

He laughs a hearty noise that sounds like a hacking cough. "No, blackmail."

"Hey, if you can find something we can use, I'm all for it."

"I'll start lookin' into his business records, see what turns up," Barry says.

Michael speaks up in a low yet stern voice. "You're not gonna find anything."

"Michael, don't be a negative Nancy."

Barry chuckles. "Hey, ya never know. He could'a got sloppy. If not, well, we'll just have to dig deeper. Say, Ev, what's ol' Ray up to these days anyway?"

Michael and I share a distraught look. "He, um, he passed away about a month ago," Michael answers when my voice betrays me.

Barry slumps in his seat. "No, you're kidding! Really?" He breathes out a deep sigh of lament. "Man, he was a great guy." I nod in agreement. "You want that drink now, Evan?" he asks, reaching into one of his desk drawers and taking out an engraved silver flask.

"No thanks, I—I don't drink anymore." I'm getting significantly more and more depressed the longer this conversation goes on.

"No shit, really? You smoke?"

I shake my head.

"You sure? I got a box of Cubans in here."

"I'm good. You go ahead, though."

“Suit yourself.” He takes a swig from the flask and lights himself a cigarette.

Michael spends most of the afternoon relaying details about Joseph to Barry, name-dropping cities he'd spent a considerable amount of time in and people he'd made connections with. When Michael mentioned Berry Gordy, Rothman's face lost a little bit of color.

“Joseph's got connections with the Gordy Family?”

Michael nods. “Berry was practically our mentor until my father went rogue. How do you know him?”

“I've done business with him a couple'a times.”

“What kind of business?”

“Legitimate stuff.” Michael laughs at that. “What, you think he made all his money from shakedowns and vigs? Nah, it's that Motown empire he's got goin'. When one of his clients backs out of a contract, who do you think cleans up the mess?” He gestures to the framed gold records adorning his office.

“You think he might have some dirt on Joseph?”

Barry shrugs. “Worth a look.”

#

For someone as paranoid as Barry Rothman, his private apartment is a horrible place to hide out. The bedroom is awkwardly arranged, putting a serious damper on my hopes to be vigilant tonight. The position of the bed makes it near-impossible to get a good look out into the living room. Sliding glass doors lead out from the bedroom to a small porch. There's just too many goddamn windows that don't have bars on them. Sure, my house wasn't exactly the pinnacle of impenetrable security, but it didn't need to be. At the very least, the apartment sits on the second floor, but that's little consolation.

I don't plan on sleeping well here.

Michael tries to make the best of our situation, cooking dinner with the few edible ingredients from the fridge and cabinets. His attempts at normalcy seem like they keep him sane, so I don't try to take that away from him. I try not to look too morose or anxious throughout the night. Michael and Jordan have their own worries; I don't need them worrying about me too.

Jordan lies with me on the couch, his head resting on my arm as he struggles not to fall asleep. Michael's sitting on the far end of the couch, giving us space, his knees drawn up to his chin while he watches TV with way too much investment. I feel a twinge of pain in my chest. As

much as I want to protect Michael, that desire doesn't hold a candle to my need to protect my son. Michael can protect himself, but Jordan is so young, so fragile...

Jordan starts to doze off when Michael leaves the room to shower, sprawling out in the space he's left on the couch. Every few minutes or so, his eyes pop open and scan the room surreptitiously for a new threat before he nods off again. I grab a blanket that's folded over the back of the couch and drape it over him. "Time for bed, kiddo." Even in the darkness of the room, I can still see the fear in his eyes as he looks at me and worriedly glances over at the window. "No one can see inside," I tell him. "Michael and I locked all the windows and made sure the curtains cover them. That's why it's so dark in here." I try a smile, but it's weak. Years ago, such an explanation would have comforted him when his worst fears were imaginary monsters hiding in the shadows. Now the monsters were real.

Jordan sighs, my attempt at comforting him a failed one. I can see the exhaustion in his eyes, the way his body remains tense as if anticipating a blow. "Dad, what's really going on? Be honest with me."

I try to find an expression that belies the grief inside of me. It doesn't work. The last thing I want to do is lie to him, but how else am I supposed to shield him from the horrible things we face? I slide off of the couch and sit on the floor, giving him more room to lay out. "Well...you know how Michael and I are...together?" He nods slowly, and I can tell he's trying to piece things together in his head. "His father isn't exactly our biggest fan."

Jordan gives me a puzzled look. "So what? He wants to kill you 'cause of that?"

I shift uncomfortably. That could be a lot closer to the truth than we think. "Well, here's the thing: Michael's father only sent him to live with us for a short time. He wasn't expecting Michael would actually want to stay and, I suppose, abandon his real family." I'm trying to skirt around the central issue of Michael's family being responsible for what happened to June and Ray. "Michael's father is a dangerous man, and he controls a lot of dangerous people."

"Kinda like you do?"

The air hitches in my throat. "Yeah." He blinks, his eyes glistening with unshed tears. "But it's not gonna be this way forever. I promise I will keep you safe. I won't let anyone hurt you."

"What about you? Will you be safe?"

"I sorta have to be if I wanna protect you, right?" I pat his hand reassuringly. "Don't worry about me. I will find you a way through this."

I stay with him until he falls asleep. He won't voice it, but I know he needs my presence there to find the proper calm so he can rest. I turn my questions over in my head, trying to formulate a plan of action. I have no idea if staying here any longer than tonight will be

beneficial, if our staged break-in has fooled Joseph's forces. Is there any chance at all that we could attempt some sort of normalcy, or are we doomed to run forever?

What can I do to save my son?

When I glance over at the bathroom, I'm surprised to find it empty. I hadn't realized that Michael had crawled into bed already. I move quietly into the bedroom to join him, taking care to leave the door open wide in case Jordan needs me. Michael hears my footsteps and rolls over on his back to look at me.

"You're awake?"

Michael nods and sits up, pulling back the blankets for me to climb in with him. It takes me a moment to find my way to the bed; the enormous windows are covered by the drapes, the fabric pinned to the walls to ensure minimal light slips through. I slide into bed beside him, and the sweet scent of unfamiliar soap overpowers my senses.

"You smell different," I murmur, wrapping an arm around his waist while I lay on my stomach.

Michael rubs comforting circles on my back. "Jordie's too smart for us," he says around a smile. "You told him the truth, didn't you?"

"You heard that, huh?" Michael nods. "I left out the more gruesome parts, but yeah, basically." I breathe a tired sigh. "I know this isn't the most ideal set-up, but at least we're hidden for now. I'll be totally honest here, Michael: I have no fuckin' idea what I'm doing. This is nothing I was ever prepared for." His fingers are warm on my skin. "Nobody's ever had the audacity to fuck with my family like this."

"Well, think of it this way: no matter what happens, at least nobody else ever will," he says, trying to be helpful.

"That's...comforting, I guess."

Michael's hand traces over the cut on my arm with care, like he's afraid he might break me if he presses too hard. "Just focus on keeping us alive."

I laugh humorlessly. "Still workin' on that one." He presses his mouth against my skin and curls closer, eager to share my heat. I push myself up and move to pin him against the mattress. He stares up at me, his eyebrows knitting together in that way that makes him look like a lost puppy. I drop my head down to kiss him, and his anxiety disappears, his hands sliding up my arms and gripping my shoulders. I kiss his chin, the curve of his throat, before my hands reach to pull his shirt over his head.

"Evan, no," he whispers against the quiet air. "Jordie'll hear us."

“Not if you’re quiet.”

He screws his mouth up into a frown. “You know I can’t—” He trails off. “You’re evil, you know that?”

“C’mon, it’s not that hard.”

“But what if Jordie—”

“Jordie’s dead asleep, okay? Trust me, he’s not gonna hear anything.” Michael’s still frowning at me. “And so what if he does? It’s not like he’s totally clueless about sex. C’mon, he’s thirteen—sex is probably all he ever thinks about.”

“It’s one thing to know about it, and a whole ‘nother thing to see—or hear—your parents doing it.”

“He’s not gonna come in and watch, Michael. At the very worst, he’ll hear us—well, *you*”—Michael glares at me—“and avoid eye contact in the morning. He knows we have sex, okay? This isn’t an entirely foreign concept for him. Like you said, he’s too smart for us.”

I’m not sure if Michael’s more concerned about Jordan’s well-being if he hears us or his own embarrassment at being discovered. It’s probably fifty-fifty. He keeps his glare on me for a moment before his expression finally softens. “Okay, fine, but you’re having the sex talk with him in the morning.”

I snort a laugh. “Oh, sweet, naïve Michael.” I kiss a line down his chest, focusing on his nipples to draw out those soft sighs he makes when my teeth graze over the tender skin. I can feel him draw his knees back, his legs brushing over my sides. My hands slide up to tug his pajamas down. I toss them over the edge of the bed and move to kiss his newly-exposed skin.

My cheek scrapes over the flesh of his inner thigh, and he sucks in a breath through his teeth. His hips shift in my hands, eager for my mouth to be elsewhere. I drag my tongue along the underside of his cock with a long, wet lick. He shivers beneath me, his fingers pulling my hair as he lets out a soft whine.

“Michael, I’ll make you come, but you gotta be quiet.”

He nods, squirms at the heat of my breath between his legs. This is going to be fun.

I sit up and slide my hands under his knees, hoisting his legs up over my shoulders. He lets out a quiet little gasp, his bottom lip tucked between his teeth to muffle any sound that might escape.

He sort of pulls me closer with his heels, and I lean over him to dig through my bag on the floor by the bed, blindly feeling around until I find the bottle. He watches me coat my dick, his eyes half-hooded and hungry with lust, and I press two slickened fingers at his entrance,

enjoying the long whine he makes when they tease the tight ring of muscle. “Remember, you gotta be quiet.” He nods again, and we fit together perfectly. Michael’s hands dig into the base of my spine as I slide in deeper, his teeth biting the plush expanse of his lower lip while he moans. I already know I’m not going to last very long, especially with the way he’s rolling his hips against me, the way his brow’s creased in hopeless pleasure. We move together in tandem, our rhythm a slow burn that makes his toes curl and my fingers grip around his thighs.

He licks his lips, and the glimpse of pink tongue makes my hips jerk against him. His nails drag over my back, his mouth crying out “Oh God—fuck—Evan—” as his back arches and his hands claw for traction. Every single thing he’s doing here is fucking amazing. His body pulls me in like he needs me to survive, his lips spilling out soft praises as I work into him. I fold at the waist to kiss him, and he moans into my mouth, his hands reaching up into my hair. His fingers curl when I pound deeper into his inner heat, then his nails scrape over my scalp when a particularly hard thrust makes his hips arch up to meet mine and his mouth mewl a needy whine that’s too loud against the quiet air.

I silence him with a kiss, chuckling at his enthusiasm. “Michael: quiet, remember?”

Michael licks his lips again before taking the bottom one between his teeth and pushing his hips against mine, moaning softly at the slow grind. When I slide my hand underneath one of his knees and push it back against his chest, his breathing hiccups before I plunge in as deep as I can go, and then he’s all loud groans and encouragements, our pact forgotten. “Oh God—Evan—yes, yes, please—right there—”

I can’t help but feel a bit of pride at how vocal he is tonight. He’s usually always noisy in bed, but we’ve never had to be quiet before; the option to move into another room was always available. For him to still be so loud speaks volumes about my prowess. Or at least I like to think it does.

“Do you want me to come inside you, Michael?” I murmur at his ear, my free hand teasing the swollen head of his cock.

“God yes, please,” he gasps as he grabs my hair in an attempt to keep me here. He slides his other leg off of my shoulder and hooks it around my waist, his heel against my ass to push me in further.

“Tell me how much you want it.” My hips stutter and slow, and I can feel myself on the edge of coming, but I want to ride this out as long as I can.

“I want you to fill me up.” His voice is soft at my ear, one hand feathering through my hair and the other clawing at my back as he tenses around me in a slow, torturous pull. “Oh, fuck—” One of my thrusts finishes him off, and Michael whines helplessly as he comes, his dick pulsing thick stripes of cum over my hand and his stomach. That’s all I need for the threads of my orgasm to unravel, and I crumble, spiralling into ecstasy as my body’s wracked by the intensity.

When the aftershocks finally ebb and leave me weary, I drag my fingertips through the wetness on his belly, making lazy swirls before I bring the digits up to my mouth. The hot liquid is bittersweet on my tongue. “God, Michael, you taste so fucking good.” He watches me with lips uncoupled, awed by my reverence, and I smear my thumb over his bottom lip, smirking at the pearly rivulets trailing down his chin. His tongue flicks out to catch the drops, and he sort of frowns at the taste. “Oh, don’t act like you don’t love it when I come in your mouth.”

“Yeah, but that’s you,” he says, still breathless. Sweat sticks a few stray curls of his hair to his forehead, his cheeks pinked with a mix of exertion and chagrin. He looks absolutely perfect.

I press a kiss to his mouth. His hands nestle in my hair, his legs squeezing around my waist. “So much for quiet, huh?” I tease him, enjoying the way he blushes a deep red.

He frowns at me and chooses his next words carefully, like he doesn’t want to inadvertently give me a compliment while he insults me. “You didn’t have to be so...good.”

“I’m afraid I don’t know how to stop,” I say, feigning disappointment. “It’s a curse. It really is.”

He gives me a warm smile, humoring my poor attempt at a joke with the bells of his laughter. I flop down onto the empty space beside him, my mind and body craving sleep. Michael quickly cuddles up next to me, his head tucked under my chin. He wraps his arms around me and holds me there, as if he’s worried I might disappear in the middle of the night. I return the favor, my hands wide on his back. The last bit of remaining tension in his body falls away at my touch.

“You know I love you, right?” he murmurs into my chest. It’s something he says fairly often, yet every time he does it wallops my heart like it’s the very first time he’s ever said the words.

I kiss the top of his head. “Yeah, I do.”

#

Michael

Barry had nothing of consequence to report the next day, so that evening Evan and I headed to a quaint little Italian restaurant a few blocks from Barry’s office for our first date after almost a year of being together. The restaurant isn’t very full, and it’s dark enough that I don’t feel completely exposed, even though we’re tucked away in the corner booth. There’s probably no reason for me to keep nervously looking at the door and wondering how we might escape if something awful happens. The waiter sort of loiters around our booth once he’s discovered that we’re colleagues of Rothman’s. Evan gives him ten bucks to leave us alone.

“Michael, you’re not being subtle at all. Stop.”

I'm sort of stabbing my slice of pizza with my fork in a confused way. "Sorry. I gotta watch out for us."

"You don't have to do anything but sit here and enjoy our date." He gives me a half-smile and takes a bite out of his pizza. Jesus Christmas, how does this man make *chewing* look attractive? It's actually really distracting and unfair. There's a tiny smear of sauce at the corner of his mouth, and I want to lean over the table and lick it away for him. He does it for me, however, and I feel strangely cheated.

"Right, enjoy it," I say, surreptitiously glancing over his head again at the front door. I take a quick sip of wine before attempting to slide out of the booth. "I'm just gonna go to the restroom real quick."

Evan's hand darts out and grabs mine. "Michael. This is our night, okay? Nothing's gonna happen. Just be with me." His voice is hard, but I can hear the fervent pleading beneath it.

I sit back down, not wanting to hurt his feelings. I suppose I could behave myself tonight. Maybe he's right; maybe nothing will happen, and I'm just being paranoid for nothing. "Okay."

His eyes lock with mine, his hands clasped beneath his chin. "Good. Alright, rule number one: no business talk."

I fight a smile. "Okay, what's rule two?"

"You have to drink more than a glass of wine." He points to my half-full glass of chardonnay.

I raise an eyebrow, still trying not to smile. "Are you trying to get me drunk, Mr. Chandler?"

"Of course I am, Mr. Jackson-Chandler." The corner of his mouth pulls up into my favorite smirk. "It's got a nice ring to it, don't you think?" My cheeks light up with red, and it's pretty much impossible not to grin at that, because he's just sort of hinted that he wants to marry me. An attempt is made to disguise my exhilaration with pizza. Evan takes a sip of his root beer in the silence, stops himself from chasing the straw with his tongue when it slips out of his mouth. "You should see the look on your face," he says with a chuckle.

"Don't make fun of my face," I grumble around a mouthful of pizza.

"I wasn't. I was admiring it."

"You're really hit-and-miss with this romance stuff, Evan."

"You win some, you lose some." We eat in comfortable silence for a while, and I quell my urge to play look-out and watch the front door. As per his instructions, I start on my second glass of wine this evening. Evan smiles, pleased that I've loosened up.

“This doesn’t mean you’re gettin’ laid tonight,” I warn him.

Evan looks unnecessarily put out. “I’ll buy you dessert.”

“Well, that does sweeten the pot...”

Something strikes my shin from underneath the table. Then I hear Evan’s voice: “Oops, sorry, Michael.”

Accidental footsie?

Knowing Evan, it was totally on purpose; he’s so bad at flirting it’s almost funny.

I let him take the last slice of pizza while I talk. “Y’know what one of my big dreams was before I met you?”

“A stable relationship?”

I give him a gentle, affectionate kick. “Stop. Anyway, I had this big house picked out that I wanted to live in. I still have the ‘for sale’ listing tucked away in my bag.”

“What’s so special about one house?”

“I guess calling it a house is like calling us friends.” I smile. “It’s absolutely massive. It’s a huge property. There’s seventeen rooms on the first floor and sixteen on the second. It’s got a wine cellar and a big area in the backyard for barbecues. And only about four hundred people live in the entire town.” He’s watching me with a goofy grin on his face. “Oh, it’s got lakes, and oh, there’s a big pool—with a diving board!”

His grin turns wistful. “Reminds me of the first time I ever saw you. Ray totally called it, by the way.”

“Called what?”

Evan plays with the straw in his drink. “That I’d end up with you. Well, not entirely. He was just completely convinced that I was attracted to you. He wasn’t wrong, but he was just so”—he searches for the word—“obnoxious about it. Like me thinking you were hot was the actual worst thing that could happen to the family.”

I sit quietly, my face turning a million different shades of red, none of them flattering. “You thought I was hot?”

Evan gives me a bewildered look. “You couldn’t tell?”

“It was sort of hard to focus on anything that wasn’t my awkward, embarrassing crush on you,” I admit, keeping my eyes away from his.

Evan tries to steer the conversation back on track. “So why didn’t you buy the place? Not enough money?”

“Oh, I’ve got money. But my father wasn’t too happy with the idea of me movin’ out, y’know?”

“Well, if we ever get outta this alive, you could probably buy it if it’s still for sale.”

I hide my unhappiness, but it seeps through anyway. “Yeah, I don’t know. Maybe.” There’s no way Evan and Jordan would want to live there—they’re born and raised in the city. And why would they want to relocate *for* me?

“Aww, why not? Your face practically lit up when you told me about it.”

“Lots of reasons,” I mumble, shifting a little in my seat.

“What’d you wanna do with the place, anyway?”

“I wanted to live there,” I say in an impossibly small voice. “I mean, Joseph was all for it until I told him that. He thought I planned on expanding the business there.”

“You’d live in that big ol’ house all by yourself? Sounds awfully lonely.”

I feel a spasm of excitement at his words. “Well, I was hoping I’d get married eventually and have a family to share it with.”

He spreads his arms so wide it looks like he’s trying to fly. “And what am I, chopped liver?”

“This was before I met you, remember?” I tell him around a laugh.

“So, uh, you still wanna do that? Get married, I mean.” Evan’s voice holds a trace of uncertainty. He stabs the straw into his mostly-empty root beer while he waits for my answer.

I give him a wide smile. “If I find the right person, yeah.”

“Well, let me know when you find ‘em,” he teases back.

We share an enormous brownie topped with ice cream and chocolate syrup for dessert. It’s decadent, at least the bites I manage to pilfer before Evan practically devours half of it in one heaping spoonful.

“Jeez, baby, leave some for me.”

“Sorry,” he grumbles, his mouth full.

“You’re such a pig.”

“Yeah, but you love me anyway.”

I’m in the middle of giggling at him when I notice someone coming over to our table. It’s not the waiter, because there’s something oddly familiar about this guy that makes the hair on the back of my neck stand up. When he moves closer and approaches me, that’s when I feel my stomach drop. I’d recognize that receding hairline anywhere. “Oh, Michael, imagine runnin’ into you here!”

The color drains from my face. “Yeah, wh—what a coincidence.”

He slides into the booth next to me, ignoring my frown. “You gonna introduce me to your friend, Mike?” He emphasizes the word in a way that makes me angry.

“Anthony, this is Evan. Evan, Anthony Pellicano. He knows my father.” I don’t bother introducing Evan with his full name. If Anthony’s been following us, that means he knows who Evan is by now.

Anthony Pellicano works as a private investigator for my father. In his long career, he’s solved missing persons cases, done work for the government, and gotten into a minor dispute with Paul “The Waiter” de Lucia, the son of a reputed mobster. After being involved with the mob, he was forced to resign from his government work. His reputation hanging in the balance, he’d worked with Elizabeth Taylor in the late ‘70s to find her third husband’s remains which had been stolen from the gravesite. That case was how my father had discovered him.

“Please, call me Tony,” he says with false modesty. “So, what brings you all the way to Chicago, Mike?”

“Business.”

Evan fixes him with a glare. “Say, Tony, have you been following us? ‘Cause, I gotta say, it’s flattering, but a little cryptic behavior goes a long way. Next time, try the secret admirer route. Send flowers or a nice card.”

Tony glares right back. “I got no idea what you’re talkin’ about.”

“Is it my chiseled jaw? My million-dollar smile? Oh, wait, I bet you’re into the femme-y lookin’ types like Michael.”

Tony’s lips press together in an angry line. I’ve yet to meet someone entangled in this business that isn’t homophobic—except for Evan. But Evan’s the kind of person who seems to defy any and all expectations.

“You think you’re a fuckin’ comedian, Chandler?”

“Oh, so you do know who I am,” Evan gloats. “Good, I was worried my reputation wouldn’t have any pull here.”

Tony turns to me. “You’re skippin’ out on your family for this yutz? I gotta say, you could do a lot better, Mike.”

Evan places a hand over his heart in faux shock. “That hurts my feelings, Tony. Don’t you know it’s what’s on the inside that counts?”

“Your insides are gonna be splattered all over this fuckin’ booth if you don’t shut up.”

“Whoa-oh!” Evan laughs, amused by the threat. “Big words, little man.”

Tony narrows his eyes. “What kind of mob boss goes on the run? None, that’s who. I got much bigger fish to fry than your pathetic ass who thinks he’s such a big-shot. You’re a coward, Chandler. You just run away the first time shit goes down.”

Evan just raises an eyebrow. I know that look. He’s probably thinking about what form of physical violence would be best to use. “So, you’re workin’ for Joseph, huh?”

Tony’s entire face glares. Even his ears. “Mike, can I talk to you in private?”

“No way.”

Evan shakes his head. “Go ahead. Just stay where I can see you.”

Tony gives Evan one last disapproving look and slides out of the booth, leading me to the bar in the middle of the restaurant. He orders a gin and tonic. “Last chance, kid, before Joseph tells me to pretend I haven’t known you since you were young and just to do the job.”

“The ‘job’ would be what? Killing Evan?”

He shrugs. “You do what you gotta do.” My expression doesn’t change. “Look, Mike, the guy’s a deadbeat, a coward.” That’s the second time he’s made that accusation. “He ain’t worth the trouble.”

“Well, Tony, you know what they say about opinions…”

He forces out a laugh at that. “You’ll only end up hurtin’ him in the long run. It’s a shame what happened to his brother.” He shakes his head and tries to look saddened, but I can tell it’s an act. “How would you feel if somethin’ happened to that kid of his?”

I take the bait. “You even touch a hair on his head and I’ll kill you myself.”

Tony looks at me with surprise. “You always did have a soft spot for kids.”

“Not just Jordan,” I say fiercely. “Evan too. Tell Joseph that if anyone touches the Chandlers I’ll make them wish they were dead.”

Tony shakes his head in disbelief. “Man, he’s really got his hooks in you, kid.”

“Screw you. Why does everyone think he’s manipulating me? Is it really so hard to believe that I actually like the guy?”

“What’s to like? He’s cowardly scum.”

I turn so that I’m facing him. “You keep using that word. I do not think it means what you think it means.” Tony does not appreciate my apropos *The Princess Bride* quote. “Evan has suffered more loss than you could ever understand. All he’s got left is me and Jordie, and my father’s vendetta means that Evan faces every day with the reality that he could be killed and leave his son an orphan.” I narrow my eyes and stand up to leave. “I’ve never known a better, braver man than Evan Chandler.”

26. A Stitch In Time

Evan

Day three in Chicago yields potential gold. Barry calls us over to his office, and he's practically bouncing in his chair when we get there.

"You might wanna cut down on the caffeine, Barry," I tell him. "That stuff'll kill ya."

He laughs and beckons for us to sit. "You'll wanna sit down before you hear this." He waits until we're seated and pours himself a shot of scotch. "Alright, so I got this friend, name's Vinny—he works down at the docks—and I had him look into some of Berry Gordy's old business contacts. Turns out there's this guy who used to work for Gordy about ten years back has some beef with your family, Mike." Michael raises a skeptical eyebrow. "He says this guy reports seeing your father—one Joseph Jackson—cavorting around Las Vegas with a woman that definitely wasn't his wife. Says he used to go with Joseph on jobs in Vegas, and he'd see him with almost a different woman every night."

I feel the room shrink around me. I look over at Michael, who takes the hit surprisingly well.

"This guy got a name?" Michael asks.

"Mike, you know how the biz works. Dirt like this can get a guy whacked."

"Or make him rich," I add, trying to be helpful.

Michael mulls it over, plucking his bottom lip. "So how come this guy hasn't tried to cash in on this?"

"Right. He just sat on a bombshell like that for ten years?" I shake my head. "Doesn't sound legit."

"Yeah, if he had proof he would've brought it up."

Barry scratches his beard. "Who says he hasn't? Maybe Joe's been payin' him off to keep quiet about it."

"Well, he did a bang-up job on that."

Michael looks at me. "You know these guys, Evan. They're scum; they'd sell out their own mothers if it meant makin' a quick buck." He turns back to Barry. "I think you're gonna need something more concrete than that if you want us to pay you."

He chuckles. "I'm not workin' on pay. This is just a favor for a friend."

“I guess you get what you pay for, huh,” Michael mutters under his breath.

“Michael.”

He huffs an irritated sigh that reminds me of Jordan; I wonder which one of them learned that from the other.

“Well, hey, fuckin’ strap in, Mike, ‘cause you’re gonna love this,” Barry says. “Word’s out on the streets that you’re being hunted by your old man, so his enemies are comin’ out of the woodwork. Gunnin’ for your own kid is pretty low, even for a hard-ass like Joe.”

Michael wets his lips. “He’s—he’s not gunnin’ for me, he’s—”

“Oh, I know he’s tryin’ to take out Evan, but I’m sure he’s heard through the grapevine that you two’d rather save each other’s sweet ass than save your own.” There’s a startling amount of truth to that. Barry waves a hand in dismissal. “So, here’s the real juicy part. Our little informant says he heard Joseph and this woman arguing one night; she figured out she was the ‘other woman’ and threatened to tell the wife. The next day, she ends up dead.”

Michael breathes out slowly, but I can tell the revelation has wrecked him. His eyes glisten with wetness before an abortive head shake stops the threat of tears. “This woman got a name?”

“Didn’t give one,” Barry answers. “I guess he’ll try to bleed us for cash before he coughs up a name.”

Michael starts to argue, but I’m paying more attention to the small, suspicious crowd gathering outside. “Hey, uh, Barry, those your guys outside?”

He turns his head to look out the window behind him. “Nah, but don’t worry. I get a lot of whackos sniffin’ around for payouts and shit.”

“They have guns.” Seriously, they’re pretty well-armed. Could these be some of Joseph’s guys?

Barry makes a “pshaw” sound. “This glass is bullet-proof. The ricochet ought’a take ‘em out.”

That’s when a hail of bullets smashes through the glass.

Instantly, we hit the floor. I feel a twinge of pain in my left arm but think nothing of it. Probably landed on the spot where Michael cut it days earlier. Speaking of Michael, he’s got his gun out and his back against the far wall, reacting almost reflexively to the threat. Barry’s cowering underneath his desk like a true soldier.

I try to think through the haze of panic in my brain while more shots ring out. “Barry, they can’t get inside, right?”

“Don’t worry, kid! This place is as protected as Fort Knox!”

“Forgive me if I don’t take your word for it!” I move to push myself up off of the floor.

“Evan, stay down!” Michael shouts. “Don’t be stupid!”

We wait out the gunfire for what feels like an eternity, but it’s probably only a few seconds. When the air is motionless and still, a man’s voice sounds through a megaphone. “We don’t wanna hurt anybody. Just give us Rothman.”

“Oh, Christ,” I grumble. “Who the fuck are these guys?”

“Well, the good news is my father didn’t send them.” Michael does a double-take when he looks at me. “Evan, are you okay?”

“I’m great, why?”

He looks almost sickly pale, his eyes wide with horror. “You’re bleeding.”

The left sleeve of my shirt is soaked with crimson. I hadn’t even noticed among all the chaos. “I’m fine. The cut just got reopened.” My fingers fumble for the scratch. Instead, they find a new wound that’s bleeding pretty heavily. Panic grabs a hold of me despite the fact that I don’t feel any pain. The adrenaline’s pumping too quickly now.

Michael stares at the blood seeping between the cracks in my fingers before tearing his gaze away and crawling underneath the windowsill. “Let’s talk about this,” he calls down to our attackers.

“What’s to talk about? Piece of shit owes us money,” the man calls back.

“Who’s ‘us’?”

“Doesn’t matter who we are. It’s who we work for.”

I’m crawling across the floor to reach the door, one hand pressed against my hemorrhaging wound. I twist the doorknob and peer out into the reception area. I don’t see or hear any commotion. Michael’s still negotiating our little hostage situation. I stick my head out the door. “Jordie?”

“Dad, are you okay?”

“Yeah, just peachy. Where are you?”

“In the booth.” I see his hand stick up and wave from inside the receptionist’s booth.

“Great, just stay there ‘til I come back, alright?”

“Is Michael okay? Did anybody get shot?”

“No, we’re fine. Just stay hidden.”

“Okay.”

When I get back into Barry’s office, Michael’s standing up, sort of leaning out the window to negotiate with our attackers. I can hear the faint wail of sirens. Fuck, I really don’t want to be around when the cops show up.

“Okay, give me a minute and I’ll talk it over with him,” Michael calls down. He ducks away from the shattered window.

“Michael, what’s goin’ on? Are they gonna leave?”

Michael looks over at Barry. “Give me your scotch and a lighter,” he whispers.

Barry fumbles through his desk drawers for the requested items. Michael tears a strip off of the hem of his shirt and stuffs it into the open mouth of the bottle of scotch. Then he lights it. With an arc the envy of the Baseball Hall of Fame, Michael throws the molotov out the window. It lands with an explosion of glass, and from the sounds of the crowd outside I’m assuming the attack was rather effective.

I feel pretty useless right now, my hand pressed against my arm to stem the bleeding while Michael does all the work. The sound of the sirens is getting louder, and the attackers sound like they’re surrendering and scattering, threatened by the impending police presence.

Michael risks a glance out the window, and his posture loosens up, relief crossing his face. I suppose we’re out of the woods for now. He comes over to me, and I stand up on shaky legs. “We gotta take Jordie and scam. The cops’ll be here any minute.”

Michael looks horrified again, reaching out and placing a hand over mine. “Baby, you’re bleeding.”

“I’ll be fine. We gotta get outta here now.”

“You torched my car!” Barry howls in disbelief, staring out the window at the wreckage down below. A black Rolls-Royce in the back parking lot has caught fire, its windshield busted from the impact of the molotov. “Michael, you torched my fuckin’ car?”

“They were going to kill you!” Michael protests.

“I’d rather they killed me!” Barry wails.

“Guys, I’m shot, and the cops are coming. We can argue about this shit later.”

Michael gasps. “You got shot?”

“Leaving now!” I drag him out the door with my good arm. “Jordie, c’mon, we gotta go!”

I hear Jordan’s shoes clunk against the floor as he hurries to catch up to us. “Dad, are you okay? What happened?”

“I’m fine. Just a flesh wound.”

“Don’t worry,” Michael tells him, trying to be soothing. “He’s quoting Monty Python—he’s gonna be okay.”

Michael drives the Charger while I keep the pressure steady on my arm. The smell is starting to make me nauseated, but at least it seems to have stopped bleeding. While we’re stopped at a light, Michael rips a long, white strip of cotton from the hem of his shirt and presses it against my arm. I watch my bright red blood stain the scrap of his white shirt.

“Same arm I cut you on,” he murmurs in a low voice at my ear.

“I don’t mind bleeding for you, Michael.”

He presses his lips together in a hard line, his face as white as bone as drives us back to the condo.

When we get inside, Michael helps me onto the arm of the couch, letting me lean against the hard wall of his body. Jordan’s hovering close to us, curious but still slightly terrified. “Jordie, in my black bag in the bedroom, there’s a smaller, white bag with medical supplies. Can you go get that for me, please?” Jordan nods and leaves the room, coming back seconds later with the med-kit. “Thank you.” Michael lifts up the scrap of his shirt to check the bleeding. There’s still a slow trickle of blood, so he sets the kit down and opens it, digging around for something. Jordan stands by and watches.

“C’mon, Jord’, you don’t have to stay here,” I say with a sigh, trying to sound casual about it. But this really isn’t something he should see. I’d like for him to believe I’m untouchable for a little while longer. “I’m fine.”

His brow creases with concern. “You sure?”

“Yeah, I’m friggin’ fantastic”—I wince minutely as Michael does something to my arm that stings—“don’t worry about me.” I flinch again and look down, wondering what the hell Michael’s doing that’s causing this awful tingling sensation. The gash on my arm has a thin, white line of foam on top of it, and I can smell peroxide.

Jordan sort of narrows his eyes. “Yeah, you seem like you’re totally fine.”

“It doesn’t hurt. It just tickles.” Not a lie, because Jesus Christ it feels like ten thousand ants are walking around inside the wound.

“You’re not ticklish,” Michael says in semi-disbelief.

“I am when you’re touching the inside of my skin.” I watch Jordan’s face to distract myself from the burn. “I’ll be fine.”

“I—I want to watch,” he insists. “I mean, this is probably something I should know, right?”

I’m not entirely sure how I feel about that. I want to preserve his innocence a little while longer, but if circumstances arise where Jordan needs to know how to do this... I swallow grudgingly and nod. “Okay, you can watch if you really want to.”

Michael digs around in his bag of tricks and pulls out a needle and thread. Oh no. Oh Jesus H. Fucking Christ no. “I won’t lie, this is gonna hurt.”

I grit my teeth. “Balls.” I feel the squeeze of his fingers when he pinches the skin. That’s when the needle digs in and loops through. The tugging and piercing in my skin is agony threaded through me, but I don’t dare make a sound. I keep my teeth locked together, my eyes focused on everything but the stitching of my arm. Jordan has to think I’m indestructable so he can sleep at night, and so does Michael; he’s carrying around way too much guilt already.

So I stay silent, the slow clenching and unclenching of my other fist the only evidence of my struggle to keep my pain locked inside so it can’t hurt anyone else. Michael murmurs soft apologies at the shell of my ear when he thinks he’s hurting me, and I let him do it because his voice and his touch are the most soothing things I can think of right now.

“So, who were those guys anyway?” I ask him.

“Apparently, Barry’s in debt big-time with some creditors. They hired those goons to rattle him a bit,” Michael says. “I thought the windows were supposed to be bulletproof.”

“Not when you tamper with the bullets.”

I feel him shudder at the thought. “Thank God it just grazed you.”

I could have lost him today had one of those bullets found him instead of me. Hell, I could have died today if the bullet hadn’t simply grazed my arm. But somehow that doesn’t seem to matter much in the face of losing Jordan. I can bear anything, but not that.

“It’s too bad you don’t drink anymore,” Michael says. “Might help with the pain.”

“Y’know what’s not helping? You talking about it.”

He giggles, presses his lips atop my head. “Sorry, baby.” His mouth curls into a smile by my ear. “Would it help if you thought about me naked?”

“Help what?”

He laughs and keeps working. I close my eyes and lean back against him, focusing on the way the pads of his fingers melt their heat into my skin.

I feel the void of his fingers when the stitching’s done and his hands leave me to dig around in the bag again. Jordan’s staring at me in silent awe. “Wow, Dad, that was...impressive. You didn’t even cry.”

“Told ya I’m tough.”

Michael just chuckles knowingly and wraps a strip of gauze around my arm.

Despite my protests, Michael moves me into the bedroom once he’s done dressing my wound, insisting that I sleep and try to recover. Jordan agrees with him, so I’m outvoted. I grudgingly let Michael help me change into more comfortable, less bloody clothes—an opportunity which he takes to fondle my ass—and get me into bed. I feel pretty ridiculous. It’s daylight outside, and here I am confined to bed like an invalid while we’re on the run for our lives. If my life were a horror movie, I’d be the first victim to die a gruesome death, that’s for sure.

Michael sits at my bedside while Jordan’s in the kitchen heating up a can of soup for me. “Michael, this is silly. I got shot, I don’t have the goddamn flu.”

“Pickin’s are slim here, babe, unless you want me to risk my safety and go to a drive-through,” he teases, his hand playing with my hair.

“Well, I haven’t had a McRib in a while.”

He gives me a playful slap on my good arm. “Do you have any other connections here, someone who might be willing to help us out?”

“What do you need?”

“It’s more what *you* need.” He tosses a glance at my wounded shoulder. “I need to get you some decent pain meds. Tylenol ain’t gonna work; that’s like tryin’ to put out a fire with a squirt gun.”

“That’s a...colorful metaphor.”

“I think it’s a simile.”

“Whatever, I’m not a writer.”

He laughs and settles a hand on my chest. “Do you think you could call Mark and ask him if he knows anyone in the area that might be able to hook us up?”

“I thought you said you didn’t want to risk your safety.”

Michael sighs sadly. “Y’know, maybe Barry was right.”

“About what?”

“About how we’d rather save each other than ourselves.”

I shrug my good shoulder. “Hey, everybody needs a hobby, right?”

Mark nearly has a convulsion when I call him in his car about thirty minutes later. “Holy shit, you’re alive?”

“Barely,” I say with a dry laugh.

“Christ, I thought you got whacked when I saw your house, Ev.”

“There aren’t any cops sniffin’ around, are there?”

“No, but you should’ve seen the fuss Joseph Jackson kicked up lookin’ for you and Mike. He came around asking if I knew where you guys went. I don’t know why I didn’t put it together that you staged the whole thing.” He laughs in relief. However, this information fills me with dread. If Joseph was asking where we’d gone, our little staged crime scene must not have been authentic enough. “Shit, where are you anyway?”

“Your phone’s not tapped, is it?”

I can almost see the “you’re an idiot” look he’s giving me. “Evan.”

“I’m in Chicago.”

“No fuckin’ shit, really? Me too!”

I nearly slam the phone down in frustrated elation. “Really?”

“Yeah, I got this client who’s a huge girl when it comes to pain.”

I clear my throat. “Uh, doctor-patient confidentiality?”

Mark scoffs. “So what’re you doin’ in Chicago anyway? You got an appointment with Barry?”

It hurts to furrow my brow this hard, but that doesn’t seem to stop me. “Are you talking about Barry Rothman?”

“Well, yeah.”

I shut my eyes. “How the hell do you know Barry Rothman?”

“Who do you think introduced your brother to him all those years ago?” I’m not sure if I want to scream or laugh. Mark chooses the laughing option. “So, Ev, what do you need?”

“I need some pain meds. Whatever you got on you is fine.”

“What did Michael do this time?”

“They’re for me,” I admit. “I might’ve gotten shot.”

“Again?” Mark asks with an uncalled-for amount of reprimand in his voice.

“Yes, *again*. Jesus, what do you think I do for a living?”

He chuckles at my pain. “Alright, I’ll stop by—”

“No, I can’t risk you being followed. I’ll send Michael out to meet you somewhere public.”

“Great. You stay safe, Ev. Try not to get shot again before Michael gets back.”

Smart-ass.

#

While Michael’s out getting my pain medication, Jordan sits with me on the bed like he never wants me to leave the house ever again. He’s been very attentive, making sure I don’t have to exert myself too much—read: at all—for anything. I appreciate that he cares, of course, but it’s all too similar to the way he was the first couple weeks without June—directing his anxiety and grief in a more helpful direction rather than sit and think about it.

“Is that—is that the same arm you got shot in last time?” he asks timidly.

“Yeah. But at least the bad guys only shoot me in the arm I don’t have all my fine motor control in.”

Jordan laughs weakly. He's trying very hard to seem unaffected by all of this, but thirteen-year-olds are not the best actors.

"It's okay to be scared, remember?" I ask, because I think he needs to be reminded from time to time that it *is* okay.

He nods, lightly places his hand over my wound. "It really hurts, huh?"

"Well, it's not exactly comfortable."

Jordan huffs out an irritated sigh. "Dad, stop actin' like you're not scared."

"I'm not!"

"Yeah, you are. You always make jokes and act like this when you're scared."

"I'm your dad. I'm indestructable."

"No, you're not! I'm thirteen, okay, I know that people die." I try not to show how much this hurts.

"I know you do, I just—I just don't want you to worry about me. You shouldn't have to worry about this kind of stuff until you're my age." His mouth curls into a frown. "When this is all over, I'm out. We'll move somewhere—you, me, and Michael—and have a normal life."

He looks at me with hopeful eyes. "Really? You promise?"

"Yeah, I promise."

#

Michael

Mark and I meet up in a K-Mart parking lot. He finds it absolutely hilarious that I stitched Evan up; I'm not sure why. He gives me a bottle containing sixty Hydrocodone for Evan—"just in case he gets shot again," Mark had said with a laugh. I still don't understand the humor.

After trading stilted small talk for a minute or two, Mark drives off in his Jag. I reach over to put the pills in the console when I hear knuckles rapping on the driver's side window. I turn my head, thinking Mark had forgotten something, but instead I'm face to face with my brother Marlon.

"Yo, Mike, how's it hangin'?"

My heart lodges in my throat. My first instinct is to get away, but doing so might raise suspicion, and I'm not a big fan of running over my brother's foot with a car. So I just sit there, frozen in fear.

“Mike, no, no, I’m not here to hurt you or anything! I just wanted to make sure you’re okay!”

I manage to find my voice. “Why wouldn’t I be?”

“C’mon, man, we got ears all over. I heard what happened downtown. All that blood... Well, we got worried. Plus, you’re here gettin’ pills...” He trails off, shrugs.

I have to remind myself to breathe. “Have you been following me?”

“No, nothin’ like that.”

“So you just so happened to be here at the same time I am? Yeah, not buyin’ it.”

“I was in the area and heard Torbiner was around. Figured he might lead me to you or Chandler.”

I grit my teeth. “Well, you got what you wanted. I’m fine. Now, will you guys just leave me alone?”

“I didn’t come here to hurt you or force you to come home, Mike. C’mon, you’re my brother. I just want to talk to you.”

I spread my hands. “Here I am. Start talkin’.”

He shakes his head. “Go on and take those pills back to Chandler. He musta got busted up pretty bad if you came out of hiding to get ‘em. Just promise me we can talk in the morning. The hit is called off, okay? More important things are goin’ on.”

I wonder what those might be. “Okay. I’ll talk to you tomorrow. But if you bring any back-up, the deal’s off. You gotta meet with me in good faith. And don’t even think about following me back to Evan.”

“Of course. I’ll be at the Starbucks on the corner of North Wabash at ten.” Marlon walks off, and I wait until he’s driven off in the other direction before I depart. There’s a very good possibility that this is a trap, but he’s my brother; what can I do?

#

I keep watch over us that night. After the attack on Barry’s office and the resurgence of my brother Marlon, I figure hypervigilance is appropriate. I sit perched in an uncomfortable chair facing the bedroom window to watch for suspicious activity. I wonder if this mindless traveling from state to state is what the rest of our lives will be. Endless nights that are too cold and too hot, run-down motels that smell like smoke and mold, always looking over our shoulders, wondering when the other shoe is gonna drop. If we’re constantly on the run, what possibility is there that we can put down roots somewhere and have a nice, normal family life?

Evan rolls over onto his good side and sighs when he sees me sitting there. “Michael, come to bed.” His voice holds promises I want him to keep. “I’m gettin’ lonely.”

When I join him in the bed, he climbs into my lap and takes my rigid line of heat inside himself, his breath shuddering out in hard, soft sighs as he moves. “Oh my—” The steady roll of his hips robs me of my voice, and I watch him ride me, his fingers tightening in the sheets at the smooth slide. I have no idea what brought this on, why he’s suddenly okay with having my cock inside of him. It’s kind of shorting my brain out, because Evan is amazingly, confusingly hot like this. “Babe, your arm—”

“Fuck my arm,” he grunts, then frowns as if reconsidering his choice of words. “I don’t need to use it anyway.” He grinds down on me to prove his point, his eyes shutting in bliss. “I’m not a fragile flower, Michael,” he huffs out while pushing his hips against mine in a way that makes me unconsciously jerk up into him. Evan makes a cracked noise through his teeth. “Yeah, keep—keep doin’ that. That’s good.”

I follow his order and move my hips in tandem with his, savoring the way his brow furrows and his teeth capture his lower lip when we fit together. I squeeze the hard muscle of his thighs, wrapping my hands around his ass to sort of shove him into my thrusts. We’re quiet, breathing out soft huffs of breath and low sighs and groans into the space between us. His thighs are pressed at my sides, his palms flat on my stomach. I reach for the jut of his cock, holding him in my hand, and I feel his fingers tighten over my skin while I squeeze and stroke. Evan pushes into my fist, moaning small, appreciative sounds at my touch.

“Michael—mmm—oh, fuck—that’s good...”

I try to find my voice, but each rotation of his hips shakes it out of me. “I’m gonna”—I lick my lips—“I’m gonna come... Do you want—”

“Yeah,” he sighs, moving a little harder and quicker now. I don’t stop thrusting up into him, watching how his face reacts as he gets closer. I break apart, filling him up, and I can’t help but watch, transfixed, when Evan comes over my hand, his head tipping back and his spine straightening as a low, shaky moan leaves his throat. It’s the hottest sound I’ve ever heard.

I taste him on my fingers before sliding my hands up the rough curve of his thighs that quiver from the intensity of his orgasm. His hips are still grinding against me, albeit slower now, and it takes him a while to come down and stop wringing out the aftershocks. When he looks at me again, his eyes are half-hooded with lust. “Is that a thing we do now?” I ask him. I’m still not sure he wasn’t just possessed by some sort of horny demon.

“Yeah, we can—that’s—I’m okay with that.” He pushes a hand through his hair, brings it around to the back of his neck. “You like it?”

I nod. “Very much.”

“Yeah, it was pretty good.”

I let him lay on my chest, his aching arm resting beside me while his other hand’s tangled lazily in my hair. Even underneath the bandage, I can feel the heat emanating from his wounded shoulder. Now might be a good time to tell him about my meet-up with Marlon, considering he’s lingering in that post-orgasm intoxication that makes him pretty agreeable.

“So, um, I saw my brother Marlon today.”

Evan sighs into the crook of my neck and shoulder.

“He heard about the shooting and thought I was the one who got hurt,” I explain, as if that makes it any better. “He doesn’t want to hurt us. He just wants to talk to me.”

“It’s a trap,” Evan mumbles, doing the worst impersonation of Admiral Ackbar I’ve ever heard.

“What if it was your brother?”

Evan just breathes irritation over my skin before falling asleep.

I wake with a start, feeling the morning sun warm my skin and the scent of coffee fill my nose. The bed is empty, but a small trace of Evan’s warmth still lingers on the sheets. I rub my eyes and find him in the kitchen, stirring a cup of coffee. “Well, good morning.” I pad over to Evan and slide my arms around his waist. He presses a kiss to my cheek. For a split-second we’re home again. Then it all rushes back.

He offers me the cup, but I decline. “Mm, suit yourself.”

Jordan’s still asleep on the couch, so I don’t worry about shielding his innocent eyes when I slip my hands beneath Evan’s shirt. Evan softens under my touch, letting my fingers glide over his hip bones. He sighs, soft and happy, and places a hand on the small of my back, bringing me closer. “All that talk about gettin’ married...did you mean it?” I ask him, because I am nothing if not skilled at ruining nice, comforting moments.

His fingers spread out over my spine, and he breathes a quiet laugh into my hair. “Michael, do you have any concept of how important you are to me? Of course I meant it. Getting your father off our backs would just be a great bonus.”

“I didn’t know you were such a romantic under all that arrogance,” I tease, linking my fingers behind his back.

He kisses my forehead. “It’s a blessing and a curse, but I’ve sworn an oath to only use my powers for good.”

“Like what, seducing me?”

“I think that definitely falls under the heading of ‘good.’”

I smile at his humor, but a dark thought flickers in my head like a faulty light bulb. “Good for who? Seems like the only good’s been for us.”

He looks down at me with a poorly-masked frown on his lips, his eyes curious and pleading. “Isn’t that enough?”

“God, you guys are gross,” Jordan whines from the couch, covering his head with a pillow. “It’s like living in a dirty Hallmark card.”

“Aw, c’mon, can’t you be happy for your old man?” Evan says. “I know you wanna think that parents reproduce asexually, but I’d like to celebrate the fact that I’m getting laid on a regular basis.”

“Dad, do you *want* me to be in therapy for the rest of my life?” Jordan groans. “Cause I feel like it’s gonna happen.”

“It was probably gonna happen anyway,” Evan jokes. Jordan just glares at him. I watch my two favorite men in the world bicker like children, feeling something like pure joy bubble up inside of me. For another brief moment, we’re a family, the struggle of the road forgotten.

But only briefly.

I glance at the clock on the wall. It’s nine in the morning.

“I have to meet with Marlon at ten,” I remind Evan.

“You should probably get ready then, huh?”

“Will you two be alright?”

He chuckles at that. “We did okay before you came along, Michael. We’ll be fine.”

I meet Marlon at the coffee shop ten minutes before ten. He’s sitting near the window, sipping something foamy. He’s wearing a nice suit, absolutely looking the part of a mobster, while I’m dressed in a simple button-up shirt, jeans, and sneakers. There’s a chocolate chip muffin and a small cup of coffee on the table when I sit across from him.

“I ordered for you. Caffe mocha okay?”

“It’s fine, thank you.” I bite into the muffin and take a sip of the coffee. Not bad.

Marlon sort of laughs. “You never did like coffee all that much, did ya? I remember the first time you ever tried it back in Gary. You remember?”

I did. I had been very young then, and Mother was always flitting about the kitchen with a pot of coffee brewing. I was curious, as most children are, so I asked her if I could try it. Even with cream and sugar, I'd thought it was nasty. We all laughed, except for me—I was too busy shoveling in bacon and eggs to get the sour taste out of my mouth.

“Yeah, I remember,” I say with a smile. Living with Evan had changed my views on the drink, however. Some of my fondest memories at our Staten Island house involve the scent of coffee on his breath when he'd kiss me in the morning, his hands wide on my back before Jordan found us in the kitchen. “Y'know, I looked in on the old house a couple'a days ago.”

Marlon nods. “I know, Mike. That's how I knew you were here.”

I feel two hands press down on my chest. “So you *were* following me!”

“Not me! Joseph had some guys stationed there when he found out you went runnin', figured you'd pass through Gary.” I try to quell my shaking hands as I reach for the muffin again. “Joseph did some research, thought Chandler would take you into Chicago and told me to keep an eye out since I was in the area. Then when Torbiner showed up...” He shrugs, trails off.

It's all hard to swallow. “You sent Tony, didn't you?”

Marlon looks at me like he doesn't understand my words. “That was Joseph. I wouldn't talk to you through a middle-man, Mike. You're my brother.”

I'm not buying it. How many days had Marlon been watching us? Had he seen me and Evan on our date? Had he found Barry's condo already?

“I don't want nothin' to do with Joseph's vendetta, not when it puts you in the line of fire,” he says.

He's building up to something. “What do you want, Marlon?” His mouth forms an “o” of surprise. “I know you didn't come to Chicago for coffee and a conversation. So what is it?”

We fall into silence for a moment before Marlon says, “Mom turned sixty-three this year.”

“I know.”

“She's not young anymore.”

“Not old either.”

He shrugs. “Too old for what Joseph's putting her through.”

“She knows I'm okay, right?” My eyes prickle with the threat of tears at the thought of my poor mother, worrying whether or not I'm even alive.

“Yeah, but I dunno, Mike, things are pretty bad back home,” he says, staring into his coffee cup.

My heard snaps up to look at him. “What? What are you talking about? Is Mother all right?”

Marlon fixes his eyes on me. “Mike, I want you to know that this has nothin’ to do with what’s going on with you, alright?” I want to answer, but I can’t find words, so I just nod limply. “While you were gone, Mom caught pneumonia, and at her age...”

I can’t think clearly after hearing this. If Mother is sick because of me... My stomach lurches violently as panic starts to set in.

“You know Joseph wouldn’t be able to go on without her. She’s his one weakness.”

A tiny cry of pain slips out of my mouth as I slump into my seat. If I had hurt my mother by foolishly running off, I don’t think I could ever forgive myself.

27. In Place of Someone You Love

Michael

I stumble into Barry's condo, my eyes blurred with angry tears. Evan feels my distress like a disturbance in the air and moves to offer me support, comfort, or strength—whichever I need. "Michael? What happened? Did someone hurt you?"

I shake my head numbly, burying my face in his chest. He carries me over to the couch and lets me sit there with him, and I sob into the strength of his chest without pause. He shushes me and strokes my hair. Jordan scoots closer, placing his hand on my shoulder. "Mike, what's wrong?"

I struggle to speak through the sobs hiccuping in my throat. "My—my mother..."

"Did she—did she die?" Jordan asks, his voice practically a whisper.

I shake my head, the mere thought spurring more tears to pour from my eyes. "No, no, no, she's—she's sick... 'cause of me."

Evan brushes my hair back, and I feel the warmth of his palm on the back of my neck. "Did your brother tell you that?" I shake my head adamantly. "Why do you think it's your fault?"

"Cause, 'cause I was gone..." My fingers curl weakly in his t-shirt.

"You know that's not true."

I sniffle and wipe my eyes. "I—I have to go back."

A pained look comes over Evan's face. "Would it be characteristic of your family to lie about something like this?"

"No, no, nothing like this. I even tried calling her as soon as I heard. Joseph said she was asleep. Mother was always an early riser..."

"W—wait, you're leaving us?" Jordan asks, and I catch the split-second of disappointment on Evan's face before it disappears.

I find my footing on shaky legs. "Not permanently. Just long enough for Mother to recover. The closer I am to home, the easier I can look into what Barry was talkin' about." I walk into the bedroom and find my luggage, reaching inside one of the bags and digging around. "You two can't stay here though. My father knows you have connections here; it won't be long before he finds this place." I pull out a small address book and tear out a stub. "I want you guys to go here." I hand Evan the paper, and he studies the address scrawled on it. "I know a guy who'll let you stay with him. His name's Frank Dileo. He's a good guy. I used to stay at his house sometimes when I wanted a taste of a more normal life." I smile, and Evan tries to smile back,

but it's weak. "Don't worry, Joseph will never trace him. My father doesn't even know that I know the guy."

Evan seems slightly relieved that I have a plan for him and Jordan, but there's still worry etched along his brow. "I don't like splitting up." Splitting up never ends well for the groups of teenagers in horror movies; I fear just as grisly an end might await us.

"I don't either, but I promise I will come for you."

His mouth curves into a smirk. "You always do," he murmurs at my ear before kissing my cheek. I turn my head to meet his lips. Jordan makes a quiet sound of disgust at our display of affection. Kids.

"When it's safe, I'll call Frank and make sure you guys made it okay," I tell them, quickly packing my things.

"And if you don't?" Jordan worries.

"I will." My family, as deranged as they may be in dealing with other people, would never kill me. They need me alive, especially if they want to know where Evan and Jordan are hiding.

I finish packing and hug them goodbye before taking my bags and moving into the living room. I'd agreed to meet Marlon at the Starbucks again once I was ready to leave. I wanted to make sure he wouldn't be able to trace where I'd come from or find where Evan and Jordan are hiding. They'll be long gone by the time any of Joseph's goons do find the condo, however.

"Remember, don't stop for anything," I remind them.

"Aw, I wanted to stop in Vegas," Evan says with a pout. "Maybe teach Jordie how to win big at the craps table."

I laugh and slap his good arm playfully. "You good to drive?"

"Yeah, I'll be fine. Don't worry about me."

"You can ditch the car if you need to, right?"

"Michael," Evan warns. I sound like an over-protective parent. He's smart, and he's been in this business his entire life; I'm sure he knows what to do in case things go south. "C'mon, you think I'm totally helpless without you?" he teases.

"I know you aren't."

"You sure your family doesn't know about this Frank Dileo guy? I mean, they won't be waiting for us when we get there, will they?"

“Frank’s good at keeping secrets. Plus, he’s not afraid of Joseph. Why don’t you ask him how he got outta the business?” That piques Evan’s interest, and he raises his eyebrows. I lean in and squeeze his hand. “Evan, if you let anything happen to yourself or Jordie, I swear I’ll kick your ass, okay?” He smirks, and I kiss his mouth, lingering a little too long. “I love you.”

“Go on, Michael. We’ll be fine,” he murmurs around my lips. I savor the scratch of his stubble against my chin before he pulls away. “You can tell me all this mushy crap later.”

With a final goodbye, I grab my bag and depart. I take the bus to the closest bus stop near the Starbucks. After a quick walk, I round the corner to see Marlon waiting for me outside his car. I get inside and toss my bag into the back seat. After riding around in Evan’s stolen Charger, Marlon’s sleek, leather-interior car is a drastic change from what I’ve been sitting in for what seems like ages. The passenger seat has just the right amount of give to it. My body sinks into the seat and thanks me for the comfort. But it just doesn’t feel right without Evan and Jordan with me.

It’s a long drive to the airport, a long drive spent in mostly silence. I keep the radio switched on, but it just sounds like white noise. About halfway through the drive, Marlon makes a phone call with his car-phone. I listen intently, trying to decipher whether or not my mother’s condition is as bad as I imagine. “Joseph, it’s Marlon. I got Michael; he’s comin’ home...” I wish I could hear the other side of the conversation. “Tell Mom he’s okay... We’ll be home tonight... No, have Jackie be there when we get back... Right, yeah. Okay. I’ll call you when we get to LA.”

He hangs up and leans back in the seat a little bit. I desperately want to know if Mother’s okay. “Well? Did he say anything?”

“She must be asleep right now ‘cause he didn’t put her on the phone.”

She was sleeping when I called, too. Dread wraps around my gut.

“What did you want Jackie there for?”

“He’s out of town on a job,” Marlon answers dismissively. “I think the whole family should be there when you come back.”

I wondered if Jackie’s absence has anything to do with tracking me or Evan down. I feel a chill of worry even though the threat is gone...for now. “Yeah, that’d be nice.”

We’re quiet for a moment before he speaks up again. “Hey, you remember Alejandra?” I press my lips together, trying to recall the name. “Randy’s girl?”

“Oh, right.”

“She’s with Jermaine now.”

“What?” I ask way too loudly.

Marlon laughs at my reaction. “Yeah, crazy, huh?”

“I’m gone for a couple’a months and everything goes nuts?”

“Seems like it.”

I roll my eyes and sigh. The unspoken insinuation that I need to be present at all times to keep the more *adventurous* members of my family in line is there, needling me. “He really needs to re-evaluate his life choices.”

“Speakin’ from personal experience?”

I take the jab without flinching. I’ll need to take more verbal barbs tonight when I return to Hayvenhurst; enduring Marlon’s teasing here will be good practice for the main event tonight.

The flight back to California is torturously slow, and Marlon doesn’t make it any easier, dozing off quietly next to me. I try to busy myself with reading the magazines stuffed into the seat in front of me, but the distraction doesn’t serve its purpose. I can’t help but think about Mother, if she’s sick because of me, if I inadvertently killed her by being reckless and stupid and stubborn. I think about Evan and Jordan and wonder if they’re safe, if they’ll make it to Frank’s place and hide out until I can come back for them. There are no safe thoughts in my head. Even thinking back upon happier times with Evan and Jordan just makes me miss them more. Thinking about my mother fills me with worry, and thinking about my siblings makes me fear the terrifying possibilities of what they might do to bring me home.

I stare out the window at the endless swirls of cottony clouds around us. After a few moments, my eyes slide shut, my body exhausted from the near-constant assault of stress. The images that flicker behind my lids while I sleep are nowhere near pleasant, but I manage to get a few hours of rest before I feel Marlon jostle my shoulder.

“Yo, Mike, wake up.”

I sit up, my body sore from being contorted into the same position for so long. “Somethin’ wrong?”

“Nah, we’re home.” He sounds much happier about this than I am.

Tito picks us up from the airport after we get off of the plane. He claps me on the shoulder and then pulls me in for a hug. “Mike! Welcome back! Get a load of my new ride!” He gestures grandly to the gleaming Rolls-Royce behind him. The hubcaps alone are polished meticulously enough to nearly blind me.

“It’s nice,” I say as I let myself in after putting my luggage in the trunk. The interior is black leather, with windows tinted dark enough to shield my eyes and skin from the sun. “Couldn’t you have stolen something less...conspicuous?”

He and Marlon share a laugh. “I didn’t steal it,” Tito says, “oh ye of little faith.” He slips into the driver’s seat and starts the engine. It comes to life with a roar. “Got yourself some boyfriend trouble?” he teases. “You look glum, chum.”

My suspicion of my family’s motives is an eternal flame, and I wonder if I should concoct a lie to keep them off Evan’s trail; it wouldn’t be hard to manufacture melancholy and bitterness. It might be a long shot, but giving the impression that Evan and I are no longer together might take away Joseph’s incentive to hurt him. Evan’s my weakness, and my father knows it. The love I have for him will just be used against us. But if Joseph thought I didn’t love Evan anymore...

“Did he dump you?” Tito asks with a shocked look on his face, like he can’t fathom why anyone would ever do such a thing.

“I broke up with *him*,” I say through grit teeth.

Tito lets out a low whistle and pulls out of the parking lot. “Damn, what happened? I thought you liked the guy!”

“I thought so too.” I hate myself for even speaking the words, but first and foremost I have to keep Evan and Jordie safe, even if it means uttering complete blasphemy.

“Is he lousy in the sack or somethin’?”

Evan, I’m so sorry. “He’s just lousy period. He’s a thug just like the rest of them. I wanted to come home and see Mother. He wouldn’t let me.” I need that in my corner; after supposedly putting Evan over my “real” family, Joseph will be thrilled to hear that I chose the Jacksons over Evan.

Marlon tries a frown. “I was wonderin’ why you were with a guy like that. You never wanted to be part of the family business.”

“I thought he was different.”

He slaps a friendly hand on my shoulder from the back seat. “Well, it’s good to have ya back, Mike! We’ve missed you. Especially Mom.”

I nod lamely, looking out the window at the familiar city of Los Angeles and letting a few tears escape.

After a considerable amount of time, we pull up to Hayvenhurst. Tito takes my bags for me, and we walk up the walkway. Marlon steps in front of me to open the door. The inside of the

mansion is unchanged from when I'd left, nothing moved out of place. I wonder if that means anything, if my presence in the family allows them to change and evolve rather than stay stagnant. *Whoa, deep.*

Marlon pats me on the back as we stand in the foyer. "Welcome home, Michael."

I feel a twinge of pain at first, because, to me, this place certainly isn't my home. Sure, it's where I spent most of my years with my family, but it wasn't a happy time. That's when the guilt hits me, because I'm far more comfortable and happy in Evan's house with him and Jordan than I am with my own flesh and blood.

Tito and Marlon don't hover, letting me climb the stairs to my room and pull open the door. A familiar scent lingers inside, having been shut in this room since I'd moved out. I try to ignore how that makes me feel. Everything is pretty much the same as it was when I left. The bed is still rumpled and unmade, dresser drawers not fully shut with various articles of clothing sticking out of them. All the books and magazines I'd left on the floor remain in their places. It's comforting in a way, yet it isn't. It's a painful reminder of my family's grief, how they refused to move on and accept that I'd gone.

I decide to unpack to maintain the illusion that I'm staying here for longer than a day or two. If I did break up with Evan like I'd said, why wouldn't I settle back in to my room? Where else would I have to go? I'm thankful that no one hovers while I unpack my bags. It's nice to be alone and not have to force enthusiasm.

I find one of Evan's t-shirts tucked in among some of my own. I smile to myself, glad in hindsight that I'd mistakenly tossed it into my bag this morning while I packed. He probably won't even know it's gone—or maybe he will; he wears it a lot. But I need a tangible reminder of him now, one that's absorbed his rich, familiar musk into its fibers. I press the fabric to my nose and inhale one deep whiff of his scent.

"Gee, Michael, you come home and don't even say hi? Rude," Janet says.

I nearly fall off of the edge of the bed, flailing my arms wildly and scrambling to shove the t-shirt back into my bag. "Haven't you ever heard of knocking?"

She gives me a flat stare. "Your door was open."

"You could still knock anyway." I mindlessly shuffle through the rest of the items I haven't unpacked yet, embarrassed that she's seen my secret.

Janet closes the door as she walks inside. "So you lied."

"What?" I try to play it off like I've got no idea what she's talking about, but I'm pretty sure the furious thumping in my ribcage is audible.

“You told Marlon and Tito you broke up with the guy. But you’re still carrying around his clothes.” She feigns disappointment and sits beside me on the bed.

“They could be mine,” I argue.

“Uh-huh.” She smirks, grabs the shirt from my bag and sniffs it. “And apparently you bathe in Aqua Velva.”

I try to glare at her. “Maybe I do. You don’t know my life.”

Janet makes a face. “God, Michael, stop. You’re so bad at lying it’s physically hurting me to watch you do it.” She hands me the shirt, which I stow away safely in the top dresser drawer. “I don’t know why they believed you.”

“Because I told them what they want to hear.”

I hear a familiar voice in the hallway: “Michael, is that you?”

“Mother? I’m home!” I nearly trip over my own feet rushing out to greet Mother. I’m about to engulf her in a bear hug before I remember her condition. Mother, however, plays by no such rules. She wraps her arms around me as tightly as she can, then grabs my face and kisses my cheeks over and over. I imagine my face is littered with her red lip prints.

“Oh, Michael, baby, it’s so good to see you again!” she cries, her eyes moist with tears. She reaches for another hug, but I place my hands on her shoulders.

“Mother, don’t overexert yourself—”

“Overexert my foot! Give your mother a hug!” She embraces me again, and I don’t fight it.

“But your condition—”

Mother pulls away and gives me a puzzled look. “What’re you talkin’ about, Michael?”

Everything crashes down on me at once. “You’re...not sick?”

She gasps at that. “Sick? Honey, I’m as fit as a fiddle! I may not be as young as I used to be, but that don’t mean nothin’!” Mother takes my hand and guides me down the stairs. Janet follows behind me. “C’mon, honey, let’s get started on dinner.” My feet take each stair, my entire body in a numb sort of shock.

They had lied to me. They’d lied so I would come home. So I would leave Evan and Jordan. Thank God I’d had the hindsight to send them somewhere safe before I left.

I'd had a minor suspicion that I'd been lied to, but this only confirmed it. Mother had absolutely no idea what I was talking about when I'd asked her if she was sick. Her jaunty steps down the stairs only reiterate the lie. This is not a sick woman.

I feel it coming now, the snap Joseph has been waiting for.

"Janet, help Mother in the kitchen," I say to my sister through my teeth. "I'll join you in a moment."

Janet doesn't argue. She knows that tone of voice.

I stalk through the living room and grab Marlon by the collar of his shirt, dragging him through the room and out into the backyard. Tito, Jermaine, and Randy jump up from their seats, as if to interfere and stop me, but perhaps they don't want to share Marlon's fate.

"How could you?" I shriek at Marlon as I throw him into the grass, advancing on him as he scoots away from me. "Our own mother?"

"Mike, I can explain—"

"How? You lied to me! You said she was sick! You made me think she was dying!"

Someone's arms wrap around me from behind. I stab my elbow back into their ribcage. I hear an "oof" sound, and the iron fetters disappear.

"Mike, Mike, please, just listen for a second!" Marlon pleads.

"You have one second," I snarl.

"Joseph asked me to, Mike," he says, his breath coming in quick gasps, even though I haven't hurt him yet.

"He pay you to do it?"

"No way."

"Then why? If it wasn't for money, why would you do something like this?" My hands tighten into fists. Fury clouds my brain.

"Cause you've lost your head, man!" he wails. "This Chandler guy's got you good."

"He's not controlling me, Marlon!"

"Maybe not, but you ain't yourself anymore, Mike!" he shouts back. "You've changed. And the way you're runnin' with him, it's gonna end up gettin' people killed. Good people, people like me and your brothers. And he ain't worth it."

“That’s not your call to make!” I screech, my voice choked with rage.

“It’s not my call to go against Joseph’s orders either! We just want you home, brother. Long enough for Chandler to move on and find someone else, and maybe for you to do the same.”

I exhale an angry breath through my nose. “Run while you still can.”

Marlon sighs, tries to stand, but his legs are too weak. “What do you love about this guy?”

“Why does it matter? It’s all just a big joke to you anyway.”

“No, c’mon, don’t be like that. Tell me. Make me understand.”

I keep him pinned beneath my glare. “Evan is wonderful. He’s kind and loving and funny and supportive... He’s everything our father isn’t, everything our father could have been. Before I met Evan, I felt like there was something missing, like someone had punched a huge hole through my chest. Then he came along and filled it, patched it up and made it like new.”

Marlon gives me an appraising look. “I thought you said you broke up with him, that he was a thug just like the rest of ‘em.”

What I do next I’m not proud of. I kick him in the side so hard he lifts up off of the ground. He gasps for air, choking and sputtering. I reach down and grab him by the collar of his shirt, beating him with an angry fist. Marlon, heartbreakingly enough, doesn’t cry for mercy or beg me to stop. He puts up no fight, just lets the blows rain down until my rage ebbs and Tito and Jermaine interfere. They pull me away from Marlon, and I don’t even try to hold on. Tito rushes to Marlon, whose nose and mouth are bleeding, and leads him into the house to tend to his wounds.

I slump down into a sit, the atrocities I’d just committed making me sick to my stomach. I just beat up my own brother. True, he probably deserved it, but there’s no excuse to unbottle my fury upon my own kin. Maybe Marlon’s right. Maybe I’m not myself anymore.

Jermaine kneels beside me on the lawn. “He’ll be alright. He’s gotten in worse scuffles before.”

I nod, feeling the humiliation now.

“He won’t tell Joseph, if that’s what you’re worried about.”

I almost laugh. Joseph would be delighted to learn that I’ve hardened up. Like father, like son.

I swallow back my disgust and stand up, heading back into the house to prepare dinner.

#

Nobody mentions the lumpy, swelling bruises on Marlon's face that evening at dinner. Joseph looks like he wants to ask but thinks better of it, instead scooping out an extra helping of macaroni and cheese.

“So, Michael, whatever happened to that Chandler guy you were involved with?” he asks me.

I stare down at my plate, pushing the food around with my fork.

To my surprise, Marlon answers for me. “They broke up. He's real sore about it.”

“That true, Michael?”

I look up at my father with red-rimmed eyes and manage a nod.

“Poor baby,” Mother says, wrapping a supportive arm around my shoulders. “I know he meant a lot to you.”

I try to disguise my distress with a biscuit that's sopped up the white gravy I'd poured over it.

Joseph's eyebrows do a frowny thing. “Guess I was right about the guy after all. Maybe you ought'a listen to your father more.”

I keep chewing so that I don't speak.

“Told you my instincts were right,” Joseph says, nudging Jackie with his elbow. “Good thing Tony's on it.”

I freeze, feeling as if someone's reached into my chest and squeezed my heart. If Tony's still tracking Evan and Jordan... If I left them unprotected...

I force myself to swallow.

“Joseph, don't you think we should use Tony for somethin' else? That chump ain't worth our best resources anymore,” Jermaine says. “Mike's home. That's what's important.”

“Boys, you know the rules. No business at the table,” Mother chides.

Joseph sets his jaw in that way of his and bites into a chicken leg as if it's personally offended him.

Marlon approaches me later that evening while I'm clearing the table after dinner. He doesn't speak at first, just gives me a look that says he's sorry for everything.

"Thank you," I whisper.

He gives a nod and helps me clean up. "I owed you one anyway. I didn't realize how serious you are about this guy."

"It's all right. I can see how you could get the wrong idea." When I look up at him, I can see how dark the bruises have become. "Sorry about"—I gesture to his face—"that."

"It's nothin', Mike. I'd be scared to be on your bad side."

If he only knew.

"I thought about movin' away once."

"Really?"

"Yeah, maybe down near Atlanta."

"Atlanta, Georgia?"

"Well, the local one's all booked up." He laughs at my frown. "But Joseph wouldn't let me. He wanted me to stay close. So, yeah, maybe I can sympathize, y'know?"

"I never knew that," I murmur.

Marlon shrugs. "We've all got our secrets."

Sleep evades me that night, and I stare up at the ceiling of my bedroom as I lay there, fighting back against the pain that threatens to drown me. Even though there's nothing truly safe for me to think about now, I can't help but let my thoughts drift to the travesty that is my family. Driving through Gary and reminiscing about life's happier days was almost suffocating, because when I resurfaced I had a new, stunning clarity with which to see my kin.

We have all been changed and twisted by our success and our sorrows, molded into something strong and powerful, but there's no peace in it. There's no triumph in transcending barriers of race and circumstance when it's come at such a high price. We've sacrificed trust and love for heartbreak and betrayal, and because we don't trust, we're a discordant mess of emotions, rigged to explode and crumble at the slightest threat to our unity. My father preaches loyalty and integrity but twists their definitions to suit his needs. How is the kind of business he runs synonymous at all with integrity? How does threatening your child's happiness line up with loyalty?

I don't trust them, plain and simple. I know they're waiting for the right opportunity to exploit me for their own gain. What ethics? They've already proven that they have no qualms about lying to me. Lying about my mother's health to get me to leave Evan is Joseph's attempt at forcing me into this kind of life through isolation; without Evan and Jordan to ground me, it will be easier, Joseph thinks, to make me cross the line and become like him.

They all subscribe to a certain craziness, delusions that help them sleep better at night. They tout their family pride and loyalty, because without that they've got nothing left. What other values were we taught besides bending and breaking the rules for the sake of your family?

It doesn't surprise me at all that Joseph would balk at hearing I'd created a relationship with Evan. Not only because Evan's another man, but because he has the capacity to show me what unconditional love and trust are. Those certainly weren't values modeled in my own family, and Joseph knows once I got a taste of that I'd never come back.

I roll onto my side, pulling the blankets around me and still feeling much too cold.

28. Family Business

Michael

We're at Janet's shop in the middle of her lunch break, sharing a plate of nachos from the Taco Bell down the street. I spent the afternoon here with her, helping her restock the racks when groups of wild-haired high-schoolers come in and buy pricey clothes with their parents' money. It's interesting to see the customer base here. Most are teenagers, eager to show off their unique fashion sense at school via a \$150 jacket or \$20 sequined shirt. There's a good percentage of twenty-somethings as well, with more money to burn, and a surprising amount of people my age.

"So, how do you like being back home?" Janet asks, her sympathetic smile a flicker. She laughs at my disgusted expression. "Then tell me about Evan. You two didn't really break up, so what happened?"

I have no fears that her store is bugged, so I don't mind answering candidly. "I had to send them somewhere safe. Marlon told me Mother was sick, so I thought I would only be staying long enough for her to recover."

Her jaw drops. "Is that why his face looks like he was chasin' a parked car?"

"Yeah, pretty much." I steal a nacho, precariously balancing a hunk of meat atop the chip. "To be fair, Joseph made him lie about it. Big surprise." I heave a sigh. "I just don't see a way outta all this. How do I get back to Evan and Jordie and have both of my families together without everyone destroying each other?"

"Maybe you just gotta do a little innocent blackmail." I raise an inquisitive eyebrow. Barry Rothman had suggested that as well. "Y'know, how I got my shop," she adds with a conspiratorial wink.

"Wait, what?"

She takes a sip of her mostly-empty Sprite. "You think Joseph just happened to let me out of the whole 'marry-into-the-biz-and-have-a-million-babies' thing? No way! I caught his ass when he wrecked Mother's precious statue collection and had them all replaced with fakes at the last minute." She beams a proud smile. "Best thing I ever did."

I beg to differ.

"Honestly, that man ain't afraid of nothin' but Mother."

I feel the jealousy I'd been harboring against my sister drop out of me. Janet hadn't been more special or loved more by my father; she'd just had an "in," a way to tilt circumstances in her favor. Now I just need one.

I think about what Marlon said last night about secrets, what Barry had said about my father's rumored infidelity and how far he might go to keep it under wraps.

Finding my “in” shouldn’t be too difficult.

When I get home, Joseph’s on his way out. “Where were you?” he asks as I get out of the car.

“Janet’s store. She needed some help restocking stuff.”

He sets his jaw in that way of his when he doesn’t like your answer but can’t do anything about it. “I see. What changed your mind?”

“About?”

“About that Chandler guy. You seemed to like him enough to uproot his whole life and take him on the run with his kid.” There’s that hot knife of guilt Joseph’s so fond of using. “I was just wonderin’ what happened to change your mind about ‘im.”

I keep my voice steady. “We got into a fight. He didn’t want me comin’ home to check on Mother. He said I had to choose between him or my family.”

“And you chose us.”

Obviously the wrong decision.

Joseph gives me an acknowledging nod and departs for his car.

If you want a quick, efficient way to find out what your enemies are planning, constructing a phone bug is the best way to go—if you know what you’re doing. A lifetime of building listening devices and taps means I have plenty of the necessary materials. Building the bug takes me about ten minutes. Picking the locks on the door of Joseph’s office takes about three, thanks to my trusty multi-tool.

When I get inside, my first step is to install the bug in his phone. Once I’ve done that, the fun begins. Gathering blackmail information on my father is going to be tricky, because I’m not sure where to look or what I’m exactly I’m supposed to look for. The windows overlooking the front lawn ensure I’ll know when Joseph returns home, giving me enough time to make a quick escape.

I suppose if there’s anything he’s hiding, it’s going to be, well, hidden. So I check the obvious places: the barrels of his pens, the battery compartment in the radio on his desk, the conspicuous flowerpot on the balcony railing. I only find small stashes of cash and nine millimeter ammunition.

In his desk drawers, there’s handguns, stacks of papers, a few books and magazines, and various knick-knacks from our time in Gary, but overall nothing of importance. There’s an audio speaker amongst a pile of boxes along the far wall that looks suspiciously out of place. I glance

back out the windows again before scurrying across the room. I pry the speaker open with as much finesse as possible, careful not to damage it.

Inside are stacks of unmarked VHS tapes. At least, they appear to be unmarked before I pull them out and examine them. Along the bottom of each tape is a golden yellow label with a name and year scribbled out in Joseph's handwriting. I sort through the tapes and read their labels: *Gamble '76, Huff '76, DeMann '77, Weisner '77, Rubell '77, Jones '78, Jones '82, Branca '83, Russo '86, Hoefflin '86, Sneddon '86, Fields '87, Weitzman '89, Sneddon '89, Sneddon '91, Sneddon '92...*

Rage and disgust roil through my body and engulf me when I remember each name and the awful things I'd had to do to get these people to do favors for my father. But I'd had no idea he'd taped the encounters. It wasn't my "persuasion" at all that put them on Joseph's payroll; it was blackmail. And I'm the star of it all. Hot tears push at my eyes and force their way forward. That first day we met, Evan had probably stood in this same room in the vicinity of these tapes.

If Mother knew about these, about what Joseph made me do...

I leave the room just as pristine as it had been before I'd entered.

#

Evan

I'm just gonna have to live with the fact that the interior of the car permanently smells like fast food. Gotta say, that's not one of my top five smells for the car to have. But I guess it's unavoidable because Jordan and I practically live in the thing for an average of sixteen hours a day. Michael told us not to stop if we could help it, so pretty much all of our meals are consumed inside the car while driving. What I wouldn't give to eat food like a normal person instead of a guy who's late for work.

Tonight's dinner is around two p.m. In lieu of keeping any of Joseph's goons off our tail, we've adopted a rather unorthodox sleeping schedule: sleep during the day, drive at night. Anyone trying to find us would likely check motels at night and passing cars during the day. Flipping those expectations keeps us one step ahead.

"I can't wait to eat, change clothes, and go to bed," I complain when we pull up to the motel.

"Does your arm still hurt?" Jordan asks, opting to carry the pizza box and bags stuffed with garlic rolls and lasagna.

"Yeah, a little bit." I freeze, noticing that the door to our motel room is slightly ajar. I've got my gun out instantly.

Jordan makes an irritated noise, already tired of my constant paranoia. “Dad, it could just be the maid or something. Maybe she forgot to close the door.”

I motion for him to stay back and stay quiet before I kick the door open with my boot. It thuds loudly against the wall, and I sweep the room. Anthony Pellicano is laying on the bed, flipping through the scambly television channels. He’s looking over at me with a smug smile I want to punch right off his face. “Oh, Mr. Chandler, so nice seeing you again.”

“What the fuck are you doing here?”

He places a hand over his chest. “Why, Evan, that’s not very polite. And in front of the boy, too! What would Michael think?”

“Michael would ask you the same question: what the fuck are you doing here?”

Tony laughs a bitter sound and sits up. I keep the gun focused on him. “Word is Michael finally dumped your sorry ass. Better late than never, I guess.”

One of the best things about being with Michael so long is that I know how he works. So when a bombshell like this is dropped, I know to just go with it. “You sound like a spurned lover, Tony. What’s the matter? Michael didn’t call you back?”

“Always with the jokes.” He shakes his head. “That’s how you operate when you’re scared, isn’t it?” Jordan had said something similar the other day. I expect my own son to know my behavioral quirks, but not some irritating stranger.

“You’re awfully confident I won’t just shoot you here.”

“If you wanted me dead, you’d have shot me by now.” Tony blinks slowly, waiting for me to fire. When I don’t, a smirk grows on his face like a vine. “Exactly.”

“So we’re back to my original question: what the fuck are you doing here?”

“I’ve been called off your scent—you really need to cut down on the Drakkar Noir, Ev, a little goes a long way—but I don’t fucking trust you.” He stands up and meets my eye. “I just wanted you to know—it’s more my style—you *are* being watched.”

“I’ll make sure to leave the blinds open when I get undressed. Give you a little show.” I wink at him, which absolutely infuriates him if the color his face turns is any indication. Homophobia gets ‘em every time.

Tony scowls and walks toward me with absolute confidence that I won’t shoot; for all his obnoxious talk, he really does know me a little too well. “We’ll be in touch,” he says, slapping me on my arm—my *bad* arm, Tony, you fuckin’ douche—as he takes his leave. He’s probably ascertained that I’m not running out of fear—my journey has a purpose, a destination. He’ll stick

around to find out where that is. I can only hope this Frank Dileo guy is as good and as protected as Michael said.

Jordan shuts and locks the door behind him and places our food on the bed. “Who was that guy?”

I put my gun away and sit on the bed. “Some jerk Michael’s father sent to keep tabs on us,” I explain around a mouthful of delicious pizza.

“Why didn’t you shoot him?” Jordan asks, and I almost choke. “I mean, c’mon, he gave you a bunch of reasons to off ‘im, but you didn’t. Shooting people before they can shoot you is sort of how we’re still alive, right?”

I sigh. “It’s a little more complicated than that, kiddo. This isn’t really the best place to just shoot someone. Kinda makes for an unpleasant eating environment.” I take another bite of pizza. “Besides, he said Michael’s father called him off.”

“He could’a been lying, Dad,” Jordan says like it’s the most obvious thing in the world.

“Not likely. Tracking me has become sorta personal for him. And if he was gonna kill me, he would have already done it. Guys like that feed off fear. If you show ‘em you’re not afraid of ‘em, they get bored and move on to someone who *is* scared of ‘em.”

“So they’re basically grown-up bullies?”

“Basically, yeah.”

He gives me a puzzled look. “You always told me to beat up bullies if they ever messed with me.”

“You never said a word about that to your mom, did you?”

His smile is frayed and pained around the edges. “No, don’t worry.” He plucks a pepperoni off of his slice of pizza. “So why didn’t you beat him up?”

“Sometimes it’s better not to, especially when you grow up.”

#

Michael

The bug in Joseph’s office phone doesn’t yield anything particularly interesting until the next night at an almost ungodly hour. I’m curled in my bed, listening to the bug’s radio receiver while flipping through *To Kill a Mockingbird*, a book with a very misleading title.

I hear a gruff voice come through the speaker: “I’ll get you the money. Relax, baby.”

Terror wraps around my chest. The voice belongs to my father, but why would he be calling anyone but Mother “baby”?

I hear the second voice, and something in my soul snaps like a dry twig: “Don’t you ‘baby’ me, Joseph. This is your child too. You promised you’d help me.”

I don’t recognize the voice, but one thing’s certain: it’s not Mother. It’s another woman talking about a child. *Their* child.

My father had an affair with another woman, and he’s got a child out there to prove it.

Barry’s informant was right.

My throat locks up tight at the threat of tears. Does Mother know about this? Surely she couldn’t; there’s no way she would still be married to him if she did, and he wouldn’t be talking to this woman in hushed whispers.

“Joh’Vonnie needs this for college, Joseph,” the woman continues. “She just got accepted to California State.”

Anger flares up in my gut. College? That means this girl is at least eighteen. Joseph’s kept this affair and love-child hidden for almost two decades.

It takes every shred of self-control I have not to burst into his office now and start screaming at him. And it hurts. Every minute that passes by scorches me like I’m burning on a pyre. All this pent-up rage sits inside of me with no outlet.

It isn’t until Joseph finally exits the office and retires to his bedroom that I can begin to give my pain a channel to vent. I sneak down the hall using the only the outsides of my feet to keep my steps quiet; walking flat-footed means less surface to shift under my weight. I get the locks picked and carefully inch the door open.

This time, it’s different. Here in my father’s office, I now know there’s evidence he’s betrayed everyone in this house. It isn’t easy, especially when the person who’s betrayed you is someone you love dearly.

I start my search with the stacks of papers in his dresser drawers. The first stack yields nothing of use, but beneath it is a locked compartment. After picking the lock, I open it up to find a brown leather-bound journal of sorts. I flip it open to the first page and discover that it’s an address book. There must be hundreds of names and addresses in here, probably a log of everyone Joseph’s ever made eye contact with. I skip straight to the J tab. There’s a couple of pages before I find the name I’m looking for, scrawled in red ink: Joh’Vonnie Jackson. Below the name is a phone number and address in Los Angeles. I rip the listing out and stuff it into the pocket of my pajama pants.

I’m back in my bed within three minutes of sneaking into the office.

#

The next afternoon, while Janet's out at the Taco Bell picking up our lunch, I make a quick call to this Joh'Vonnie Jackson. If she's home, I plan on paying her a little visit. After all, she is my illegitimate sister.

I dial the number, and a woman's voice answers. "Hello?"

"Are you satisfied with your telephone company? Pacific Bell is—"

"No, thank you." Click.

Rude.

But now I know she's home. Will she be home about thirty minutes from now? I'll take the chance.

When Janet comes back with our food, I grab my bag of tacos and blurt out, "I need to borrow your car."

Janet seems to think I'm crazy. "Not even a thank you?"

"Thank you. Can I borrow your car?"

She sits behind the counter and pops open her nachos. "I'm going to assume this much secrecy means you don't want Joseph knowin' where you're goin'?"

"You would be correct."

"At least tell me?"

I shake my head. No one can know about Joh'Vonnie's existence until I use it as blackmail. If Joseph knows that I know, he can arrange things to my disadvantage. "I can't." She raises an eyebrow. "Not yet, at least."

"Does it have anything to do with Evan?"

"Sort of? It's complicated. I promise I'll tell you at some point, but not now."

"When will you be back?"

I shrug. "An hour, hour and a half from now?"

"As long as I have my car back before closing time." She beckons to her car sitting out front. "Go on."

“Thank you so much!”

“If there’s even a trace of food anywhere near the seats, I’m gonna make you scrub it out!” she shouts at me as I hurry out the door.

Joh’Vonnie lives in a modest apartment just off of Wilshire Boulevard. I pull into the parking lot, far enough away from her apartment building as to not appear suspicious, but close enough for surveillance. I just sort of stare at it for a while, finishing off my burrito. I’d managed to eat lunch during the drive here and not spill any inside the car—a technique I’d mastered during my road trip with Evan and Jordan.

God, I miss them.

If I go up and knock on that door, I get Evan and Jordan back. But it sure ain’t for free.

Is it worth it? Hard to say. I’m really not a huge fan of barging in there and turning her life upside down. I’m willing to bet that Joseph never told Joh’Vonnie about his, uh, “other” family. Joh’Vonnie probably thinks the same thing I did, that her father had no other woman in his life other than her mother. To shatter that illusion would be needlessly cruel.

Joh’Vonnie doesn’t need to know I exist in order for the blackmail to work. I have all the information I need. Why should I disrupt the little peace she has?

I’m shoving the last bit of my burrito into my mouth when the door to her apartment opens. I hold my breath and watch an attractive woman leave the building. She’s wearing a wide-brimmed hat, so I can’t see her face until she descends down the staircase and walks to her car. Those Jackson cheekbones are unmistakable; I can definitely see my father’s genes at work.

I linger in my car for a while after she’s driven off in her own. I don’t cry or scream, but I can feel my foundation starting to give way. Seeing her—actually seeing her in the flesh—is life-altering in a way nothing else has ever been. I have a sister I’ve never known about for almost twenty years.

I get out of the car and walk up the stairs to her apartment. Then I do something I’m not proud of: I break in.

The interior of the apartment is about what you’d expect from a college student: youthful, disorganized, each item displaying a memory or interest. I’m not sure what I’m looking for exactly. Maybe some insight into what kind of person my sister is without disrupting her life to obtain it.

Her bedroom door is open, and I can see inside. I don’t step into her room, but I look at the items on display there. There’s lots of baseball memorabilia; Dodgers and Angels pennants decorate the walls, as well as framed pictures of famous players like Jackie Robinson and Nolan Ryan.

The photographs on the fireplace mantle grab my attention next. There's a few of Joh'Vonnie with an older woman I presume is her mother. Then a couple pictures of people I don't recognize—probably her friends or family on her mother's side.

Then my heart stops.

There's three photographs of Joh'Vonnie with her—no, *our*—father, Joseph. Both of them are smiling exuberantly. Each picture was taken at different stages in her life—one is of Joh'Vonnie as a little girl at Disneyland wearing a red polka-dotted dress and Minnie Mouse ears; Joseph is holding her hand as they walk. The second picture stars Joh'Vonnie as a teenager with Joseph at a Dodgers game at Dodger Stadium. I grit my teeth in jealous fury. He took her to a baseball game. Jackie's been a huge baseball fan his entire life, and Joseph never took him to a game.

The third picture looks relatively recent. Joh'Vonnie's wearing a graduation cap and gown, graduating from what I assume is high school. Joseph is standing beside her, beaming with fatherly pride in a way I hardly remember him smiling with any of us. I feel disgust knot in my gut. This isn't real. The Joseph Jackson that Joh'Vonnie knows isn't real. He can't be.

The only thing that keeps me from exploding with rage is the thought that this is the kind of family Joseph really wanted. He didn't have much of a choice with us; we were too deeply entrenched in the underworld of the mob to ever live like this. And he knew that. So when Joh'Vonnie was born, he saw her as a clean slate. He had a choice.

I've done nothing but fight with this man my entire life. I've had to fight and beg for his attention, affection, and approval. I've fought for my freedom, my independence from the family. Now I'm fighting for the lives of Evan and Jordan. But here's a child of Joseph's who never had to fight or beg for any of that. It just came naturally.

I leave the apartment and return to Janet's car. I put my hands on the steering wheel—surprisingly, they're not shaking—and begin the drive back to Bel Air.

When I push the door open to The Velvet Rope about thirty minutes later, Janet greets me with a big smile. "Welcome back. You didn't spill anything, did you?"

"Nope. Are you proud of me?"

"Very." She waits a moment. "So, did you go see Evan?"

I shake my head. "I told you I wasn't."

"You also told me you'd explain everything."

I make a face. "I didn't say that. I said I'd tell you eventually."

“When are you supposed to see him again?”

“I don’t know. I hope it’s soon.”

“Me too,” she agrees. “You’re walking around with this heartbroken puppy face. It’s hard to watch.”

It’s hard to live.

29 A Man of Honor

Evan

It's about sunset when we finally arrive at Frank Dileo's wide, open ranch in Ojai, California. Behind the massive, wrought-iron gates I can see the regal mansion in the distance, along with a stable and pastures for horses. There's a couple horses wandering around the grounds now, actually. The vegetation is finely clipped and manicured.

"Why do I feel like I'm in the beginning of *The Godfather*?" Jordan asks.

"If I wake up with a horse head in my bed, I'm gonna be pissed."

The security booth is set up similar to a drive-through window. There's guards plastered around the gates and one in the booth. They're eyeing me suspiciously, which I can't say I blame them for. They open the gates for me after a quick show of identification, and Frank Dileo greets us in the driveway of the Tudor-style mansion.

Frank definitely looks the part of the classic mobster cliché: he's short with a roly build, the black hair on his balding head slicked back with enough gel to put Elvis Presley to shame. His dark suit is finely tailored, and he holds a thick cigar between his teeth.

"So, you must be the Chandlers," he says, offering me his meaty paw as I get out of the car. We shake hands. "Michael told me you'd be comin'."

"You heard from him since?"

Frank shakes his head. "Not yet. He should be callin' pretty soon. Whadd'ya say we get inside so we don't miss him?"

That sounds like a great idea. Jordan and I carry our luggage inside the house. The interior is even more ostentatious than the outside. The floor is wood, the walls the color of cream. The ceiling seems to be made out of wood too, the beams and arches made of exquisite oak. Sliding glass doors lead out to the back yard, and I can see the azure glow of a swimming pool before we're whisked away to the east wing.

Frank leads us up the spiral staircase and down the hallway into a modest guest room. It's rather large, consisting of a king-size bed, two chairs, and a small couch. "The couch folds out into a bed," Frank says, like a real-estate agent trying to make a sale. "Bathroom's across the hall. You two get settled in, and I'll start dinner."

Dinner's on the table by the time we're both showered and dressed—Italian food, by the smell of it. I'm almost a little overwhelmed by the size of the meal Frank's prepared for us. He's proving to be a pretty considerate host.

Frank notices my look of surprise. "I don't mind goin' the extra mile for a friend of Mike's." He motions for us to sit. "He called, by the way. I told 'im you both got here safely and

not to worry, but knowing that kid he'll call every day now that he knows you're here." He chuckles and cuts into the lasagna.

"You and Michael must go way back."

"Yeah, I've known him almost ten years now."

"Did you work for his father?"

Frank laughs at that. "Joseph? No way. Not without lack of tryin' on his part, though." He pours himself a glass of Pinot Grigio, offers me some, but I politely decline. "He actually sent Michael to try and convince me to work for him." I remember with a pang how Michael had "convinced" people to work for Joseph. "But we just ended up talkin' about everything but the business. I gave 'im a safe place to crash when his family crap got too hectic."

"You weren't interested?" In either Michael's, uh, "services" or the job.

"Nah, I was on my way outta the biz by then."

"Yeah, Michael told me about that. How did you get out?"

"You tell me how you met Mike first."

A fair trade. I find myself having to censor the parts Jordan shouldn't know about. "Through Joseph, obviously. After my wife passed, he owed me a favor"—Frank bows his head in respect at the mention of June—"so he reluctantly let Michael come live with us and help out around the house and my bar."

Frank raises an eyebrow at that. Clearly I've said something he doesn't like very much. "So, what exactly is your relationship with Mike?"

"They're dating," Jordan speaks up casually around a mouthful of garlic bread. "It's totally gross. They make out on the couch with no regard for my innocent eyes."

I give him a glare. "Boy, you'd sing like a canary, wouldn't you?"

Jordan just shrugs. "Hey, he asked."

"Well, have some discretion. You don't know what people will think about stuff like that."

"You always said if you love someone it doesn't matter, right?"

Frank smiles at that, sitting back in his chair, his hands folded on a belly pushing on the buttons of his shirt; I hope one doesn't pop loose and take out an eye. "That's good. I'd hate to think you were one of those guys, Evan."

He doesn't elaborate, but I know what he means.

#

Michael

I knock on the door to Joseph's office that evening. He lets me inside, scrutinizing my expression as he sits at his desk. I opt to stand. Neither of us say anything for a while. After a moment of silence, I say, "I know about Joh'Vonnie."

The color drains from his face.

"I know about the affair, and I know that you treated Joh'Vonnie with more affection and love than you ever did with any of us."

"Michael, you know that's not true."

I swallow thickly. He didn't deny the affair, just the accusation that he loves her more than us. "Do I? You took her to a freakin' Dodgers game! Jackie wanted to play ball professionally; did you ever take *him* to a game?" I watch him sit there and say nothing. "Yeah, didn't think so. I also know about the tapes." He blanches impossibly further. "So here's what's going to happen. You're going to call off your vendetta against the Chandlers. You're going to allow me and Evan and Jordan to live peacefully wherever we choose. You will support my relationship with him and never ask me to do anything regarding this business again." Joseph's eyes tighten. "Or I'll come back on my own, and on the way I'll pick up Joh'Vonnie. She's just dying to meet the rest of the family, especially Mother. I'll also show Mother the tapes you saved of my 'business deals' with some of your more stubborn clients. I wonder what she'll think of you if she knew what you forced her child to do." I spread my hands. "It's your call."

He stares at me like he's finally seeing me for the first time. "You're crazy, Mike."

"You're the entire reason I'm here right now. You're the reason Evan and Jordan are running for their lives. Call off the hit. I'm finishing this tonight, one way or another."

"So you're blackmailing me, is that it?" I nod. He doesn't say anything for a moment, just sits and stews. His fists tighten and unclench. "Fine, Michael. You win. You got me. Destroy the tapes, and I'll make the call."

That's an obvious trap. He's in no position to be making demands. Forcing me to destroy the tapes first is his attempt at weasling his way out of this. "Yeah, I don't think so. Besides, the tapes are just collateral. If Mother knew you had an affair, that'd be all it took for her to leave you."

"She'd never believe you," Joseph says, suddenly defiant.

"Oh, I know you didn't leave a paper trail. You're too good for that. If I know you as well as I think I do, you set up fake accounts to pay for child support, you falsified jobs and

alibis when you were spending time with your other family. You spun a web of lies that we'll never untangle. But I don't have to *tell* Mother. I can just show her. I'll take her to that little apartment on Wilshire Boulevard and introduce her to her step-daughter. I'll show her the photos on the fireplace of you and Joh'Vonnie at Disneyland and the Dodgers game and her high school graduation. You'd never be able to explain that away."

Joseph exhales angrily through his nose. "You wouldn't hurt your own father like this, Mike. It's not in your nature."

"Maybe I'm more like you than I'd like to believe."

"Yeah, maybe you are."

He sits there with his fists clenched and his eyebrows drawn low, smoldering in fury. "Are you really gonna go through with this?"

"Absolutely. Weren't you the one always goin' on about how family is everything, how togetherness would make us strong? 'They can break one of you when you are separated, but if you stick together you are unbreakable.'" He wilts beneath my glare. "You punished me for breaking away from the family. Now it's your turn to own up."

He scowls at me before trying another direction. "Don't do this to your mother. You tell her any of this, it'll hurt her. Never mind me, think about the pain she would feel."

Guilt trips. A classic Joseph Jackson technique. "You dug your own grave, Joseph. You're the one hurting her, not me." I grab the telephone on his desk. "Either you make the call, or I will." I stare him down, trying to force his hand as I begin to dial Mother's bedroom extension.

Joseph recognizes the number and scrambles for the phone. "Alright, I'll call it off!" He grabs the receiver from my hand and presses a couple of buttons. "It's Joe. Ease off" a Chandler. It's over."

#

Evan

I wake up the next morning from what feels like a coma. My body's in the same position it was when I flopped into bed last night right after dinner. Sunlight blares through the flimsy drapes and lights up the room. Surprisingly, I'm not tired; I feel amazingly well-rested in way I haven't been in what seems like ages.

Jordan's gone, so I assume he must have gotten bored waiting for me to wake up and decided to venture out into the house. I throw on a change of clothes and go downstairs. Frank and Jordan are in the lounge playing cards. Frank sees me out of the corner of his eye and greets me with a wide smile. "Feel better? We thought you got lost in there, kid."

"How long was I out?"

“Thirteen hours,” Jordan answers, not bothering to look up from the cards. “I won five bucks, by the way.”

I chuckle and sit beside him. “That’s my boy. Where’d you learn how to play poker, anyway?”

“Michael taught me.” He looks over at me, suddenly excited, as if remembering something. “Oh! I talked to Michael this morning! He called and said we were safe.”

I feel my heart in my throat. “Did he?”

Jordan nods. “Does that mean we can go home now?”

Michael may, by some extraordinary miracle of God, have gotten his father off our backs, but the problem of Anthony Pellicano’s vendetta still lingers like a bad rash. Tony’s acting of his own accord, independent of Joseph’s orders. I’ll need to make sure he’s taken care of before we’re truly safe.

“I’ve got a few things to take care of first, Jord’,” I tell him.

He seems to be okay with that. Later, he goes for a swim in the pool out back, leaving me and Frank to make small talk over a game of cards. “Y’know, there’s one thing I don’t understand about all this,” I say. “How come Joseph’s so gung-ho on making Michael the head of the Family?”

Frank takes a puff of his cigar. “You’d be surprised what Michael’s capable of. He’s good at compartmentalizing.”

So I’ve seen. Michael had never let fear or grief paralyze him. I, on the other hand... “But he doesn’t want it.”

Frank shrugs. “Mike was always different from his brothers anyway. Quieter, gentler, y’know. But when his skin started to change, he backed off of the business more than he usually did, got a couple surgeries. Even a couple’a years ago, he was much darker than he is now. So when the pigment really left, maybe he felt like even more of an outsider from his family.”

I wonder about that, about how he looked back then.

“I gotta say, when Mike called me and told me you were comin’ up, I was pretty worried.”

“About?”

He leans in a bit, keeps his voice low. “I know that kid, and I know there’s nothin’ he won’t do to protect the people he loves. That’s just who he is. He’ll do something that’ll stay with him for a long time if it means keeping his loved ones safe. I’ve seen it happen before.”

He must be referring to the Detroit incident, unless there's more blood in Michael's past that I don't know about.

"He'd hate me for sayin' this, but I think he's more like his father than he realizes," Frank says.

This does not fill me with hope. What lengths had Michael gone to here to ensure our safety? He'd told Jordan that we're safe. If he was pushed far enough, would Michael actually kill his own father?

"That's why Joe's comin' down so hard on you," Frank continues, oblivious to my moment of sheer panic. "He doesn't push this hard for someone's head on a stick unless he's threatened. He thinks you're takin' Michael and using him to overthrow the Family from within."

Victor had suggested something similar, although in reverse. How had I not seen it at the time? Oh, right, Victor was polluting my head with insinuations that Michael was fucking my son. "Well, he doesn't need to worry about that. I'm out. Everyone in New York probably thinks I'm dead by now. I just wanna take Michael and Jordie and live somewhere my son won't have to worry about one of us not comin' home."

Frank smiles, takes another puff off the cigar. "Good on you. This sort'a life hardens you up. I know you don't want that for your boy."

I look out the sliding glass doors leading out to the backyard and watch my son swim. I want so badly for him to be truly safe. To do that, I'll need to take care of Pellicano.

#

Michael

Mother sneaks up on me while I'm packing my bag. "I grilled you a cheese," she says, setting the plate down on my bed and sitting on the edge of the mattress. "Lord knows you get so caught up you forget to eat." She smiles at me. "I hope Evan remembers to feed you every once in a while."

I look at her in bewilderment, as if what she's saying makes no sense. "What are you talking about? We broke up, remember?"

Mother laughs. "Oh, please, Michael, a mother knows. And I know you aren't packin' your bags for a trip to the beach."

I glance over at my travel bags with clothes spilling out of them. That's pretty incriminating evidence. My gaze slides to the floor in shame. "I'm sorry I lied to you."

“That’s alright, honey. I know you did it for a good reason.” She pats the empty space beside her on the bed. “C’mon, eat up and tell me about them.”

I do as I’m told, pulling apart my sandwich into small bites. “I only lied because I thought Joseph would hurt them.”

Mother gasps in horror. “No! Your father loves you so much, Michael. He’d never hurt someone you love. He might not understand, but he’ll come around in time.”

Poor Mother has no idea what that man is capable of, what he’s kept hidden from her. I opt to say nothing, eating in silence.

“Would you be upset if I moved away?” I ask after some time has passed. “I found a real nice place about an hour or two’s drive from here. It’s absolutely massive, and—” I stop, reaching into my bag to pull out the ad, wrinkled and faded from use. “Well, see for yourself.”

She examines the photograph of the property, a smile on her lips. “It looks lovely. They’d be very happy here.”

“I—I didn’t say I was gonna move in with them yet,” I mumble, feeling my face flush.

One of her eyebrows jumps up. “A mother knows,” she reminds me. “You should bring ‘em around sometime if they’re in the neighborhood. I’d love to meet them.”

“You already met Evan, remember?”

“I remember you had a little crush on that man the minute you laid eyes on him,” she says, laughing fondly at the memory. I’m sure my face is a disgusting shade of red by now. “I don’t mind you movin’ away, but I have to meet him again now that he’s datin’ my son.”

“Joseph wouldn’t be too happy about that.” She makes a “psh-shaw” sound. “Or my brothers.”

“Nonsense, your brothers won’t say anything. And if they do, well, they’re not too old for a whuppin’.” Mother knew how to balance discipline with love. Joseph didn’t. This is a large part of why I did not resent her the way I resent my father. Mother looks down at the ad again. “Michael, this listing is over a year old.”

“I was gonna see if it was still available. If not, well, I’m sure I could find someplace we could settle down.”

She puts a motherly arm around my shoulders. “I know wherever you go, you’ll be happy together.”

I knew we would be too.

Her gaze is drawn to my luggage again. “You have them someplace safe?”

I nod. “They’re in Ojai.”

“Goodness, honey, what are you sittin’ around here for? Go to them!”

I chuckle at her enthusiasm. “I have some things I need to take care of first. But I will. I promise. And then you can meet ‘em.”

Mother stands to leave the room. “Your father always kicks up a fuss when his children wanna get married against his wishes. But he still loves them, Michael. Don’t you forget that.”

30. All Hell Breaks Loose

Evan

I take a drive that afternoon to meet with Tom Sneddon Jr., the district attorney of Santa Barbara County. Sneddon had been one of my father's business contacts—Dad was a strict proponent of having ties on both coasts. From what I've heard, Sneddon's a big fan of payoffs.

We meet at a restaurant called The Hitching Post outside of Santa Barbara. I guess neither of us are big on trust; best to rendezvous in a public place to deter the other guy from putting a gun to your head.

Tom Sneddon looks amused to see me when I sit across from him at the table. He's wearing the standard white shirt, tie, and dark slacks combo. He leans back casually in the chair as if he has nothing to fear. "Haven't heard from your clan in a while, Chandler. Your old man couldn't even send me a postcard?"

"I guess he can't find a stamp; he's been dead four years."

Sneddon's face loses a bit of color. "Shit, really? I'm sorry, kid. Your dad was a good guy."

"So they tell me."

He reaches into his lap and places a manila folder on the table between us. "Here's the info on that Pellicano guy you wanted. You wanna tell me what you're doin' with him?"

"Just tell me about him. Humor me."

Sneddon sighs and opens the file. "What do you need to know?"

"Any ways you could make him, say, disappear?"

He frowns at me. "I may mingle in your circles, Chandler, but I am, above all, an enforcer of the law."

I roll my eyes. "Yeah, I know, you're a real prince. If I wanted him at the bottom of a lake with cement shoes, I wouldn't be talkin' to you."

Sneddon turns his attention back to the file. "In 1974, he filed for bankruptcy, citing that he'd borrowed \$30,000 dollars from a mobster's son. Huh, looks like you two got a lot in common."

"Right, 'cause all mobsters know each other."

He ignores my sarcasm and keeps reading. “He worked with Los Angeles attorney Howard Weitzman to defend John DeLorean on charges of cocaine trafficking, even though DeLorean was caught on tape by the FBI selling cocaine to an undercover agent. There were charges that Pellicano had intimidated government witnesses.” He raises an eyebrow. “Christ. When a Dr. Ammerman died of a drug overdose, his family filed a civil suit alleging Pellicano had destroyed evidence at the scene to protect one of his clients before the police arrived. The charges were dismissed a year later when the client died.”

“Shit, how come nobody’s nailed this guy yet?”

“Surely you can’t be that naïve,” Sneddon says with a dry chuckle.

I spread my hands. “How do you expect me to answer that question?”

“Why don’t you tell me how this guy got up your ass, for starters.”

“You know Joseph Jackson?”

A small quake runs through Sneddon’s face. “That’s a fairly common name.”

“Doesn’t explain why you look like you’ve just seen a ghost.”

He tries to wave it off. “I’ve put out a couple of fires for him. His sons have shown up on my radar quite a few times over the years.”

I feel a cold finger trace up my spine. “What do you mean?”

“Tito was arrested twice for stealing cars, Jermaine for a charge of battery. Jackie got collared for drunk and disorderly.”

“Let me guess, Joseph paid you to keep them out of jail.”

“In his own special way,” he says with a lilt of a smile.

I feel a growl rumble through my chest. I know what’s coming, but I can’t resist prodding at the question out of morbid curiosity. It’s a struggle to keep my voice even and detached when I ask, “Was Michael involved in any of this?”

“He may have had a hand in persuading me.” He says it with an edge that lets me know exactly what he’s referring to.

My thirty-eight is a heavy, solid weight beneath my jacket. I want so badly to punish him for tarnishing Michael and treating him like a sex toy, but I keep myself grounded. Violence will only make me Sneddon’s enemy; I really need him to be a friend right now and eliminate Pellicano. So I clench my fist beneath the table. Sneddon has no idea how close he came to being worm food.

“Joseph put Pellicano on my trail,” I tell him, redirecting the conversation away from Sneddon’s indiscretions with Michael. “That’s how he found me.”

“This is the part where I ask you what you did to end up on the wrong side of Joe Jackson, and you’ll talk in circles for a while and eventually tell me. So why don’t you just cut the crap and tell me now?”

I stare at him a moment before answering. “Joseph’s motivations don’t matter. Pellicano told me flat-out that Joseph called him off, yet he still insists on making himself a royal pain in my ass.” I try another tactic. “I’m used to living my life lookin’ over my shoulder, but I don’t want that for my son.”

Sneddon appears unmoved by my attempt to tug at his heartstrings. Well, shit. “Maybe you should’ve thought of that before you became a mobster.”

Mr. Sympathy. “Hey, that’s just speculation.”

“Your father paid me for favors, and here you are following in dear old Dad’s footsteps. I think it’s safe to say you step over the line of the law every now and then.”

I want to point out that he does as well, but I hold my tongue. Friend, not enemy. “I made some calls before I came to meet you. I have a few other contacts in the area. A reporter—Diane Dimond—tells me she suspects someone’s tapped her phone.”

“Why does that name sound familiar?”

“She’s on *Hard Copy*, did a report on that Heidi Fleiss scandal. She suspects Pellicano of tampering with her home and office phones. Wiretapping’s illegal, y’know.”

“I know the law, Chandler.” I try not to grin at that. It always amuses me when tough guys get indignant and call me by my last name, like they’re trying to make it absolutely clear that we’re not buddies. His expression turns contemplative. “I’ll look into it. If I can nail him for that, perhaps I can tack on a few extra charges as well to keep him in custody. But it won’t be for free,” he says, noticing the hope on my face.

“But of course. A gesture of goodwill is so rare nowadays.”

Sneddon smiles and leans in. “I think fifteen up-front is reasonable.”

I make a face. “That’s highway robbery.”

“You want to protect your son, don’t you?” he asks, feigning concern. “I have nine children, and I wouldn’t hesitate to pay the fee nine times over if it meant keeping them safe.”

I give him an impatient handwave. “Alright, alright, spare me the humanitarian act. Fifteen up-front.”

“And an extra ten to ensure I put him away for quite a while.”

I don’t mind coughing up the money. I may only have a limited amount of cash on me, but my offshore accounts and shell companies are worth a bundle. The only thing that irks me about forking over \$25,000 here is that I just know Sneddon’s milking me for all I’m worth. He wants to see how much he can drain out of me before the well runs dry.

It’s oddly humbling to be on the other side of one of these back-room deals.

“Like yourself, I’ve built a formidable reputation,” Sneddon says, like he doesn’t think I’m convinced. “I’ve been described as combative and tenacious when I pursue a case.”

If his ego inflates anymore it’ll need its own zip code. “Put it away, you’ll get your money.” I reach into my jacket and count out three knots of hundreds, handing the bills to him underneath the table.

Sneddon pockets the cash and stands up. “We’ll be in touch. Next time you see Michael, tell him I said hello.”

My hand steadies over my concealed revolver as I watch him leave.

#

I’m \$15,000 poorer when I return to Frank’s ranch hours later. The sun is just beginning to set, making the entire estate look warmly picturesque. I think about living on a big, sprawling property akin to the one Michael had described on our date in Chicago. I wonder if it’s still for sale. It’s easy to imagine my life with Michael when the dust settles, how we’ll make love morning and night, how we’ll raise Jordan and live out our perfect little piece of heaven together.

Jordan would call me a total sap if he knew I was such a hopeless romantic. Michael probably would too.

Frank’s reading a newspaper and gnawing on another cigar when I get inside the house. “Welcome back, kid. You get what you need?”

“I think so. Where’s Jordan?”

“His uncle stopped by to take him to a movie.”

I feel an icy hand squeeze my heart. “What?”

“Well, Jordan said it was his uncle. I thought it was fishy at first, but the kid didn’t seem scared or nervous around the guy. Said his name was Dave Schwartz.”

The ocean roars in my ears. “Oh, fuck.” My breathing stops.

“He’s not one of the guys that’s after you, is he?” Frank asks, suddenly terrified.

I shake my head, the numbness beginning to seep in. “He shouldn’t be. But Jordan wouldn’t know...”

I know I need to calm myself and think things through rationally, but this is my son’s life we’re talking about. There is no rationality when your child is in danger. Logic goes out the window completely. It’s impossible to detach and look at the situation coldly.

I rake a hand through my hair and collapse into a chair. “Dave is an old friend of mine—or at least, he was. He had an affair with my wife. Jordan doesn’t know. Of course he’d be happy to see him.”

“This guy ain’t gonna hurt Jordan, is he?”

“No, no. He loves that kid. It’s me he’s got a problem with.”

“How come?”

“He got pissed about the way he thought I was treating my wife. I don’t know what June told him about me. Maybe some of it was true, maybe it wasn’t.” Frank’s questions are good for me, keeping me focused. There’s nothing more terrifying than that total black-out of fear and helplessness. “I love her dearly, but June was no saint. She could lie and keep secrets just as good as me.” Apparently better. “But whatever she said to him must have skewed his perspective, because after she died Dave grew more and more antagonistic toward me.”

“How do you think he found this place?”

I have no idea. “My best guess is he’s got some sort of tracking device in the car. Michael and I...may have stolen it from him.” Frank makes a pained face. “Fuck him, he stole my wife. I think I’m entitled to a goddamn Charger.”

Frank doesn’t argue that. “So you’re sure he’s not gonna hurt Jordan?” I nod. “You think it’s just a simple kidnapping?”

“Then why didn’t he leave a ransom note or make any money demands?” I shake my head. “No, this is a setup. He wants me to come to him.”

“Don’t go alone, Evan.”

“This is life or death for my son. I can’t just sit this one out.”

“I’m not askin’ you to. I’m just suggestin’ you wait until we can come up with a plan that doesn’t leave you totally exposed.”

I grit my teeth and try not to think about the last time I’d seen Jordan smile. “How long ago did Dave stop by?”

“About an hour or so.”

My leg starts jackhammering.

“Evan, you’re sure he won’t hurt Jordan?”

“Jordan’s safe with him,” I admit, the words like poison on my lips. As much as Dave may loathe me, he’s still got a soft spot for Jordan.

“Then it’s in you and your son’s best interest to wait for backup. He did this to psyche you out and make you act without thinking. Don’t play into that.”

I nod slowly, trying to believe it. Frank rushes into the kitchen to make a phone call. I stay in my chair, trapped in the vortex of my imagination. I shut my eyes in pain and struggle to think clearly. What I’d said to Frank was true: Jordan’s in no mortal danger with Dave. The kidnapping is just a ploy to get me to meet with Dave unprotected and unprepared. Then it will be over for me. I don’t think he’ll make Jordan watch. Again, he couldn’t hurt the boy like that. He’d probably seen himself as June’s white knight, rescuing her from what he saw—or what she lead him to believe—as a dysfunctional relationship. Maybe “rescuing” Jordan from what he thinks is a harmful influence (read: me) is an extension of his anger with me. He watched my family fall apart, and there was nothing he could do until it was too late.

Would it really be so bad for Jordan if he had to live with Dave? Sure, the guy’s unstable, but when I’m off my medication so am I. I’m no saint; I’ve done worse things for less justifiable reasons. I love my son dearly. I’d die for him. I’d give up everything to keep him safe. But now I wonder if I’m good enough, if I’m the right person for him to structure his existence around.

As much as it kills me inside to even think about surrendering my son to a man I loathe, this isn’t about me. It’s about what’s best for Jordan. Am I strong enough to do the right thing?

Frank comes over to me and sees my tortured form on the couch with my head in my hands. “I called Michael.”

My head shoots up to look at him. “What? Why?”

“Remember what I told you? There’s nothin’ he won’t do to protect the people he loves.”

#

Michael

I burst into Joseph's office in a furious panic. "You told me you called it off!"

Joseph barely looks up from his desk, as if he's totally accustomed to this sort of thing. "Called what off?"

"The hit on Evan!"

"I did!"

"Then why am I hearin' someone kidnapped Jordie?"

That gets his attention. He sits up impossibly straight in his chair like someone dropped an ice cube down the back of his shirt. "What? Impossible, nobody's supposed to go after kids. That's not what I ordered. Was it Tony? That guy can go overboard sometimes."

"It was Dave Schwartz." Something in my head suddenly clicks. "Did you hire Dave to kill Evan?"

"No, Michael, and I'm offended that you'd think I would."

I plant my hands on his desk and stare him down. "We don't have time for this. Did you hire him or not?" Joseph shakes his head. "He kidnapped a thirteen-year-old boy. Now's not the time to hide behind your code of honor."

Joseph folds his hands. "I sent some guys around Staten Island to knock on doors and see if any of Evan's associates knew where he went."

"When was this?"

"When my guys discovered your little crime scene." His words siphon the blood from my face. "You did a good job with the blood stains, Michael. But my men are no stranger to crime scenes, and they thought it was awful peculiar that there wasn't a blood pool on the floor where the body should have been. See, when you shoot someone, they usually fall or slump to the floor and leave a pretty big mess to clean up. Your little show of blood drops and hand prints was nice, but inaccurate."

If my only mistake was that I hadn't had the proper "training" to make a staged murder seem convincing, I suppose I can't be too upset with myself. "So, what, you knew Evan wasn't dead, so you went lookin' to see if he might've told someone where he was going?"

Joseph nods. "Evan did well on that front, but he forgot about Dave."

"Who already had an axe to grind with him."

Another nod. "He knew you and Evan took one of the cars off his lot to make your little road trip. He gave us the plate numbers, make and model. We put look-outs all over, but you

only showed up on our radar when you passed through Gary. I keep a couple guys stationed in the house across the street from our old place, just in case.” Confirming what Marlon had told me when he met up with me in Chicago.

“So he gave you information on how to find us. He played his part. Why’d you need to hire him?”

“I didn’t!” Joseph protests. “I swear on my life I didn’t.”

“Then how did he find Evan, and where did he take Jordie?”

“I don’t know, Mike.”

I grab the phone off of his desk and dial Frank’s number. “Frank, put Evan on.”

“Michael?” It’s the first time I’ve heard Evan’s voice since we left each other in Chicago. He shouldn’t sound so damn sad.

“Joseph says he didn’t hire Dave.”

Evan sighs. “So he doesn’t know where Dave might have taken Jordie.”

“Jordan’s not gonna get hurt, is he?”

“No, Dave’s after me.”

“Then how come he didn’t tell you where to meet him?” Evan’s quiet while he thinks it over. “Does he just assume you’ll know? Is there some place you both knew or talked about in the past?”

“No. Nothin’.”

I think for a moment. “So it’s not about money or even killing you.”

“Taking Jordan would be enough to kill me, Michael. He knows that.”

So do I. Dave may actually succeed at stealing Evan’s entire family from him. The thought breaks my heart anew. “Evan, we’re avoiding the obvious solution here.”

“It ain’t obvious to me.”

“Get the police involved.”

“Michael—”

“Listen, my father has connections around here. He’s got a police chief, commander, a judge, hell, even the LA District Attorney on his payroll. We can make sure nothing happens to us—”

“And you’re willing to bet our son’s life on that?” The words give me pause. I feel my heart in my throat. He’d called him *our* son. Evan doesn’t seem to notice the slip-up. “First of all, Dave’s not a hardened criminal; I’ll bet he doesn’t even have so much as a traffic ticket. We don’t know what he’ll do if he sees cops. He might panic and end up hurting Jordie. Second, Dave’s little kidnapping is nothin’ compared to what I’ve done, what you’ve done, what your family’s done. Dave’ll sing like a canary if they get him in custody, and any cop—no matter how many favors your father’s done for ‘im—would be a fuckin’ idiot to ignore the opportunity to bring down an organized crime ring. You know the drill. They’ll offer him immunity or the chance to plead to a lesser charge if he talks.”

“Right, yeah, okay. Jordie needs you,” I agree.

“He won’t hurt ‘im,” Evan assures me. He sounds calmer, as if explaining this all to me has made him more secure in his convictions. “His plan is probably to raise Jordie as his own. Killing him or harming him would be detrimental to Dave’s self-image as the ‘savior’ of my family.” He takes a deep breath. “Okay, so we just gotta find out where Dave might be taking him.”

“I’ll get in touch with one of my father’s contacts, see if Dave owns any property in the area.”

“Oh, you might wanna see if he’s working with Pellicano on this.”

I shoot an inquisitive, accusing glare at Joseph. “Oh? I thought my father called Tony off.”

“Well, he did, but I guess Tony’s got a little crush on me, ‘cause he’s still on my tail.”

“You think Dave met up with him at some point and they decided to work together?”

“No idea, but they’re the only leads we got right now, so…” He sighs, trails off.

“Alright, I’ll make some phone calls. Try to relax, babe.”

He chuckles dryly. “Sure. You too.”

#

Evan

Frank’s watching me when I hang up the phone. “Evan, maybe you ought’a call the cops in on this.” I shut my eyes in pain. “They’re experts at this stuff. You’re not.”

“If I do that, I lose everything, especially Jordie. I’ll run the risk of landing a lot of good people in prison, including yours truly. Jordie’ll end up shipped off to a foster home, and you got

no idea if those people are fit to care for him or not. If I get anybody locked up, guess who they're gonna come lookin' for on my first day at the pen?" Frank doesn't say anything. "Trust me, it's better this way."

"For you, or for your son?"

"Maybe both." I turn to look at him. "I love that kid more than my own life, but maybe Dave's right about me. Maybe I am a negligent father. Maybe I should've been around more or not at all. June and I had problems in our marriage; maybe she should've just divorced me and married Dave, and then Jordie wouldn't be where he is now."

Frank's entire face frowns, making him look like a sad bloodhound. "My opinion probably doesn't mean nothin', but from what I saw of 'im, Jordan seemed like a well-adjusted kid." He shrugs. "If Michael likes you this much, you're probably a good guy. I don't think Jordan's been harmed by having you in his life."

"That's not how Dave sees it. Maybe June lied to him, made our marriage sound worse than it was so Dave would sympathize with her. Maybe she didn't. But either way, he sees me as the enemy now."

"That doesn't give him the right to steal your kid from you. Or your wife."

I think about that. The silent moment drags on before the phone rings. I answer immediately, thinking it's Michael. I'm not prepared to hear the voice on the other end.

"Dad?"

31. A Friend of Ours

Evan

Panic floods my throat. “Jordie? Are you okay? Where are you?”

His voice is almost a whisper. “I can’t talk long. I had to sneak away from Dave so I could call you.”

“That’s okay, just tell me where you are and I’ll come get you.”

“We’re at this restaurant called The Golden Temple, but we’re about to leave.”

“Is it just Dave who’s with you?”

“Yeah.”

I can hear my heart thumping in my chest. “Did he hurt you?”

“No, I’m fine.”

“Did he say where you’re going? Where is he taking you?”

“We’re going back to the hotel, I think. He said we were gonna leave in the morning.”

Too many questions ricochet around in my head. I pull one out of the air. “What hotel are you staying at, do you remember?”

“Yeah, hold on.” I can hear him rummaging around for something, probably more change for the pay phone. “It’s called the Regent Beverly Hills Wilshire Hotel, room 350.”

I almost laugh. “That’s a mouthful, kiddo. How’d you remember that?”

“I took one of the pens from the room. It’s got the name on it.”

I feel a swell of pride and elation. “How’d you know to call here anyway?”

“When Dave came to pick me up from Frank’s house, I went into our room to get my backpack with my Game Boy, ‘cause I remembered you had that sheet of paper Michael gave you with the address and number for Frank’s house in your bag. I wanted to take that in case I had to call you, ‘cause I thought Dave showing up was kind of weird.”

Thank you, June and Ray, for teaching my son enough about this business to make him think like a spy. “Good thinkin’, Jord’. Okay, do you know where he’s taking you tomorrow?”

“He said we’re leaving in the morning to go to some island Mom’s family was from.”

My breath stops. “St. Vincent’s?”

“Yeah, that’s it.”

An almost frightening calm spreads over me. Yeah, my son’s been kidnapped by a guy who wants me dead, but I know his plan now. I can plan around him. “Okay, I need you to keep Dave distracted. Go see a movie or ask him to take you shopping or something. Just keep him out of that hotel for an hour or two. I *will* come get you, but I need time to make it over there. Can you do that for me?”

“Yeah.”

“Just act natural. Don’t let him know I’m coming or that you called me.”

“Okay. Dad, I gotta go. Love you.”

He hangs up before I can tell him the same.

I set the phone down, tears flooding my eyes. I can’t remember the last time my son said that he loved me. The older he got, the more he rejected that kind of “mushy stuff.” I’m sure he did love me, he just felt like saying it would make him uncool. I wonder if him saying it now means something profound.

Frank’s voice sounds from behind me. “He’s alright, isn’t he?”

“Yeah, I know where Dave’s taking him.”

#

Michael

Joseph lets me drive his gold Mercedes on the way to the Regent Beverly Hills Wilshire Hotel. He sits in the passenger seat with a duffel bag of makeshift flash grenades, looking very displeased at the arrangement. He doesn’t appear to be nervous. I, on the other hand, am way too jittery to be behind the wheel of a vehicle. My knuckles are white around the wheel, my leg bouncing up and down through the periodic stops.

When we get on I-405 heading into Beverly Hills, Joseph asks me, “What exactly is your plan again, Michael?”

“Evan and Frank are going to meet us at the hotel. If Dave is already there, we’ll use the flash-bangs. If not, we’ll find another way in and give him a little surprise when he comes back.”

Joseph raises an eyebrow. “You just gonna take the boy and walk away? Or are you prepared to see this through to the end?”

I don't want any bloodshed, but it might be unavoidable. "Depends if Dave cooperates or not. We'll have him outnumbered and outgunned. He'd be an idiot to try and fight back."

"And if he's an idiot?"

"Then we deal with him," I say plainly.

Joseph seems oddly satisfied with that answer, relaxing back into the leather seat. He reaches over and fiddles with the radio; Tony Toni Toné! sing "If I Had No Loot" while we drive in somewhat silence for a few minutes.

Finally, I ask, "Why are you helping me?"

He gives me a puzzled look. "Why wouldn't I?"

"Oh, please. You had your guys chase me and Evan across the country. Don't act like you're innocent."

He exhales a deep sigh through his nose. "Michael, you look like a father right now. You love this kid like a son. I've made some mistakes, but I think I know a thing or two about that."

I keep driving. "I thought you hated Evan."

"I have my suspicions, but I see that him and this boy mean a lot to you. I don't wanna see what'll happen to you if you lose them."

The car phone rings and interrupts our father-son moment. I pry one hand off the wheel to answer it.

"Michael?" It's Evan, of course. I'd given him the number to the car phone before we left.

"Yeah, babe?"

"I'm about thirty minutes away. Where are you?"

"Outside of Bel-Air on I-405. Fifteen minutes, tops."

"Shit, okay." He sighs in frustration. "You won't mind sittin' 'til I get there?"

"No, I'll be fine." I switch hands. "Do you want me to go in if he's already there, or should I wait for you?"

"Wait for me. Please. The more the merrier, right?"

My cloud of despair lifts momentarily at the levity in his voice. "Right. Then I'll see you there."

“I love you,” he blurts out. It’s not the first time he’s said it, but I still get chills.

“I know.”

Evan does something I’m not expecting at all: he laughs. “Holy shit, did you just Han Solo me?”

“Yeah, I did.”

“I am totally giving you points for that. I have the best boyfriend ever.”

“No, I think I do,” I say around a grin. “I’ll see you at the hotel, babe.”

“Yeah, you too.”

I hang up, and Joseph’s giving me a look I can only describe as frustrated confusion. “What?”

He shrugs, putting his palms up as if warding off my accusation. “Nothin’, I’m not sayin’ nothin’.”

#

Evan

I pull into the parking lot of the hotel about thirty minutes later. Michael’s sitting in the driver’s seat of a gold Mercedes, doing surveillance from the very back of the lot. I try to sneak up on him, but he hears the car pull up and shut off. His head whirls around, then he gets out of the car and rushes toward me.

Michael leaps into my waiting arms and wraps me in a tight embrace. The force of it would have knocked me off my feet if I hadn’t been ready. He pulls my face to his and kisses me hard, like he doesn’t know how to stop. I can feel my heart pounding and my mind racing with panic, but Michael’s greedy hands in my hair and his mouth against mine set everything right for one blissful moment.

He rests his forehead on my chest. I close my eyes and kiss his hair. “I missed you.”

“Good.”

I smile. “Is he in there?”

Michael straightens up and takes a step back. “No, I don’t think they’re back yet.”

“Jordan must’ve been able to stall him, then.”

“My family uses this hotel as a meeting place. You want me to go let us inside?”

“You can’t just break in yourself?”

He shakes his head. “The locks here are too difficult.” Probably why they use it as a meeting place. “They work on electronic cards. I have a spare I can try that I picked up the last time I was here, but there’s no guarantee it’ll work. If it doesn’t, I’ll just go to the front desk and say I left my key in my room.”

“And since you have ‘connections’ here, they’ll give you one no questions asked.”

He smiles a wide smile. “Of course.”

I noticed another person sitting in Michael’s car. It looks suspiciously like Joseph Jackson. “Why is your father here, Michael?”

Michael looks back at Joseph, who opens the door and steps out. “He wanted to help.”

“Uh-huh. Any reason why you didn’t tell me he was comin’?”

“It was a spur of the moment decision on his part,” Michael says.

Joseph approaches us, and we shake hands. “We gotta stop meetin’ like this,” he says.

“Yeah, hopefully next time will be a little more pleasant.”

Michael pats my hand. “You two get acquainted. I’ll let us inside.” He struts off before I can say anything else. I watch him walk away.

Joseph clears his throat; I try to look like I wasn’t gawking at his son. “I assume Michael told you the hit is off, huh?”

“Yeah.” I’m not sure what else to say. Do I thank him? I’m pretty sure he didn’t call it off out of the goodness of his heart.

“You and him gonna move away and live together, raise that boy of yours?”

I find the courage to nod. “That’s the plan, if he’ll have me.”

Joseph steps closer and drops his voice to a low murmur. “Well, Mr. Chandler, you think I’ve made your life hell so far? Now I’m family. And you’ve seen the way I treat my family.”

I chuckle. “I’d rather die than hurt Michael.”

“I might just have to call your bluff someday.”

It's not a bluff, but he'll realize that eventually.

It takes Michael about five minutes to get inside the room and flick the lights on and off as a signal. Frank opts to stay in his car as a look-out/potential getaway driver. Joseph and I head inside to meet with Michael. I look around the room, dimly lit by the moonlight pouring in through the curtains. Jordan's backpack is still here, as well as a few duffel bags I assume belong to Dave. There's a neat little nook to hide behind where the closet stops and forms a wall by one of the beds.

"Where are they headed?" Michael asks. "Tomorrow, I mean."

"St. Vincent and the Grenadines," I answer, sitting beside him on the bed. I have to nudge the bag of explosives he'd brought out of the way first. "It's an island in the Caribbean where June's family was from. She vacationed there during the summers when she was younger." She must have told Dave about that, because I don't think Jordan would have known.

"Would Jordie even be able to leave the country? Does he have a passport?"

"Yeah, we went to Monaco over the summer when he was about ten." I begin to fidget with my nails. Michael places a warm, comforting hand over mine.

"It's going to be fine," he assures me.

"What if we're making the wrong move?" I ask, my voice strangled by panic. "What if he panics at the sight of us here and hurts Jordie?"

Michael shakes his head. "He won't. Trust me."

"How do you know?"

"Because he raved about Jordie. Loved him like a son." He squeezes my hand. "And he hated you."

"Gee, that's comforting."

"In a way. It means if he does have a gun, he'll aim for you first. But never Jordie. He's planning on raising him as his own. He wouldn't go through all this just to hurt him."

I swallow thickly, trying to see it the way Michael does. I'd been so certain that Dave wouldn't hurt Jordan, but now that the sand in the hourglass is running out, I'm having second thoughts. It's probably just nerves.

"Why's this guy so pissed at you anyway?" Joseph asks from his spot in the chair by the window.

“He had an affair with my wife for five years.” It still doesn’t hurt any less. “I admit I may have fucked her over in some ways, but I don’t know what she told Dave. She might have lied or embellished things, but I don’t think she had to.” I breathe out a sigh. “I believe everything is preventable—every bad action that anybody takes is probably preventable if you just sit down and talk about it. I didn’t do that with June as often as I should have. And I know that I’m the cause of this whole problem—”

Michael grabs my face in his hands and silences me with a kiss. My heart stutters in my chest. “Evan, stop blaming yourself for everything. Dave made his choices. We’re gonna bring Jordie back home and that’s gonna be the end of it.” He places his other hand on my back, righting me.

We sit in silence for a few minutes before Michael perks up. He motions for us to be quiet—like we were talking at all to begin with—and I strain to listen, unsure as to what he’d heard. My pulse quickens. The sound of my raucous heartbeat pounds in my ears, drowning out almost all sound.

I hear the doorknob rattle.

In one swift motion, Michael whips his gun out and rushes over to the window to hide behind the drapes. Joseph follows suit. I press my back flat against the closet wall, my thirty-eight at the ready. Michael and Joseph have put themselves in a vulnerable position. Dave will most likely spot them first if he turns on the light when he comes in, but I’m obscured until he reaches the beds. Then I can take him by surprise if he tries anything squirrely.

The door to the room opens. I hold my breath. I try to swallow, but my throat’s too dry. My heart’s still pounding furiously—I feel like it’s loud enough to give away my hiding spot. I press my palm over my chest, trying to muffle the sound. So many thoughts swirl dizzily in my mind. More than anything, I want to tell my son that I love him.

I hear the door shut. That’s when Michael steps out from behind the curtain with his gun aimed at Dave’s head. “Dave, so nice to see you again.”

Joseph steps out to flank Michael.

Dave snorts a laugh. “What is this, Hamlet? Just leave it alone, Michael. It’s better for Jordie this way.”

I will myself to speak. “I’m afraid I can’t do that, Dave.”

“Dad!” Jordan’s voice is rich with relief. I can’t see him yet; neither Dave nor Jordan have walked past the wall I’m using as a hiding spot.

“It’s alright, Jordie. You’re safe now.”

Dave takes a few steps forward and finally sees me there with my gun drawn. “Really, Evan? How did you find me, anyway?” He’s caught between the three of us. I still can’t see Jordan. Maybe it’s best for him that way; he’s right by the door in case things get hairy.

“Just a hunch.”

Dave looks away at what I presume is Jordan. “Jordie, you told Evan where we were, didn’t you?” Jordan doesn’t answer. “And you stalled for time while he got his little motley crew together to stop us.”

“Not bad for a thirteen-year-old, right?” Jordan offers, albeit fearfully.

“Just give me my son back, and this is over.”

Dave shakes his head. I don’t see the bulge of a holster or any other signs he’s carrying a concealed weapon. Of course, that doesn’t mean he isn’t. “No, Evan, I don’t think I will. Do you really think living with you is what’s best for Jordie?”

“Yeah, I do,” I answer with no hesitation. “Because I’m the guy that came to save him.”

“I think you’re referring to me.”

“No, Dave, it’s me. See, as bad as my life is, I’m willing to let it get a lot worse and sacrifice whatever it is—and I don’t even consider it a sacrifice—I’ll give up anything so that my son won’t be damaged. You’re not willing to do that.”

“I came here to save him from *you*, Evan,” Dave accuses. “You don’t think this violent, unlawful lifestyle is going to harm him in the long run? It certainly harmed June.”

I grit my teeth. “Leave her out of this.”

“Answer the question.”

“Do I think it’s harmful? Yeah, I do. That’s why I’m walkin’ out as soon as I have my son back. But I think it’s more harmful to forcefully remove him from his family. And I got news for you, buddy: June wanted him to follow in my footsteps. So if you’re doing this for her, you might wanna rethink things a bit. I was the one tryin’ to keep him sheltered from it.”

Dave looks surprised for a moment, as if he hadn’t expected to hear that. I wonder if June had lied and told him I was the one pushing the mob life on Jordan.

“Why don’t you tell us how you found Evan and Jordie?” Michael speaks up, his voice impossibly soft yet still demanding.

“You stole one of my cars,” Dave explains, “and your little friend Tony was more than happy to help track you down, Evan. It seems you two have some sort of rivalry going on?”

“I think he’s just jealous of my good looks.”

Not even a smile. Tough crowd. “You’re poison, Evan,” Dave says. “You ruin everything you touch. You ever think that Michael deserves better than this?”

“What Michael deserves and what Michael wants are two totally different things.”

“And Michael can speak for himself, thank you very much.” Michael gives me a pointed look. “Dave, just walk away,” he pleads. “It’ll be better for everyone. Evan and I can raise Jordie together, Jordie won’t need to see any bloodshed, and you’ll still be alive. Really, everybody wins.”

Dave turns to Michael. “You’ve seen it first-hand. You’ve lived it. You can’t think Evan is more fit to raise Jordie than I am.”

“You kidnapped him,” Michael hisses out, stressing each word. “Not to mention your other indiscretions.”

“I’m only thinking of Jordie,” Dave says.

I roll my eyes. “Oh, yeah, sure. Abduct him from his parents and his friends and take him to an island in the Caribbean he’s only ever heard about. Great job. If you were concerned about Jordie, you wouldn’t have forced us to show up with guns to get him back.”

Jordan’s voice sounds further away now; he must have sneaked into the bathroom to hide, using the door as a shield. “Dave, I—I wanna stay with my dad and Michael.”

“Can’t argue with that.”

“I would do anything for Jordie. I would lose everything. I would die for Jordie. That’s the bottom line,” Dave says.

“Then why don’t you prove it and walk outta here?” Dave doesn’t budge. “Oh, I see, you’re gonna prove it by forcing my hand and making me shoot you, aren’t you? You stubborn bastard. There’s nothing I’d love more than to shoot you, Dave, but I’d rather not have Jordie see his dad kill someone.”

“You’d rather he just know about it instead.”

“You’ve got three weapons pointed at your head. It’s gonna be a massacre if I don’t get what I want. Just walk away. I’m not an evil person. I don’t wanna do this.”

Dave’s face is taut with emotion. Tears start to cascade down his cheeks. “Why couldn’t it have been you that night?” he wails. “June would still be alive, and we could have moved away and started fresh, raising Jordie and Lily together.”

I feel a twinge of pain, like my heart's been zapped with a cattle prod. Out of the corner of my eye, I see Michael bristle in much the same way. "Don't," he whimpers.

Dave's wide-eyed pleading takes a twisted, macabre turn. "I'm going to tell you a little secret, Evan. Something June told me in confidence. See, we had a relationship where she talked to me about stuff she never said to you."

My knees begin to shake. I feel a curl of nausea in my stomach. "Yeah, June kept secrets. Revelation of the century there, Dave."

"Dad, what's he talking about?" Jordan asks. "Does he know who killed Mom?"

Michael's voice is a stern warning. "Dave."

"Will somebody tell me what the hell is goin' on?" Joseph bellows.

"When June got pregnant again, she was so happy," Dave says. "We were gonna take Jordie and the baby to St. Vincent's and make a life together. She was going to leave you, Evan."

I take the blow without flinching. I had prepared myself for the fateful day when I'd be presented with the divorce papers, or even the moment she'd spit the words out in the heat of an argument. It's not really a surprise, but hearing it still breaks my heart. "Yeah, I sorta figured that."

"But there's one thing you don't know—"

Dave's body goes slack, the life snuffed out of him in one quick gust, and collapses to the carpet. The blast made little noise due to the silencer, but it's still enough to make us all whirl to face the direction of the sound. I actually gasp out loud when I realize who the shooter is.

Michael holds the smoking gun, his face a smooth mask of indifference. I stare at the ragged heap that was once Dave Schwartz and feel something akin to pity. "Michael..."

"He wasn't gonna let you walk out of here, you know that, Evan," Michael says, his voice quivering. "He was gonna take Jordie away from you. I know that's not what you really wanted."

I'm still frozen in shock watching Dave bleed out onto the carpet.

"Evan, it was either him or you. There's no contest."

"You killed someone."

"Wouldn't be the first time."

“Yeah, but—”

“Evan, you and Jordie are my family. There’s nothing I wouldn’t do for you.” Michael steps over the body with lithe grace and presses a quick kiss to my mouth. “Take Jordie back to Frank’s, spend the night. I’ll make arrangements for the morning.” He kisses me again. This one lasts a little longer. “Go, baby. It’s over.”

“It’s not over until we’re together.”

“Then just wait a little longer.”

#

“Dad, I’m fine, really.”

“You sure?”

We’re in the guest room at Frank’s, getting ready for bed by about ten o’clock that night. Jordan hasn’t been acting unusual—opting to play his Game Boy in silence most of the evening—but I still feel like he’s gonna need a lifetime of therapy after all of this.

“Yeah, I didn’t even see anything,” Jordan says. “I was listening through a crack in the door, but I wasn’t looking. I sorta knew what was gonna happen.”

“I’ll never be sorry enough for putting you through this.”

Jordan shakes his head. “It’s not your fault.” He doesn’t say anything for a moment, then: “Was Dave in love with Mom?”

I feel my chest shudder at his innocent question. “Yeah, yeah, he was.”

“Was Mom in love with Dave?”

My lungs stop, and I have to remind myself to breathe. “I think so.” Jordan’s expression changes into something sad and heartbreaking. “But remember how I said you can love different people in different ways? I think that’s what happened with your mom.”

“And she got confused ‘cause she had to pick one person?”

“Something like that.” He nods slowly, understanding.

“I thought Dave was your friend.”

“So did I.”

“Then why did he try to take me away?”

I think about how to explain it. “He loved your mom a lot, maybe as much as I do. I think he thought she’d be happier with him, and when she passed he just got more and more jealous and resentful of me. He thought it was disrespectful to her that I started dating Michael.”

Jordan’s face scrunches up. I’m probably confusing him.

“Remember how you thought that me dating Michael meant I didn’t love your mom anymore? Well, that’s what Dave thought too. And sometimes grown-ups get really”—I search for the word—“stubborn about what they think is right.” He nods and crawls into bed. “You gonna be able to sleep?”

Jordan rolls his eyes. “Dad, I told you. I’m fine. I don’t see why it has to be such a big deal. I mean, I do, but...Michael was just trying to protect us. Besides, I’ve lived through worse.”

We both have.

“You know this doesn’t have anything to do with you, right? None of this is your fault, Jord’.”

He nods again. “Yeah, Dad, I know. I’m okay, really.” I take his word and switch off the light, bathing the room in darkness. “So, do we get to go home now?”

“I don’t know. Michael’s taking care of that. I guess he’ll call us tomorrow and we’ll just go from there. Would you be upset if we lived here? Like, in California?”

“No, that’s okay. I just want things to feel normal again.”

“Me too, buddy.”

#

Michael

Joseph and I sit in molded-resin chairs in the backyard of our Hayvenhurst mansion after the clean-up. It’s just after two in the morning. The moonlight casts an ethereal glow atop the glistening surface of the pool. Joseph had found me here about fifteen minutes ago, sat beside me and said nothing. It’s a comfortable silence now that we have an understanding between us.

He clears his throat. “What was Dave gonna tell Evan that you didn’t want him to know?”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about,” I argue, but my voice is weak.

“Dave wasn’t armed—didn’t even have a weapon on ‘im. So your claim that he was gonna take the boy by force or kill Evan doesn’t really fly.” He leans closer and fixes me with a very parental stare. “I won’t tell no one, Mike. I’ll stand by you. I just wanna know.”

I stare off into the distance at nothing in particular. “Evan and June had been trying to have another child after Jordie was born, but, for one reason or another, they had trouble. I don’t know if that caused a rift in their marriage or not, if that was the big thing that put them at each other’s throats, but…” I push my hair out of my face. “June started having an affair with Dave about six years ago. Evan didn’t know. So when June got pregnant again, they were both real happy about it. They thought it might help their marriage.”

Joseph shuts his eyes in pain. “But the baby wasn’t Evan’s, was it?”

I shake my head, feeling the tears start again. “Evan doesn’t know. I only know because Dave told me when we were alone once. He said Evan was poison and that was the reason why June couldn’t get pregnant again by him.”

“Did June know who the father was?”

I shrug. “I don’t know how she lost the baby. I never asked. Wasn’t my business. But maybe she knew.” I sniffle and suck in a breath, looking over at my father with pleading eyes. “Joseph, you can’t tell Evan. You can’t. Please. He’s suffered so much, this would just…”

Joseph places a warm hand on my shoulder. “I won’t tell anyone.” We sit in silence for a few moments, save for my embarrassing sniffles. Then Joseph sighs. “I suppose I can let Evan and Jordan stay in the guest room ‘til you three get back on your feet. You can’t exactly go back home, can you?”

I look at him like he’s just grown an extra head. “Is this some sort of test? Are you secretly hoping I’ll say no because you want me to choose blood family over heart family?”

Joseph frowns. “No, I’m tryin’ to be hospitable to my son-in-law and nephew.”

“Really? You’re not gonna cheapen it and call ‘em your ‘future’ relatives?”

“Technically, they already are part of our family. You’ve gone to hell and back for ‘em.”

I feel something reach into my chest and squeeze. I wipe my watery eyes with the back of my hand. “Thank you.”

Epilogue: *A Nova Vida*

Evan

Michael corrals me and Jordan into the Charger, grinning from ear to ear like a kid on Christmas morning. He'd asked us to pack our things the night before, and I'm filled with the nagging suspicion that we're getting the big kiss-off.

Not one for surprises, Jordan asks, "Where are we going?"

That's a damn good question.

Michael just keeps up the Stepford-Wife smile and cryptic answers. "I want to show you something."

"Oh, this sounds promising."

Since the whole mess with Joseph is over, we've been staying in Michael's Encino home in the guest wing for the past couple of weeks. Michael's accompanied us in our room at night, making sure none of the more vengeful members of his family try anything. But by "vengeful" I'm sure he means Joseph. Joseph's demeanor toward me and Jordan since the "incident" has been...interesting, to say the least. With Jordan, he's alarmingly pleasant and jovial, cracking jokes and generally acting like a real human being. With me, well, he'd rather pretend I don't exist, but on the off-chance we catch each other in the hallways or are forced to share a few sentences Joseph is stubbornly civil. One evening he passed me a plate of rolls at the dinner table; I thought the gesture might actually kill him.

Michael's mother Katherine has pretty much accepted me and Jordan as members of the family. On our first evening at the house, she showed us countless pictures of Michael over the years that he would definitely deem embarrassing and unflattering. I think he looks beautiful in every single one.

Michael's siblings are warm and welcoming in their own ways. Jackie and I watch baseball and bicker about team superiority. Sometimes I'll help Tito with his cars out in the garage. Marlon tells me embarrassing stories about Michael. I play cards and foosball with Randy and Jermaine. I still don't know which brother shot my wife. I don't think it matters anymore.

We drive in silence for a while as Michael moves to a song on the radio. He's way too upbeat today. Something's up.

"Did Joseph ask you to keep us out of the house while he bugs our room?" I ask, because, seriously, that sounds like something he would do.

Michael laughs a light, airy sound. "No, silly! Nothing like that! I promise, you'll be pleasantly surprised."

After a few minutes pass, Jordan says, “Are you kicking us out?”

“Heavens, no! Jordie, trust me, you’re gonna love it.”

I breathe an exasperated sigh. Surprises do not bode well with my knee-jerk reaction to expect the literal worst from every situation.

“Are we there yet?” Jordan whines.

“Thirty minutes max,” Michael says.

Jordan groans theatrically and takes his Game Boy out of his backpack. I have no such distractions, so I opt to stare out the window at the rolling California scenery.

About an hour passes, and the cityscape begins to thin, giving way to rolling hills and lush greenery. A smattering of trees dots the landscape. I realize now that Michael’s going to kill us. He’s been ordered by Joseph to shoot us and leave us for dead in the vast countryside where no one will ever find us. I’m on to you, Michael.

“Do we even get a hint to where we’re going?” I ask him.

“You forgot what day it is.”

I think for a moment. “I’m gonna say Tuesday, but I’m probably wrong.”

“It’s our anniversary, remember?” he says around a grin.

It’s embarrassingly obvious now. Michael’s probably planned some huge party for us, or maybe the bags hint toward some sort of elaborate vacation. We drive through a long, winding valley and come upon an oak gate that opens for us. About half a mile inside the property is an enormous, elegant house, sprawling over what seems like acres of land. It’s a huge, massive thing, which bears repeating because, seriously, this place is fuckin’ giant. It looks like something out of a fairy tale, a place where you might actually believe magic exists.

Of course, I’d missed the obvious. It’s our anniversary, so Michael’s taken us to a massive resort where we can relax and have some time away from his family. My expectations of something sinister seem ridiculous now.

Michael parks the car out front, and we walk up to the entrance. I look around for resort staff, but the entire area seems frighteningly desolate. “Where is everyone?” I ask him.

Michael laughs and opens the front door for us. There’s no need for him to flip on any lights, because the massive windows let the sunlight in and showcase the grassy lawn encompassing us on all sides. My first impression of the interior is that the wood motif of Hayvenhurst is very prominent here—almost everything seems to be made out of oak or

mahogany or varying shades of brown. Then I notice how empty the place is, save for cardboard boxes placed haphazardly on the ground that look suspiciously like moving boxes.

“I guess we should have made a reservation first,” I quip as I walk inside, my shoes clacking on the wooden floor.

Michael laughs in that way of his when he knows something I don't. “Baby, where do you think we are?”

“A resort that didn't know we were coming?”

He laughs again. “It's our anniversary, remember?”

“Yeah, so?”

He sighs, but there's a smile there. “We're home.”

I feel my breath get stuck in my throat, but I manage to croak out, “What?”

If he smiles any wider his face is gonna split in half. “Remember that place I told you about on our date, the house I wanted to move into?” He gestures grandly, his arms spread wide. “I bought it for us!”

Jordan's jaw drops. “You're kidding! Seriously?”

Michael puts his hand in the boy's hair. “Yep! This is our new home.”

I'm officially shocked. I'm looking around the gigantic living room, blinking in disbelief. “You're absolutely insane, Michael,” I say with affection. “This place is enormous. How...”

“Don't worry about moving in. I called Larry and told him what happened.”

“Larry Feldman?” I'd been fairly sure he'd never want to hear my name again after everything that went down.

Michael nods, and his dark curls bounce along with him. “Yeah, he was more than happy to arrange the move.”

“Wait, what are you talking about?”

“You didn't notice all you guys' stuff was here?”

Jordan peers inside one of the boxes. “Oh, hey, Dad, look! Here's some of our stuff from the living room!” I look inside and recognize one of the framed paintings we'd had on the wall, a mirror, and a few vases. “Is there a basement?” Jordan asks.

“No, but there is a big game room,” Michael says proudly.

Jordan practically squeals with delight.

It’s hard for me to comprehend that we’re going to live here. Never in my wildest dreams would I have thought I’d be living with Michael in such a grand space in just a year’s time. In the span of about one chaotic month, we’d managed to save the idyllic life we’d fought for, unite our families, and give Jordan a wonderful, limitless future. Now I was with Michael, our own blissful life stretching out in front of us.

Michael approaches me with a shy smile on his face while Jordan digs through the boxes spread over the floor. “Well, what do you think? Do you like it?”

“Of course, but...” I stare into his eyes, passionate and pleading. “You gave me a house. How am I supposed to top that?”

He pulls me close. “Our bedroom has a fireplace,” he says with a purr of arousal.

“Oh. *Oh.*”

“And there’s a pool and a hot tub out back.”

“Sounds like we’re gonna be busy.”

Michael’s lips press fiercely against my own. “So why don’t we get started?”

Sometimes the hardest part isn't letting go, but rather, learning to start over.

~ Nicole Sobon