

The Family Business

Summary: 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?

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“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

I: Cosmic

July 1992

It shouldn't be too difficult to ask his father about moving out; teenagers leave home all the time, and their parents are ecstatic about it — but Michael is thirty-four years old, and those teenagers don't have to answer to Joseph Jackson, Mafia chief of the west coast.

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

Janet's tabulating something on a calculator; she doesn't even look up, just shakes her head. "You really wanna open that can of worms?"

The house in question is featured in a Greensheet ad Michael's had dog-eared for about a week, highlighted in green and pink and yellow until the colors blended. The listing describes a twenty-seven-hundred acre property in Los Olivos named Sycamore Valley Ranch. Michael's had the magazine hidden beneath his mattress for the past week or so, as though the proximity to it might give him the courage to talk to his father about his plans.

"If not now, when? Should I wait 'til I'm forty?" Michael tries to shake off the horror that rises within him at the prospect.

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Janet shrugs simply, her fingers tapping numbers on the calculator while her other hand writes figures in a spiral notebook . “Wait long enough and he’ll be dead. Problem solved.”

“You don’t mean that!”

“Of course I don’t. But maybe you should hold off on asking for favors right now. Catch him in a good mood.”

After one of Michael’s brothers caused problems three weeks ago on a New York business trip, to say Joseph isn’t in the best mood would be an understatement. The family has remained tight-lipped as to the identity of the guilty party, and Michael hasn’t been prying to find out. What you don’t know can’t hurt you, as the saying goes.

“Joseph in a good mood? I’ll have better luck waiting ‘til I’m forty,” Michael grumbles.

“Just do what I did: open a boutique and offer to launder his money.”

They’re inside Janet’s fashion shop, The Velvet Rope. Most of the mannequins wear flamboyant, decorative clothes designed by Janet herself. The newest arrival is a shiny vinyl jacket with orange and yellow and green sparkles glittering throughout the material like twinkling stars. Price tag: \$350. The store itself is located in a nouveau-riche Bel-Air shopping mall; sometimes Michael comes here just to walk around and soak in the atmosphere.

“You don’t launder his money,” Michael says.

“I know, but I offered,” Janet says. “I guess he doesn’t want his daughters directly involved in the business.”

“That seems a little unfair.”

“It works for me.”

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

"He already made that mistake once."

She's referring to their sister LaToya, who married a brute of a man named Jack Gordon. Gordon has mob ties in New York, and he managed to get Joseph's permission to marry her if she could perpetuate the Jackson family name around the east coast. Joseph realized his mistake too late when Gordon ended up isolating LaToya from her family. They haven't heard from her in years. So Joseph tightened the reins on his children looking to leave home.

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

"He knows. But he's still a father with a lot of control issues."

Point taken. Michael listens to the echoing chatter of mall patrons outside the shop's glass doors and resigns himself to another year of captivity.

When Michael returns to the Encino mansion he calls home, Joseph's sitting in his private office with the door open, as though waiting for Michael to pass by in the hallway. You'd think his small stature would make him look less intimidating when he's sitting down. You'd be wrong.

Joseph barks Michael's name, and Michael snaps to attention like a nervous cadet. "I got two questions for you," Joseph says. "One: where the hell have you been?"

Michael creeps into the open doorway. "At the mall, visiting Janet. I told you this morning before I left, remember?" Clearly Joseph doesn't remember, but Michael always chokes in situations like this.

"Two: what the hell is this?" What Joseph holds in his white-knuckled

fist twists Michael's stomach into knots: the Greensheet magazine from underneath Michael's mattress. The magazine with the highlighted listing for a home in Los Olivos.

Michael feels the ground drop from beneath him. He tries to convince himself it's possible Joseph didn't even see the ad, that he merely took offense to Michael hiding something from him. But even as Michael attempts to sell this half-assed reasoning to himself, he already knows he's not buying. Joseph is nothing if not thorough. He would have scoured the magazine for its hidden treasures.

As if to lay to rest Michael's doubts, Joseph turns to the ad in question. "Don't tell me you're thinkin' of dropping thirty-five million dollars on this place?"

It's not about the money. Every Jackson family bank account holds more wealth than the GDP of most countries. Michael swallows, but his mouth is too dry for the effort. "I could haggle."

Joseph sets the flimsy paper onto his desk, his face without a glimpse of sympathy. "You're thinkin' about breaking away from the family, aren't you?"

"I could do a lot with that place. Raise a family, build a career —"

"You already *have* a family," Joseph interrupts. "And what kind of career you think you're goin' into?"

"Something like Janet's doing?" Michael hates how his voice upticks there, making it sound like a question. He ignores the lurching feeling in his gut and says, "I could — I could launder your money."

Joseph laughs, and, wow, so much for that bluff. "You got no plans of your own, so listen to mine. You ought'a start taking on some of my responsibilities. I ain't getting 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."

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"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."

"Have Jackie do it!" Michael protests. Jackie is the oldest Jackson brother, so naturally this responsibility should fall to him.

Joseph shakes his head wearily. "I'm puttin' out too many of his fires this month." Could Jackie have been responsible for the accident in New York? Michael can't imagine any of his brothers shooting someone, even accidentally, but it must have happened all the same.

"Why does it have to be me? What about Tito?"

"He's got kids to raise, and he's too busy with the cars anyway." Tito 'repossesses' cars and sells the parts for extra cash.

"Jermaine?"

"Boy can't keep his zipper up."

Joseph has a lineup of excuses for all the others: Randy is too young, and Marlon is an extravagant spender (which is a real 'pot, meet kettle' situation, coming from Joseph).

"How come Janet gets to do what she wants?"

"'Cause Janet came to me with a plan," Joseph says. "She knew exactly what she wanted to do. You just want to leave and hope a good opportunity will fall in your lap. There's no sense in struggling on your own when you could stay here."

"What struggle? I have enough money to sit around and do nothing for the rest of my life if I want."

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“And you think I’ll let you flush all that money down the drain?”

Michael tries 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 Michael a glare that he feels in his bones. “I did. And in order to start a family, you might need to find a *wife* first.”

Michael wonders what part of his ego Joseph’s hoping to bruise here — the part that enjoys unaccompanied, indoor hobbies, or the part that’s attracted to men moreso than women. “Say that I do. What happens then?”

Joseph shrugs and tosses the magazine in the wastebasket by his desk; Michael feels his last shred of hope crumble. “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.”

Michael shuts his eyes. *I’m doomed to stay here forever, and on top of that, he expects me to take over the family business and find a wife.*

As Michael storms out of the office, Joseph says, “I’m thinkin’ about inviting the Chandlers up to negotiate, resolve this big mess and cut a deal.”

“Cut a deal?” Michael repeats, aghast. “A woman — a *civilian* — was killed.”

“It’s a tragedy, I’m not sayin’ it isn’t, but we have to smooth things over. You let things like this fester, and that’s how your friends become your enemies.”

Michael doubts there are such things as friends in this business. His hand freezes around the doorknob when he recognizes Joseph’s tactic. “I am *not* clearing any more debts for you.”

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Joseph looks offended. "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," Michael grumbles as he slams the door behind him.

"I can't believe George Lucas made this. Didn't he make Star Wars?"

Evan sighs in understanding and wraps an arm around his son's shoulders. "How the mighty have fallen." Evan and Jordan are seated on the couch, watching late-night TV. Tonight's midnight feature is *Howard the Duck*. Evan would rather endure waterboarding than watch another minute of this crime against cinema, but spending time with his son ranks higher than maintaining a certain degree of film snobbery. And the glass of Jack and Coke in his hand helps a lot. "At least Lucas didn't write it," Evan says. "That ought to count for something."

"He still put his name all over it," Jordan says with a discerning frown. "Why's this even on TV?"

"When I was your age, we had about three channels, and they all went off-air at midnight."

"I wish *this* was off-air," Jordan mumbles.

"That can be arranged." Evan grabs the remote from the coffee table and switches off the set. "Besides, it's just about bedtime for you, kiddo."

Jordan groans an "Aww, Dad" just as Evan's raising his drink to his

lips. Using Evan's moment of incapacitation to his advantage, Jordan pleads, "C'mon, it's Friday night. Can I stay up one more hour and play Super Mario?"

"No, but you go to bed now, and tomorrow I'll take you to the arcade if I'm not busy."

"You drive a hard bargain," Jordan says, pretending to think over the offer. "But you have to promise."

The nebulous nature of Evan's work puts him in somewhat of a conundrum here, but he's on a roll and doesn't want to stop now. "If I'm not busy, I promise."

Jordan accepts these terms and allows Evan to corral him upstairs. "Brush your teeth," Evan reminds him as Jordan bypasses the hall bathroom.

"I was gonna," Jordan huffs, backtracking to the sink.

While Jordan brushes, Evan lingers in the bathroom doorway and studies his son's reflection in the mirror. Jordan has his mother's eyes, and sometimes his laugh is an echo of hers. Since June died, it's the little things that squeeze Evan's heart; the wallet-size photos of her he finds in the top drawer of the bureau as he's digging for a matching pair of socks; the way Jordan rolls his eyes the same way June did when she argued with Evan; the bottles of lotion and perfume Evan sees every morning in the bathroom cabinet but can't bring himself to throw away; hearing a song on the radio that June loved.

"Dad?" Jordan makes eye-contact with him in the mirror. "You don't have to stand there and watch."

From downstairs, the phone rings. Jordan visibly wilts at the sound. He knows what it means when Evan gets a phone call at this hour.

"Can I trust you to finish up and put yourself in bed while I go answer

that?" Evan asks.

Jordan nods, still scrubbing his teeth (the kid has an admirable brushing technique).

Evan heads downstairs. The phone's still ringing, and he grabs it off the hook before to goes to voicemail. "Yeah?"

Evan's greeted with the nasal, grating voice of his brother Ray. "He didn't show." The 'he' in question is Evan's friend and neighbor Dave Schwartz, who's reneged on payments he owes for the Chandlers 'protecting' his rent-a-wreck. After a few weeks of lapsed payments, Evan decided it was apropos to send Ray over there for a little 'reminder' of why Dave needs the Chandlers' protection (Evan really can't emphasize the sarcasm quotes enough here).

"Well, fuck him! Hold tight. I'll be there in thirty." Dave's rent-a-wreck is tucked between Concord and Arrochar, so Evan has about a thirty-minute scenic drive through Staten Island ahead of him.

"No, no, don't get your panties in a twist," Ray says. "Forget about it. We can handle this."

"The fuck do you mean, 'forget about it'?"

"I mean don't bother coming down. Take care of yourself, y'know?"

Ray works as Evan's underboss, so naturally he's in competition to take over the business, despite their father handing it down to Evan three years ago. But Ray seems to view June's death as the perfect excuse to shut Evan out of business matters. Ray can slowly take charge of the organization, and he gets to look like a concerned, loving brother while he does it.

"No, I'll be there. Give me half an hour, at least."

"Ev —"

* * *

"Don't argue with me." Evan hangs up before Ray can do just that.

Upstairs, Jordan's already tucked himself into bed and switched off the lights. Evan stands in the doorway, wondering if the hall light makes his silhouette look looming and terrifying.

"Do you really have to go?" Jordan asks in a pleading voice that usually makes Evan cave to his demands and buy him something expensive as penance.

"You know the drill."

Jordan sighs. "Why can't Uncle Ray do it?"

Evan steps into the room, approaches Jordan's bedside. "He's already there. He needs me. You know your uncle; he'd lose his head if it wasn't screwed on." Evan sits in the empty space on the bed and ruffles Jordan's hair.

"I need you more," Jordan protests, and it's not hyperbole from a scared twelve-year-old; since burying June three weeks ago, Evan is the only parent Jordan has left.

"You'll be fine," Evan says, guilt sloshing in his stomach. "Nothing's gonna happen to you." If June's looking down on Evan from the great hereafter, what must she think of him now?

"What about you? What if you leave and don't come back?" Jordan doesn't say *like Mom did*, but the implication is there. Evan's heart cleaves in two.

"Hey, that's not gonna happen. I won't let it. Just like I won't let anything happen to you."

"Then how come you let something happen to Mom?"

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Fuck. Evan's not good at comforting talk; June always knew what to say in situations like this. "I didn't — That's not..." He wants to say *that's not true*, but is it? If he hadn't argued with June that night, would she have stormed off to the bar and ended up dead?

Jordan seems to understand that he's hit a nerve. "Sorry, I didn't mean — "

"No, it's okay. If that's how you feel, I want you to tell me." Evan rises from the bed, his knees cracking as he moves (Christ, he's getting old). "Be strong for me, kiddo. I promise I'll be back in two hours. Maybe less than that."

"Why can't you get somebody to stay here 'til you get back? What about Dave? He could come over — "

"Jordie, no. Go to sleep."

Jordan drops his pleading gaze and settles back into bed. They say their goodnights, and within ten minutes Evan's on his way.

The sky is a dark blanket over the cityscape with tiny points of light dotting its surface. Evan moved to Staten Island with June in 1980 after throwing himself into his father's business — overseeing rackets, collecting payoffs and protection payments. In a few short years, he earned enough money to buy their humble home in the suburbs.

Though most of his business takes place in Brooklyn, Manhattan, and Newark, he doesn't mind the drive. And Evan would be lying if he said moving away from the hub of business wasn't a way to keep himself separated from it, as though the distance acts as a barrier between himself and the shadier parts of his work.

When Evan pulls into the lot of the rent-a-wreck, his headlights cut through the darkness. He sees Ray and a man who looks like a brick wall trying to pass for a human being. This, Evan understands, is one of Ray's henchmen.

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Ray watches Evan shut the door of the Mercedes and makes a production out of gesticulating. "I told you not to bother! What the fuck are you doing here?"

Ray has about a good thirty pounds on Evan, but he's pear-shaped, his hair is greying, and he has to look up in order to make eye-contact with anyone over the age of thirteen, so Evan probably won the genetic lottery in this family. Ray looks like the end result of throwing Jon Lovitz and Joe Pesci into that teleportation pod from *The Fly*. Looking at Ray, Evan sees his father staring back.

"Fuck you, alright?" Evan says. "And you stuck around anyway, so don't bitch at me."

"This is the thanks I get for being considerate?"

"Considerate, my ass," Evan grumbles. "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 their scrutiny.

Evan takes a look behind them at the damage. Five vehicles are completely smashed. Evan only ordered four. But looking at the destruction — busted windows, punctured tires, frames bent and mangled by swings from tire irons and baseball bats — feels cathartic somehow.

"I guess it's your lucky day, big guy," Evan says.

Ray shoots him a perplexed look. "You aren't gonna do nothin'?"

"Why should I? Shit, I wish you guys kept going."

"Keep going?" Ray sputters. "What the fuck are you on? It's just a couple'a missed payments."

* * *

"No, it's not just that. It's disrespect. I want this asshole to know he can't get away with screwing us."

"Ev', come on. He's your friend."

"I don't care who he is. Nobody fucks with me. I'm in charge, and I say we fuck this place up."

Ray steps back. "Look, we sent the message already. Why don't you just cool off and go home, alright?"

"Fine, I'll do it myself." Evan grabs the tire iron from Brick Wall's oversized hands. He swings a perfect arc into the windshield of a Honda Civic. "You guys are fucking worthless." Glass shatters into tiny pieces. The rest of the windows follow suit, each swing fueled by the black pit of rage simmering in Evan's gut. He wants to destroy something the way his own life's been destroyed and demolished beyond all recognition. Wrecking cars in a rental parking lot isn't the most ideal way of expressing his anger, but it's a start.

Despite his initial protests, Ray doesn't stop Evan from busting windows or denting the hoods of three more cars. And why should he? To protect Dave's investments? Fuck him. What does he know about losing someone he loves? Not a goddamn 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? Evan lost something more precious, something irreplaceable.

Evan trades out the tire iron for a sledgehammer. Ray looks like he wants to say something, but he keeps his mouth shut and lets Evan have at the wreckage.

The following morning, Evan wakes up to a dizzy pounding in his

head and Jordan shaking him. "Dad, wake up."

Evan groans, aware of a soreness throughout his entire body. What the fuck did he do last night? The bottle of whisky on the night table gives him a pretty good idea.

"I'm up." Since losing June, most of Evan's mornings begin with a hangover. "What time is it?" His eyes are too bleary to read the numbers on the bedside clock.

"Noon. You promised we'd go to the arcade, remember?"

Oh shit. Evan may actually say that out loud, given the distressed look on Jordan's face. He can't imagine getting out of bed, getting dressed, driving, and standing around while Jordan feeds quarters into game machines for two hours. Just thinking about it exhausts him. But what piece of shit makes a promise to his son that he doesn't fulfill?

"Jordie, can I take a rain-check on that?" A piece of shit like Evan, apparently.

Jordan exhales a sigh of the ever-disappointed child. "Dad, you promised."

"I know, and I'm sorry." Evan closes his eyes, because the light seeping through the curtains is too much for him.

Jordan looks at the night table. "What about your medication? Maybe if you take it..."

"'Do not drink alcohol with this drug.' Says it right on the label."

Jordan frowns, like he realizes what it must mean that Evan has chosen alcohol over the pills. With a resigned sigh, Jordan says, "You want me to bring you breakfast?"

"No, don't worry about me," Evan mumbles as he burrows deeper

into the bed. "I'll be fine."

Evan thinks he hears Jordan mumble, "Yeah, right," as he leaves the room. He can feel his heartbeat pulsing in his brain; thinking about it makes him want to throw up.

There's a bottle of Advil on the night table. Evan fumbles for it, manages to get the ridiculous childproof cap open and shake out two capsules. He swallows them down with a swig of whisky; it's a calculated risk, but he was never great at math.

Just as the pills begin to subdue the throbbing in his skull, Evan hears a crescendo of obnoxious rumbling. Is this an earthquake? Since when does Staten Island get earthquakes? Then the rumbling stops, as though a switch has been flipped, and someone's knocking on the front door. A moment later, Jordan calls up to him: "Dad! Dave's here!"

So that's what was making all that goddamn noise: Dave Schwartz's ancient Ford truck. Evan squeezes his eyes shut, as if doing so might make Dave blink out of existence. He hears the *clomp-clomp* sounds of Dave's footsteps on the stairs. Dave says, "Knock, knock," as he enters the bedroom through the open door, which irritates Evan to no end; the awful hairpiece Dave's wearing irritates him more.

"I could hear your fucking truck from across the street," Evan grouches into the pillow. "Will you get a goddamn muffler already?"

Dave's wearing a tie-dye T-shirt and khaki shorts, like he's going to a Grateful Dead concert. "Sounds like someone woke up on the wrong side of the bed."

Evan rolls his eyes. "What do you want?" He knows Dave didn't stop by for a friendly chat, not after all the destruction Evan caused at the rent-a-wreck last night.

Dave tentatively approaches the bed. "Um, so there's been some, uh, *damage* to my inventory, 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 on the night table.

“Pleasure doing business with you.” Evan pulls open the drawer and slides the money inside.

“You alright, Ev’? You look like hell, no offense.”

Evan must look as awful as he feels. “Rough night.”

“No shit.” Dave surveys the room, getting a good look at the unwashed clothes piled on the floor. “You need any help around here or the bar?”

June was working at the bar the night Evan’s world was torn open like a gutted calf. He hasn’t set foot in there since. The tavern remains locked up like a monument to his grief.

“If you want, I could take Jordie off your hands for the afternoon,” Dave offers. “He mentioned something about going to the arcade.”

“Did he?” Evan doesn’t want Dave trying to usurp his position in Jordan’s life, but he’s out of energy to argue about it. “Well, that’ll be good for him. Go on and take him.” Evan will just lie here hating himself for being a useless piece of shit and wishing it had been him who took a bullet instead of June. A typical day for Evan lately.

“You mean it?”

“Go before I change my mind.”

“I’ll have him back by supper, don’t you worry,” Dave says. Given that Dave’s about sixty years old, ‘supper’ probably starts around 4:30 for him. “You’ll let me know if you need anything, won’t you?”

Evan accepts the offer but knows he will do no such thing. June used to

say Evan would rather drown than call for help, and she wasn't entirely wrong.

Evan hears Dave's footsteps descend the stairs, then Jordan calls up, "Bye, Dad!" The front door shuts, and after a moment or two Dave's loud-ass truck starts up again. When the rumble of the engine fades down the street, Evan drifts off.

He wakes an hour later to the harsh ring of the phone. Evan half-expects to hear Jordan on the other end — "Dave won't stop talking about his high-fiber diet, please come get me" — but instead it's Ray: "I talked to Joseph."

That wakes Evan up. "Enlighten me."

"Joseph" is Joseph Jackson, head of the Jackson family in Encino, California. He has six sons, each a force to be reckoned with in their areas of expertise. Joseph grew up on the streets of a small Indiana town, poor from birth until he worked his way into the business alongside the Gordy family, keeping big-time casinos under his thumb and plenty of cops, prosecutors, and judges in his pocket. Evan had a great deal of respect for the guy until one of Joseph's sons shot June.

Ray explains, "He wants to avoid a war. He thinks we can negotiate, cut a deal. I think we ought'a take him up on it and head out there."

"Cut a deal?" The words taste sour in Evan's mouth. "I don't want his fucking money. All I want from him is to know which one of his sons killed my wife. Then maybe I'll kill him."

Ray sighs a tired sigh, like he's heard all of this before. "You can't kill any of 'em, not unless you wanna start a war and get all the rest of us killed."

"Easy for you to say. They didn't shoot your wife." Ray isn't married, but the point still stands.

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"Don't make this personal. You gotta look at this like a business opportunity. We're in a position now where the Jacksons owe us big-time. You can't buy that kind of good fortune."

Evan sighs an angry sound into the phone but says nothing else.

"At least go out there with me and meet this guy," Ray says. "All expenses paid, courtesy of the man himself."

"How generous." It probably wouldn't hurt to pay Joseph a visit. It might even be advantageous like Ray suggested. "Alright, but it's gotta be during the week while Jordie's at school."

If June's death truly was an accident, Joseph must be riddled with guilt. And guilt is Evan's stock and trade.

"I still say you ought'a call Barry."

"No."

Evan sighs and grunts in a way that says nothing at all. He stares blankly out the window at the rolling expanse of Encino as Ray drives them 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."

Evan's talking about Barry Rothman, a civil attorney out of Chicago. Ray worked with him on a few jobs in the past. Evan has never met the man, but from the stories Ray tells, Barry sounds exactly like the guy you'd want on something like this.

"It's much better for us if they're in our debt rather than dead," Ray says.

"Did I say 'dead' or 'kill' or anything even implying bodily harm?"

"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?"

Evan scoffs and stares out the window.

June is dead. One of those goddamn trigger-happy Jackson brothers shot her in Evan's bar in a backroom deal gone wrong. Evan should hate them, despise the entire family with everything he's got, right down to the marrow in his bones. But when the guilt settles in, all he's left with is regret that he didn't do better. Regret that it hadn't been him 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 standing in the doorway of the house, anticipating their arrival.

"It's not too late to call Barry," Evan says. Ray just furrows his brow and gets out of the car.

Joseph Jackson stands tall despite his short stature; 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 them 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 real compassion.

Joseph leads them 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 to flaunt their wealth: expensive rugs, paintings, furniture. Everything is 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. Evan wonders which one of them killed June.

"You know my boys," Joseph says to Evan. And Evan does; occasionally the Jackson brothers have business in Staten Island, and Evan has the pleasure of giving them a safe meeting place at the bar. Or at least he did...

They ascend up the stairs and lead Evan and Ray into Joseph's private office. It's a magnificent and grand thing, with oriental rugs laid neatly on the hardwood floor and crisp, oak furniture adorning the room. An oversize speaker sits near the far wall amongst a pile of boxes. There are two wide French doors leading out to a balcony overlooking the front lawn. Joseph opens the blinds a little bit to bring in some light. The brothers stand almost statuesque at the back near a large bookcase along the wall.

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

"Yeah, could you go back in time and *not* send one of your idiot sons to shoot my wife? That'd be a big help," Evan snaps. Ray gives him a nasty look but offers no other objection.

Joseph shuts his eyes, as if those words wound him deeply. "What would you have me do? Put a bullet through his head? Even the courts don't call that justice."

Evan shifts in his chair. He's 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 father respected you, Joseph." Evan's trying to stay on Joseph's good side, because he thinks Ray is reconsidering bringing him along on future 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?"

Evan looks straight at Ray. "What?"

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

"Joseph, buddy, what have we ever done to you to make you treat us so disrespectfully?" Ray asks.

Evan grabs Ray's arm. "What are you doing?"

Ray keeps his attention fixed on Joseph. "You would pinch pennies on this man's loss?" He gestures to Evan, who's still gripping Ray's arm with enough force to bruise. Ray neatly pries Evan's fingers off and extricates himself from his grip. "Surely the mother of his child is worth at least half that."

Joseph watches the two of them, his eyebrows drawn low as he measures his words. "Be reasonable."

"Two-point-five million, then," Ray says calmly, as if they're discussing an everyday legal dispute and not bargaining the worth of Evan's deceased wife.

"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 lost business revenue, emotional distress—"

* * *

“Can I speak with you in private?” Evan grabs Ray’s arm again and pulls him along as he storms out of the office. Evan shuts the door behind them and unbottles his fury in a harsh whisper. “What the fuck are you doing?”

“Negotiating,” Ray says, like it should be obvious.

“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!”

“So what do you want here?”

“We find the piece of shit that killed June and kill him,” Evan says 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. They might be lurking around the house somewhere, and the last thing Evan needs is someone eavesdropping.

“That won’t bring her back. And you know what? Fuck you! You’re always the one crawling 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!”

“So what’s your excuse 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 when some shmuck with a full shopping cart rolls into the express lane?”

Evan pinches the bridge of his nose and shuts his eyes, as if doing so

might make Ray disappear.

"Look, think about what this money could do for Jordie," Ray says. "He'd be set for the rest of his life. Don't be a fuckin' moron here, 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 Evan's mouth. It's a rare thing when Ray is actually right about something, but when it happens it feels like the entire universe might 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 owe us. We can milk this for a long time."

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

"All right. You win this time. But I'm only doing this for Jordie." If they weren't brothers, Evan might actually hate Ray right about now. Okay, so maybe he hates him a little.

They re-enter Joseph's office. "My apologies. My brother and I had to have a little discussion," Ray says.

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 say to a million? With fifty percent of that figure deposited into a trust fund for my nephew, and if our family needs a favor in the future we might be able to call upon you personally."

Evan keeps his mouth shut and lets Ray negotiate. He's still not happy that June's worth has been reduced to monetary figures, but nothing said or exchanged here will bring her back.

* * *

Joseph steeples his thick, short fingers, displaying the gold bands wrapped around them. "You drive a hard bargain, Mr. Chandler."

"It's Charmatz, sir," Ray corrects politely. "My brother's the one who wanted something 'less Jewish.'" He rolls his eyes at Evan 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 has almost 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."

Do we, really? Evan wonders. 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?

"But some of the New York Families might not see it that way," Ray continues. "June was a civilian, and if we come home empty-handed, what's gonna stop them from trying to retaliate?"

Evan didn't consider it from that angle. Apparently neither did 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 too."

Jackie bends to his father's will and leaves.

* * *

Joseph turns to them. "Evan, Ray, take a walk. Enjoy the grounds while we discuss this."

That must be his way of telling them to get lost.

"What'd I tell ya?" Ray slaps Evan on the back after they exit the room, 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 doing wonders for you," Evan says.

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, then he and Evan stand outside to bake in the August heat. The balcony overlooks the pristinely-manicured lawn and the pool.

"Joseph has six sons, right?" Evan asks.

"Yeah."

"How come there were only five in there?"

"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?"

"All I'm saying is that it'd be really helpful to know which of these assholes did it so I know if 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."

* * *

Evan looks in the direction Ray's pointing to see thin, white legs sticking out underneath the awning by the pool. Evan would have guessed the mystery lounge was a woman upon first glance, but the size of the feet tells him, nope, definitely a guy. Upon closer inspection, Evan notices the legs aren't naturally white, but colorless — save for the curiously distributed patches of dark skin.

"No, Joseph wouldn't let the pool boy laze around on the job," Evan says, mostly to himself. "I'd bet a pretty penny that's the sixth son. Why don't we have a little chat with him?"

Evan leaves the balcony, trailing down the stairs. Ray clutches onto his arm. "No, no, do *not* blow this for us!" he whispers as Evan drags him through the house and to the doors leading to the backyard. "If he's the guy — and even if he's not — you're gonna make a scene and piss away the fan-fucking-tastic offer I got for you! You know I don't drive such a hard bargain for just anybody."

That's absolute bullshit, but Evan doesn't have time to call Ray on it. "I just want to have a conversation." Evan opens the doors and steps into the backyard. "Who knows? Maybe he's willing to give up some info."

Ray pleads, "Don't fuck this up," as Evan rounds the corner.

Beneath an umbrella along the far side of the house lies a man who throws some serious doubt onto Evan's heterosexuality. The man's skin and hair glisten with a wet sheen; considering the heat, he probably 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 Evan's 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 Evan feels *something* beyond rage for the first time in what seems like an eternity.

* * *

Evan must be gawking, because Ray nudges him in the ribs with his elbow. "You a queer now?"

I'm sure as fuck not straight, Evan thinks, too chickenshit to say such a thing out loud.

"Are you — are you here for Joseph?" the hot stranger says, blushing to the roots of his hair. He pulls his thick white robe tighter around himself, like he's ashamed that Evan has seen him this way. "He's inside. He's short, but he's hard to miss." He looks at Ray and, as if sensing offense may have been taken: "Sorry. I didn't mean—"

"Don't worry about him," Evan says with a dismissive wave of his hand. "Ray's still trying to sue Randy Newman over 'Short People.'"

The stranger laughs, then a look of realization comes over his face. "You must be the Chandlers. Joseph mentioned you'd be coming here." Sorrow washes over him like a wave, and he looks at Evan and Ray with unbearably sad eyes. "I'm so sorry for your loss," he says, and Evan doesn't hate him for it.

Over the last few weeks, Evan has heard enough fake condolences to last a lifetime, but somehow this man speaks as if knowing about Evan's pain means he has to shoulder it too.

This guy'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 lashes like thick, black wings.

"Thanks... I'm Evan, by the way."

"Nice to meet you, Evan. I'm Michael."

"Oh, like the archangel?"

* * *

Michael thinks on that for a moment. "Yeah, I guess. My mother says it means 'he who is like God.'"

"Guess she has pretty high hopes for you, huh?" Evan chuckles.

"You're named after a fucking rock," Ray reminds him, most likely trying to kill any chances of Evan appearing suave here. Of course, Evan could easily spin that one into an innuendo, but just because Michael looks girly doesn't mean he's interested in men. Shit, Evan isn't sure if he's interested in dudes himself, but he's not repulsed by the idea of sliding his cock into Michael's mouth.

Michael says, "And look at you now. Kingpin of the east coast."

"It's not as glamorous as the movies make it look," Evan says.

Michael gives him an almost flirtatious glance. "Who do you think you're talking to, Evan?"

Evan was almost certain this man was Joseph's son, but getting a good look at him nearly blows that theory out of the water. Michael's got to be adopted, because he doesn't share the rich mahogany of his brothers' skin or their broad, wide features. The spots of dark color — briefly glimpsed from the balcony — are curious, but not enough to convince Evan. They could be skin cancer spots, if Michael makes a habit of lying out in the sun like this.

Evan goes with his gut: "You're Joseph's kid, right? Or, y'know, one of them."

"Don't hold it against me," Michael says with a half-smile that leaves Evan feeling sick and joyful. "He can be cruel sometimes — most of the time — but I'm not like that."

Adopted, Evan thinks with certainty. "Is that why you're out here in the doghouse?"

* * *

"It's not so bad. The view is nice." Michael glances at Evan, and his blush darkens to a shade of firebrick.

Ray makes a squeaky sound of disbelief at whatever's taking place in front of him.

"I see you've met my son Michael," Joseph's voice booms from behind them. Evan jumps. "And, God willing, my successor."

Now there's a pipe dream, Evan thinks, given Michael's earlier statements.

"Yeah, yeah, he's a peach," Ray says. "Now how's about that deal of ours?"

"Deal?" Michael asks, inexplicably wary considering how chummy they were moments ago.

"Financial compensation for Mr. Chandler's tragic loss," Joseph clarifies. He turns to Ray. "The deal is yours if you want it. Come up to my office, and I'll distribute the cash." He disappears around the corner.

Ray elbows Evan, who's standing there in somewhat of a daze. "What'd I tell ya? We're back in business, baby!" He claps Evan on the arm and hurries after Joseph.

Evan lingers there, unsure how to process this. There's a sense of finality, in that June must truly be gone now that her worth has been calculated to a monetary sum. Evan thought it would feel more official, more momentous, but it doesn't really feel like anything.

"What's wrong?" Michael asks. "You don't want the money?"

"Would you take a check as a consolation prize after losing someone you love? What am I supposed to tell my son? 'Sorry about your mom, but did you still want that Sega Genesis?'"

* * *

"How old is he?"

"Twelve."

"Are you two close?"

"Not as close as we could be." Evan has put too much on Jordan's shoulders since June died. The kid needs a normal life, or at least as close to normal as he can have.

With the interest Michael's shown in Jordan, Evan expects a scolding. Instead, Michael looks sad, but there's an edge of hope to it. "I can change that, if you'll let me."

"How's that?"

"Well, I could be your housekeeper," Michael offers with a nervous smile. "You can spend more time with your son if you don't need to worry about all that stuff. You run a bar too, don't you?"

"My wife did."

Michael's brow furrows. "Oh, well, you probably need someone to help with that, right?"

Evan isn't sure he should trust Michael. A benevolent person in this business is usually a fraud. "What's with the sudden altruism? Is this a 'keep your enemies closer' sort of deal?"

"We can let Joseph think that," Michael says with a conspiratorial smile. "But I really do want to help. I've seen what grief does to people. And, sure, I'm not being totally unselfish. This might be my only real chance to break away from my family. I'm not like my father, remember?"

Yes, Evan does remember, and he finds the prospect of having Michael as his personal housekeeper quite tempting. "You think he'll let you

out on time served?"

Michael laughs with an edge of sadness, as though he understands how this life can feel like a prison. "I can try to convince him. If he thinks it's beneficial to the family, he might go for it."

"Evan, for fuck's sake, get up here!" Ray shouts at him from the balcony.

Evan gives him the finger. To Michael, he says, "See what you can do about that housekeeper thing."

Michael nods and says that he will. Evan goes upstairs, where the money is counted out and placed in a briefcase (sometimes life *does* imitate art). Half a million dollars doesn't look like much when it's condensed into piles of hundred-dollar bills, and it's even less when it's meant to compensate for your dead wife.

"The fuck was that with you and Michael?" Ray asks when they get to the car. "What would June say? She hasn't even been in the ground a month and you're already playing for the other team?"

"Fuck you." Evan probably could have worded that in a way that didn't prove Ray's point. Ray stares at him, very aware of how Evan's face heats up under interrogation. "He just wanted to make a counter-offer. But it's not gonna happen. The way Michael tells it, Joseph might as well be running Shawshank here."

Ray doesn't understand the reference (*read a book sometime*, Evan thinks), but he gets the gist of it. "So if you were just talking business, how come you were looking at him like you wanted to put your dick in his ass?"

"This conversation is over," Evan says, starting the car.

Ray tuts at him, 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?"

"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 their father's successor, but Ray was 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.

"Yeah, 'cause you were always Dad's favorite," Ray says in a way that implies the exact opposite. "You spent your entire life fighting with that man. Why do you give a shit what he thought?"

"Will you shut the fuck up?"

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

Evan reaches over and slaps the palm of his hand into the back of Ray's head. "You don't get to talk for the rest of the day."

Ray rubs the back of his neck. Evan pulls out into the street and switches on the radio so they don't have to stew in silence.

2: Of All the Gin Joints...

August 1992

"I still can't believe you're letting me do this."

Joseph rolls his eyes, as if displaying an emotion other than gruff indifference might cause him physical harm. "You better hush before I reconsider."

Michael and Joseph stand in Los Angeles International Airport before Michael boards a plane to New York. In what Michael sees as a God-given miracle, Joseph was swayed by his argument for becoming Evan's personal housekeeper. Michael had to hit the 'keep your enemies closer' points pretty hard, as well as reiterating that he'd serve as the eyes and ears for the Jackson family on the east coast.

Joseph had to know that, on some level, this was another attempt at escape, but the clincher had been Michael's mother Katherine. She insisted that Joseph allow Michael this exercise in independence, and Joseph countered with a six-month time limit on said 'independence.'

"Can you at least pretend like you're gonna miss me?" Michael says, because Joseph is terrible at goodbyes or any sort of engagement where he might be required to shed tears. His face is a study in stoicism, but Michael wants to commit every line and wrinkle to

memory.

"You know I will," Joseph says, and that's about as much emotion as Michael's going to get out of him. "Remember, after six months, if he don't let you come home, I'm sending in the riot squad."

Let you. Joseph's once bitten, twice shy after what happened with LaToya.

"That won't be necessary," Michael says. After six months Evan will probably be begging Joseph to take Michael back.

Joseph hands Michael his luggage. "Well, go on, now. Get outta here." He gives Michael a brief one-armed hug, which comes as a surprise.

Michael boards the plane and leaves his old life behind.

The flight to LaGuardia Airport takes a great deal of time which Michael passes by reading Stephen King's latest novel. Occasionally he glances out the window and wonders what kind of view will be his constant companion for six months when he lands. He'll miss the sun the most. Of course there's sun in New York too, but it feels different when there's 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. At least that's what Michael assumes from what he's seen on television. He's never actually been there. Maybe this will be a lesson in never assuming things.

And Michael's worried about the subsequent car ride "home" with Evan Chandler. While they met briefly at Hayvenhurst, Michael doesn't really know if they're going to get along. From what he's heard, Evan has a bit of a temper and recently lost his wife, so he's going to be a big ol' ray of sunshine. Michael hopes Evan's son will be friendlier.

* * *

When Michael disembarks from the plane and into the chill of the air outside, Evan's waiting for him inside a glossy, dark Mercedes idling at the curb.

Evan rolls down the window and says, "Looking for a good time?" as Michael walks by.

Michael laughs and tosses his bags into the trunk. "Isn't that supposed to be my line?"

"Is it?" Evan unlocks the door for him (*a real gentleman*), and Michael slides in. "Good to see you, Michael. Your father's told me a lot about you." The curve of Evan's mouth says whatever information Joseph may have shared is probably embarrassing or deeply personal.

"Wish I could say the same about you."

"He ever tell you not to get into cars with strangers?" Evan grins, and Michael can tell this guy's got an irritating yet endearing sense of humor.

"I know your name, so by definition you're not a stranger."

"But I could still be dangerous," Evan says, edging the car onto the road.

Oh, certainly, Michael thinks. Evan is plenty dangerous with his flirty jokes and disheveled dark hair and stubbled jaw. He looks pretty much how you'd picture a Mafia kingpin: smug, self-absorbed, hairy, and shiny with sweat or tanning oil. He's exactly the type of man Mama warned the girls about, but she never got around to having that talk with Michael, and now here he is, lusting after a bad boy.

"Sounds like you want me to stay away," Michael observes.

"Nope, just warning you."

* * *

Michael gazes out the passenger window as the city rolls by, captivated by the new scenery. Every building here pierces the sky like they're competing 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.

"So how come you want out of the family?" Evan asks. "Creative differences?"

"That's about right. Joseph wants me to take over the business, but... That's not the life I see for myself."

"What is?"

A flush rises over Michael's face. "Oh, you know, the old nuclear family cliché."

"It's not so bad," Evan says. He glances at Michael, his dark eyes questioning, and good thing they're stopped in traffic or Michael would nag Evan to watch the road instead of his face. "And so what if it's a cliché? I mean, there's a reason they become clichés in the first place."

Michael glances at Evan's hands on the steering wheel (*imagine what he could do with those*) and notices the thick golden rings on his fingers. He also notices the silver band around Evan's third finger.

"So, what, none of your brothers have a wife and two-point-five kids?" Evan asks.

"Well..." Michael squirms in his seat.

The blood on the Jacksons' hands almost requires that Michael distance himself from them to ensure he and Evan can peacefully coexist. Otherwise, the open question of who shot June Chandler will hang in the air between them.

* * *

"They do, but it comes with a price."

"Divorce lawyers?" Evan chuckles to himself.

"The business. I don't — I don't want to be part of that." Michael feels like a dope admitting this to Evan, since the Chandlers didn't build their reputation on rainbows and smiles. "Organized or not, it's still crime no matter how you look at it."

Evan is all frowns and intense eyebrows.

"Sorry, I don't mean to criticize you or anything. Open mouth, insert foot."

That makes Evan crack a smile. "I like you, Michael. You're a breath of fresh air after all the phony pricks I have to deal with. You ever been here before?"

Michael says that he hasn't.

"Shit, I should show you around sometime. Maybe it's not what you're used to, but it can still be good," Evan says, as if speaking more to himself than Michael.

During the rest of the drive, they talk about Evan's son Jordan. Then the conversation shifts to movies (Evan has an extensive knowledge of film that rivals Michael's own) and TV shows, about books and music. Their tastes might not overlap too often, but Michael appreciates that Evan has opinions about things and knows what he's talking about.

Evan lives in a two-story home on Staten Island that reminds Michael of his own, albeit much smaller. "Nice place," he says while unloading his bags from the trunk.

"Yeah, real spacious," Evan says, his face slightly closing off.

Michael's room is upstairs in a bedroom facing out over the backyard.

It's nice and quaint with just a hint of generic guestroom; Michael gets a big walk-in closet and his own bathroom, so he considers this a victory. The cream-colored walls are rather plain, but maybe he can spruce those up with some artwork.

"I guess tomorrow you can get started," Evan says, lingering awkwardly in the doorway, like he's uncomfortable being in his own house. And maybe he is. Walking through this place must be torment for him. "For now just make yourself at home. Since, well, it kind of is."

Michael nods and sets his bags down before sitting on the edge of the bed to unpack. "Thank you."

"Yeah, sure." Evan rubs the back of his neck. "You live here now, so don't be a stranger. Come on downstairs if you need anything."

Michael smiles, hoping to encourage Evan's hospitality. This can't be easy for him. Michael thanks him again, and Evan vanishes down the hallway. After a moment, he's in the doorway again.

"Hey, I — I gotta know. It wasn't you, right?"

It takes a moment for Michael to realize what Evan's talking about. "No, of course not."

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

Michael listens to Evan's fading footsteps on the stairs. Something about this feels all wrong. Though he never considered it this way before, Michael's presence here seems cruel, like a constant reminder of Evan's loss. And Michael being of Jackson descent is even more salt in the wound.

As much as Michael had nothing to do with the shooting, he's still culpable by blood. And, oh Christ, what about the kid? What might

Jordan think of having some phony stand-in for his mother around the house? It could be worse — Evan could be dating someone new — but to Jordan, Michael will seem like a half-hearted replacement, a lazy patchwork job over the void June left behind.

Maybe this wasn't such a great idea.

But Michael soldiers on, opening and unpacking his suitcases. When he's finished, he hears a noise from downstairs, then a small voice says, "Dad?" Two distant thumps, then the creak and groan of stairs.

Michael doesn't want to appear unfriendly, so he steps out of the doorway and greets Jordan just as he's coming up the stairs. "Hey. You must be Jordan."

Jordan's wearing a Ninja Turtles T-shirt and a pair of jeans frayed a bit at the edges. He looks a little startled to see Michael. "Whoa, uh, hey. Are you — are you the housekeeper my dad hired?"

"That would be me."

"Oh. Sorry. I just assumed you'd be, y'know, a lady."

"Well, you know what they say when you assume."

"No. What?"

"You make an ass out of you and me."

Jordan thinks on it for a moment, then he laughs, and Michael definitely notices the resemblance to Evan in his face. "You tell the same kind of goofy jokes as my dad. I guess that's why he hired you."

Considering some of Evan's jokes on the drive here, there may be some truth to that.

"So are you gonna be, like, our maid?" Jordan wonders.

* * *

"I think that's the idea." *Though I hope he doesn't make me wear the costume.*
"But I might be more help around the bar."

"Yeah, Dad hasn't gone back there since..." Jordan lets that one taper off, but Michael can figure out what would have come next. He can't understand how Jordan and Evan can still live in this house, how they can walk around it with misery trailing after them like the tail of some awful kite. Michael barely knows these people, but the house still feels haunted.

"Is there anything I can do to help you right now?" Michael asks.

Jordan considers this, his face scrunching up in a way Michael's seen Evan do before. "I guess you could help with dinner. Dad's probably asleep, and he'll want something to eat when he gets up. He hates cooking."

This tells Michael a whole hell of a lot: Jordan has a great awareness of his father's needs and likely prioritizes them over his own. Also Jordan may have been acting as a temporary housekeeper until Michael came along.

"I think we can do that."

They head downstairs, and Michael gets a better look at the first floor of the house. While Hayvenhurst seems more like a museum exhibit than a home, this place has a warm, cozy feel to it, like people actually live here.

In the kitchen, Michael scrounges through the refrigerator and cabinets for something to make. There are half-empty jars of condiments, freezer-burned bags of microwaveable vegetables, and plenty of canned goods, but little actual substance.

"Where's all the food?" Michael says, staring into the fridge.

* * *

"We must've ate it all," Jordan says. "I don't remember the last time Dad went to the store."

"I'll have to do that soon. Can't have you guys starving."

"We do pretty well on take-out and pizza."

"Not for long."

With enough searching, Michael finds an unopened bag of egg noodles in the cabinet over the stove. A stick of butter in the fridge, a pinch or two of flour, a splash of milk, and the remnants of a bag of shredded cheddar results in a family-size pot of makeshift macaroni and cheese. From the freezer, he takes a chance on the freshness of one of the vegetable bags and ends up with a side dish: salted and buttered corn. It's not the most nutritious meal according to the food pyramid, but it's all Michael has to work with.

As Jordan's setting the table, Evan comes shambling down the stairs like a sleepy zombie. "Jord', you made dinner?"

"Michael did most of the work," Jordan says. "But I helped."

"I hope you don't mind," Michael says.

"No. Thanks." Evan isn't big on conversation, but he has a hearty appetite. When he sits at the table, he spoons out a heaping portion for himself. Jordan, on the other hand, doesn't stop talking.

Once he realizes Evan's just going to sit there in brooding silence, Jordan talks nonstop with Michael about the Ninja Turtles, about his favorite movies, about whether the Yankees will make it into the World Series. Through it all, Evan eats in silence and stares at Michael. Michael figures the guy's suspicious, since that sort of mindset tends to serve a man pretty well in this business.

When he's finished, Evan pushes away from the table and drops his

dishware into the sink without so much as a thank you. Michael thinks he hears a grunt of appreciation, but he can't be sure. Evan trudges upstairs, and Michael tosses Jordan a look across the table.

"Is he always like that?" Michael murmurs. Evan was somewhat personable and friendly in the car, so Michael doesn't understand where the sudden silent animosity is coming from.

"No, but he changed a lot after — after what happened to Mom. He hasn't been taking his pills either, so there's that too," Jordan says. Michael's curious before he remembers that it's probably none of his business. "I gotta start reminding him."

"You think it's your responsibility to take care of him?"

"Kind of. It's not like he *can't* take care of himself, he just doesn't anymore. When Mom was here" — Jordan's voice hitches slightly — "he was okay. He didn't drink as much, and he took his pills. But now he's sad all the time, and I don't know what to do."

How deeply did Jordan bury his own pain in order to help Evan cope with his? "Your dad needs you now more than ever," Michael says. "But you're his son, not a caretaker. You focus on being a kid, alright?"

Jordan says that he will, and they clean up the kitchen together. When the dishes are clean, Jordan invites Michael to his basement gameroom. "We can play Super Nintendo or just watch TV — if you want."

"I'd love to, but I'm getting tired."

Jordan gives Michael a judging look. "It's not even dark out, dude."

"I flew from one side of the country to the other. My arms are tired."

Jordan laughs and starts down the stairs to the basement. "Well, see ya."

* * *

Michael heads east to an as-of-yet undiscovered wing of the house. In it, he finds the laundry room, where clothes lie in messy piles atop the washer and dryer. He tosses a load of colors into the washing machine and goes upstairs for a quick shower. By the time he's finished rinsing off, the wash cycle is done. He puts the clothes in the dryer and heads back upstairs.

The room across the hall from Michael's belongs to Jordan. The door is open, and inside Michael sees posters of basketball stars like Charles Barkley, Michael Jordan, and Magic Johnson pasted over the walls. Comic books lay spread across the bed, but Michael doesn't step inside to peek at the covers. His bedroom floor is about as messy as you'd expect. There are action figures and Hot Wheels cars everywhere.

Michael ducks into his own room — his *new* room — and reads until he falls asleep. As he dozes off, he wonders what Evan's wife June was like. He wonders if she was kind, what her hobbies were, if she knew what Evan did for a living. He thinks about the ways in which she might have been like his own mother. Then he thinks about losing her, and his heart breaks anew.

In the morning, Michael wakes to sunlight streaming in through the curtains. He's a little worried to wake up of his own accord; shouldn't Evan be here shaking him awake and hollering something about falling asleep on the job?

Michael opens the door and peers down the hallway at what he presumes is Evan's bedroom door. It's closed, so that's wonderful.

"Hey, Mike," Jordan says from his own room. He's lying on his bed reading a Batman comic book. "What's up?"

"I was wondering if your dad was up. I think I'm supposed to go to the bar today, but I don't know where it is or how to get there." Michael

probably should have asked those questions at dinner, but Evan was all frowny faces and angry eyebrows.

“He’s probably still asleep. It’s not really a good idea to wake him up. But I can show you where the bar is. It’s not too far from here.”

Michael’s about to ask if Jordan has school today, but he remembers that it’s a Saturday. “I’d appreciate that.”

There’s even less to work with in regards to breakfast — only Pop-Tarts and stale bagels — so they’re out the door fast after leaving a note for Evan.

“You sure your dad’s okay with this?” Michael asks as Jordan walks in front of him. He tries to take note of where they’re going in case he has to make the journey alone.

“Yeah, I’ve been there a bunch of times with Mom. I don’t know why he’d be mad about it.”

“I don’t want to get you in trouble.”

“You won’t.”

The walk to the bar takes about fifteen minutes, and Michael 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?” Michael asks.

“Sorry, dude.”

Michael tries the knob, just in case he’s lucky today. Nope. Locked.

He’d rather not have Jordan see him breaking into Evan’s bar within

less than twenty-four hours of knowing him. But it doesn't seem Michael has much of a choice. Michael reaches into his pocket and takes out his handy multi-tool — sort of a Swiss Army knife for unscrupulous activities. He fashioned it himself one night after digging around for a lock pick had almost gotten him and Randy killed.

"What's that?" Jordan angles his head to get a better look. Sticking the lock pick tool into the lock answers his question. "Oh. You're breaking in?"

"Well, neither of us has a key. This'll just be our little secret." Michael hears the lock click. *Bingo!* He leads them inside and flips the light switch on the wall. An elaborate chandelier flickers to life, bathing the room in a calming yellow glow.

Michael expected the interior to look cheap and dirty, but he's surprised by 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, whisky, 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."

Michael wishes he could ignore the implications in that sentence. "I'm well aware of your father's *reputation*."

"So you're a friend of his?" Jordan's looking at Michael like he suspects ulterior motives.

"I guess you could say that. He works with my Family sometimes."

* * *

“And what Family is that?”

Why does he know about the Families? If Jordan’s the sole heir of Evan’s business, he’s probably being groomed for this life. Michael isn’t sure how to feel about that. “The Jacksons.”

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

The kid really has a knack for asking awkward, embarrassing questions. Jordan sees the look on Michael’s face, and if it were possible to delete a spoken question like a line of type, he would have done so then.

“I have a skin disease that lightens my skin,” Michael admits. “My grandfather has it too.” Jordan is suspicious now that he knows his father and Michael are in the same business; Evan’s probably taught him — inadvertently or otherwise — not to trust people. Michael will have to show proof of his condition to fully earn Jordan’s trust. “See?”

Michael unbuttons a shirt cuff and pushes up his sleeve, displaying the brown splotches on his arm. Jordan’s face softens in understanding.

“I usually put on make-up to cover it when I go out.” Michael left in somewhat of a hurry this morning, so he didn’t think to cover the spots with concealer.

“Oh, okay.” Jordan nods, understanding now. “Sorry I brought it up.”

Why can’t everyone grasp the subject this easily? Most people Michael encounters remain skeptical even after they’ve seen the uneven patches of color and make snide remarks about how he must bleach his skin or want to deny his heritage.

* * *

Then again, the Mafia isn't exactly the most racially-welcoming culture. It's nothing short of a miracle that the Jacksons are so prominent in the world of organized crime.

"It's alright. You didn't know." Michael swipes a finger over the marble countertop of the bar and picks up a thin film of dust. "Yeesh, how long has this place been closed?"

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

Since his mother died.

Michael's chest aches at the thought. "Well, I think your dad will appreciate it if we clean up. Would you mind helping me?"

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

Jordan's finishing the task of washing the windows when he asks, "So what did you do in your Family?"

Michael's hard at work 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?"

"It is."

"So if my dad hides my birthday presents in a safe or something, you could get 'em out?"

* * *

"Hypothetically, yes. But patience is a virtue, Jordie."

Jordan sighs the exasperated sigh of a twelve-year-old.

Michael says, "I also... *persuaded* powerful men to clear their debts or make alliances with my Family. And I made incendiary devices."

"What's that mean?"

Michael's making some progress on the stain, though not without effort. "I make stuff blow up."

"For real? That's so cool!"

"It's really not." Michael's about to launch into a full-scale lecture on the evils of violence when the front door swings open.

Evan stands in the doorway, glaring at Michael 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 the two of them are gathered. "Yes, I see that," he says through his teeth. He glances down at the spot Michael's 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 Michael again, his anger is bright and pulsing like a boil. Fear creeps up Michael's spine.

You're a little scared of him, aren't you? Maybe you have a right to be. He warned you he was dangerous, after all.

"Am I in trouble?" Jordan asks.

* * *

"No, you're not in trouble. Just do as I say. Wait in the car," Evan orders.

"Fine." Jordan huffs a sigh and heads for the open door. "See you at home, Mike."

When Jordan's safely seated in Evan's idling car, Evan asks Michael, "What the fuck do you think you're doing?"

Michael doesn't have the slightest idea what he might be getting into here, but he knows he can't clam up now. "Cleaning up the bar. I thought you wanted—"

"How dare you bring Jordie here, you fucking dick! He's just 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..." Michael can't figure out why Evan's so angry; hadn't Jordan said he's been here plenty of times?

Oh. Maybe Evan didn't know that. Maybe Michael just got Jordan into big trouble. *Oops.*

Evan grabs Michael by the collar of his shirt and pulls him to his feet. Evan's breath is hot and (oddly) minty fresh in Michael's face, and if Michael's feet weren't dangling an inch or so above the ground he would run.

"Don't bring him here again. Ever." Evan lets go of Michael and stalks out, trailing heat and anger in his wake before he slams the door behind him.

Michael lies there on the floor. His nerves tremble, and he can feel his heartbeat in his neck, his chest, his head. He's never been so scared and turned on in his life.

3: How to Win Friends and Influence Mobsters

Evan tries to keep his anger under control, but thinking about how Michael brought Jordan to the spot where June died — had him walk over it, even — makes Evan's hands curl around the steering wheel like he might bend the metal. Jordan risks a few glances in his direction during the short drive home, but otherwise they share no words or meaningful looks.

It's only when they reach the house that Jordan speaks up. "Will you just tell me what I did wrong?" he says after Evan slams the front door.

"You didn't do anything."

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

"You're not, but you will be if you go there again."

"How come? I went with Mom all the time."

"Well, I don't want you going anymore."

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 mad when I wake you up, so I knew you'd get mad at Michael if he did." Jordan looks like he wants to say something more but stops himself. "Will you please 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."

Evan grits his teeth. "No."

"Well, you can't stop me."

"I said you're not going!"

"I'll be okay! 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 Evan's mouth and cleaved through their hearts. Lately, it seems like Evan's always angry at him, and it's always wrong and misplaced.

Jordan takes the hit, and Evan sees the poorly masked devastation on his son's face. Jordan stalks across the living room and throws open the door to the basement. He slams it behind him and stomps down the stairs.

Evan drives his fist into the wall, bruising his knuckles and venting some of that pent-up anger. He said it himself to Michael: Jordan's just a kid. This isn't his world. He's got enough to deal with, but here goes Evan adding to his burden. None of this is fair to Jordan.

Some fucking father I am.

* * *

When Evan has a little more control of himself, he climbs the stairs. He's numb to the empty spaces on the bedroom walls by now, having forced himself to forget what once filled those voids. He still hasn't taken the sheet off the full-length mirror by the window, or the towel draped over the bathroom mirror.

Jordan's right: Evan isn't getting better. It's cruel and unfair to put Jordan through this. He's already lost one parent. He can't lose another, can't watch Evan drink and rage himself to death.

Evan picks up the phone on the night table and dials Ray. 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 his mind's eye. Evan shoves it away. "Nothing. I need someone to keep an eye on Michael."

"'Bout fuckin' time."

"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 J.D. on it?"

J.D. Shapiro serves as caporegime for the Chandlers. 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 Evan knows Michael won't be in any danger.

"Sure, sure. Where's Michael now?"

"At the bar."

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

* * *

Evan knows Ray's not referring to the 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, but it wouldn't hurt to have one. 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." Evan's knuckles throb; a dark, nasty bruise is beginning to form there.

"Bad choice. You gotta talk about this shit or it just eats you up inside."

Do I ever. But Ray has never had a meaningful connection with anyone in his life; what the hell would he know about what Evan's going through? "Just send a car out and shut up."

Michael leaves the bar around sunset. It probably doesn't matter much what time he closes up if the place isn't actually open. He makes a mental note of the changes he wants to implement to the interior. That carpet's gotta go. Michael 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 him all of five seconds to break in.

Michael walks back the way he came, glancing around and noticing landmarks he observed on his way here. He isn't sure if he's heading in the right direction. He feels like he is, but he's been wrong before.

Michael hears a crunching sound behind him, something like leaves

rustling. Probably just the wind or some sort of animal. Or maybe a plastic bag. It's not until he hears the sound again that he snaps his head around. A shadowy figure ducks out of sight behind a building as Michael turns. He feels a chill that has nothing to do with the weather.

Michael knows enough to defend himself if he's being followed, but who would be following him? The only enemies the Jacksons might have made are the Chandlers, and considering how Evan's letting Michael live in his house, they shouldn't want Michael dead. Unless Joseph managed to piss someone else off in such a short amount of time, if Michael's being followed it's for petty thievery, entirely unrelated to Mafia business.

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

Michael passes a small thicket of trees and hears the crunching again. He heads for the convenience store on the corner of the street up ahead. There's a spot where Michael can sneak around the corner and grab his pursuer.

He ducks behind the 7-11 when he reaches the corner and takes refuge behind the garbage bins near the fence. The footfalls grow closer, closer still, until Michael sees a man of average build walk by his hiding spot. The man wears a pinstripe suit and a fedora — a fedora, for crying out loud — like he just stepped off the set of *The Godfather*.

Michael steps out from behind the building. "Looking for me?"

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

"Is that really a fedora?"

He looks terrified for a second before realizing Michael just insulted

his fashion sense. "Shut up, fedoras are cool."

"Yeah, if you're Al Pacino." Obviously Joseph didn't send this doofus. "Who are you working for?"

Fedora picks himself up and dusts off his suit. "None of your business, that's who."

"If you're gonna spout movie clichés, we're done here. 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 tailing either. You're breaking all the rules today."

He scrunches his face into an appraising frown. "Who are you anyway?"

"You were sent to follow me, but they didn't tell you who I am?" Michael feels 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 Michael a quizzical look. "Then it was Evan?" Fedora tries to keep his face even, but there's a flicker of recognition at the name. So Evan sent this joker, trying to keep an eye on Michael.

This poses two interesting theories. One, either Evan thought his spy would go unnoticed, in which case he's severely underestimating Michael, or two, he knows Michael would catch the tail but wants Michael to know he's under surveillance. Neither option inspires much optimism.

* * *

“Okay, so it *was* Evan.”

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

Michael sighs and pushes past him. “I’m going home. You can keep following me. Or don’t. I really don’t care.”

This turn of events gives Michael something to think about on the walk home. Evan doesn’t trust him. Michael can’t say he’s surprised about that. Evan might suspect that Michael’s a spy sent by the Jacksons to infiltrate and gather information on the Chandler family, in a “keep your friends close, keep your enemies closer” sort of thing. Which would make sense, considering that was the angle Michael worked in order to convince Joseph to let him come here in the first place. Bringing Jordan to the bar probably didn’t bolster Evan’s trust in Michael either.

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

Evan is locked in his bedroom by the time Michael gets home. Over a paltry dinner of mashed potatoes, Jordan reassures Michael that he didn’t get in trouble for what happened earlier. They decide to go to the supermarket tomorrow to stock up on food. Before the night’s end, Michael tackles more laundry in the slowly-diminishing pile.

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

* * *

Jordan points out various stores on the way to the supermarket: a comic shop that “has, like, literally everything,” the coffee shop that serves the best donuts, a pizza parlor with pie to die for.

They’re about to go inside the store when Michael spots a suspicious figure across the street. Fedora is back, his nose buried in a newspaper, looking about as inconspicuous as a forest fire. He might as well cut eyeholes in the paper as long as he’s being subtle about it.

“You see that guy over there?” Michael mutters to Jordan. “Fedora, hiding behind the newspaper?”

Jordan does a subtle head turn to follow Michael’s line of sight. “Oh, that’s J.D! He’s one of my dad’s friends.” Jordan waves at him, and Fedora ducks behind the paper.

“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?”

“I guess my dad was worried about us.”

When they get inside the supermarket, Jordan helps Michael navigate the unfamiliar labyrinth of aisles. Jordan’s grateful that Michael’s there to reach all the things on the high shelves. Michael tries 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,” Michael says as they linger 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."

Michael chuckles. "Well, my mother is a Jehovah's Witness, so we don't celebrate holidays like most people do."

Jordan looks perplexed. "Really? You don't have Christmas or Hanukkah or anything?"

"No, not even birthdays."

"What?" Jordan stares at Michael in awe. "Even when you were my age?"

Michael agrees, that, yes, there were no birthdays celebrated in the Jackson household, even when Michael was twelve. "But I don't really practice the faith anymore. It was mostly just to keep my mother happy. So maybe this year you and I can do something for the holidays, if that's okay with your dad."

"I hope so. He was super mad at you yesterday, by the way," Jordan says. They round the next aisle, and Jordan loads the cart with boxes of macaroni and cheese and cans of Chef Boyardee.

"I noticed that. Any particular reason?"

"Maybe he was worried about me walking home alone or something."

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

"No. Why?"

"Just wondering." Michael glances down at the contents of the cart.

"Jordie, I don't think you can live off of macaroni and cheese and Oreos."

"I'm gonna put more stuff in. We haven't got to the Bagel Bites and Hot Pockets yet."

Michael sighs. "Do your parents ever cook?"

"Sometimes. My mom and dad worked at different times, so we weren't all home together very much."

"Well, my family is all about home-cooked meals, so that's mostly what we'll have." They turn into another aisle, and Jordan piles boxes of Cocoa Pebbles and Nintendo Cereal into the cart. "Is there anything your dad likes?" Michael asks.

"You mean, like, food, or just *anything*?"

The open-ended nature of Michael's question made Evan sound like a curmudgeon. "I guess I'm curious what he was like before... all of this."

"We used to write movie scripts together," Jordan says. "Mostly dumb comedies, like, uh, have you seen *Planes, Trains & Automobiles*?" Michael says that he has. "Well, we wrote stuff like that. My dad's no John Hughes, but he does alright."

"I think it's really great he nurtures your creativity," Michael says. "I wish my father was more supportive of what I like."

"Well, the scripts are more for my dad than me," Jordan corrects. "He's always wanted to make movies, so I guess I'm the one nurturing his creativity."

"Do you think he'd let me read one of those scripts?"

"Maybe," Jordan says, and that sparks an idea in Michael's brain.

* * *

Fedora's still reading that newspaper when Michael and Jordan emerge from the store.

Evan finally comes home later that evening while Michael's cooking dinner. It comes as a shock that Evan's been out of the house instead of locked away in his room all afternoon. He shows up at the dinner table wearing sweatpants and an old T-shirt, his hair damp from the shower. Michael tries not to let his mind stray into the gutter at the sight.

Tonight is more of the same, with Michael and Jordan supplying most of the conversation. To Evan's credit, he doesn't look as angry tonight as he did before. He's glaring at his plate of spaghetti, occasionally poking the meatballs with his fork. Jordan doesn't seem to notice anything awry, just reaches for another slice of garlic bread.

"Hey, Mike, you like video games, right?" Jordan asks. "'Cause I wanna show you this really awesome arcade! They've got Mortal Kombat!"

"If it's okay with your dad."

Evan grunts an okay that does not reassure Michael in the least. Michael doesn't know how he could have offended Evan today. They didn't even talk this morning, and Evan has only been home about thirty minutes now. Michael showered after returning from the store, so he doesn't smell particularly offensive. Is Evan a picky eater, or does he not like Michael's cooking at all?

You're cooking for the family like a good little wife. You really don't see how that might upset him?

Of course that's how Evan must see it. Michael assumed Jordan would be the one who found him a shallow replacement of June, but in a bizarre twist Evan's the one who holds resentment over Michael's presence here. Despite his age, Jordan is mature enough make the distinction between what June provided for the family and June

herself; Evan seems unable to see Michael as anything but an usurper.

After the dishes are done, Michael finds Evan lying on the couch in front of the TV. Michael sits on the edge of the coffee table, obstructing Evan's channel-flipping. "I hear you write screenplays," Michael says. "Mind if I have a look?"

Evan stops working the remote and looks at Michael like he suspects trickery.

"I'm interested," Michael says, amused by Evan's suspicion. "Jordan compared you to John Hughes."

"There is no way he would do that."

"He said both your names in the same sentence," Michael amends. "Just let me take a look at one. Please? Like the Temptations said, I ain't too proud to beg."

Evan huffs a laugh and rises from the couch. "Alright, alright. I won't ask a grown man to beg. It's pathetic." He goes upstairs while Michael waits and flips through the TV Guide.

It doesn't take long for Evan to return with a three-ring-binder full of papers. He hands the script to Michael and pretends like he isn't invested in a response. "You're not gonna sit here and read it in front of me, are you?"

"Am I blocking your view? I can move."

Evan's mouth twitches at the corner, like he's trying to smirk but can't commit to the effort. "It's a little unnerving to watch someone analyze your work."

"Then you don't have to watch." Michael sits beside Evan on the couch, opens the binder and begins to read.

* * *

The script isn't terrible, though it's not the kind of thing Michael expected, despite what Jordan said about the films being comedy-driven. If he's honest, Michael expected Evan might write what he knows and end up with an irreverent Mel Brooks-style take on the Mafia. Instead it's a buddy comedy about a private detective and a lawyer.

"This is pretty good," Michael says after the first few pages. "I don't know what you were nervous about."

"Then you're one of the lucky ones." Evan shifts his weight closer to Michael. "Ray said it was, and I quote, 'hot garbage.'"

"How many scripts has he written?"

"Exactly."

"You know what they say: those who can't do, criticize."

"Even June thought I was wasting my time writing. When your wife thinks you're a total fuck-up, maybe it's time to pack it in."

"You should keep writing if it makes you happy," Michael says. "Submit one of these to a studio. You never know what might happen."

"I know a guy who's sold a couple screenplays," Evan says with a bitter frown. "He told me not to bother."

"Of course he did. You're competition."

Evan lifts an eyebrow like he never considered that before.

Michael goes back to the screenplay, gets about halfway through before Evan says, "I can't figure you out. You don't want to be part of the business, but your father still wants you in charge when he's gone? Are your brothers that incompetent, or is there something

you're not telling me?"

There is, of course, something (a lot of things) Michael's not telling Evan. "Joseph believes I have *potential*. And maybe he's right. 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 was helping my father clear debts with men more powerful than him. I've done" — Michael pushes that one so far back in his mind a search party couldn't find it — "I've done a lot of things I'm not proud of."

"You and me both."

"At least you can try to justify it by saying you're doing it for Jordie."

"I get the feeling you don't let Joseph play that card," Evan says.

Michael smiles, pleased that Evan can read him so easily. "You're right. I don't, because he dragged me into this life, and I never got to be a kid. Not really. I didn't want any of this, but Joseph looks at his sacrifices as some sort of bill that I have to pay back." Michael glances at Evan and makes brief eye-contact. "Most fathers are happy when their adult children want to move out."

"Oh, I'm a big expert on deadbeat dads. Been there, done that."

Michael hears guilt in Evan's words. "Jordie's a great kid."

Evan's shoulders slump a bit, and he looks away. "He takes after his mother."

Michael steers the conversation away from that sensitive topic. Too much too soon. "I wanted to ask you something about the bar. I was wondering if you'd let me make a few changes."

"What kind of changes?"

"Nothing major. Just things like repainting the bathrooms, upgrading

the locks, putting in hardwood floors..." Michael watches Evan's face carefully. 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 too much attention. Give me an estimate on how much you need, and I'll take care of it."

Michael wanted it to be easy, but this feels like a push-over. Still, he's grateful Evan isn't putting up a fight.

After turning a few more pages in the screenplay, Michael says, "You should go with Jordie to the arcade instead of me. He'd like that."

"I doubt it. You get along with him much better."

"I've known him for two days, Evan," Michael says around a small laugh. Evan 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 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."

"Alright," Evan says after a moment of thought. "Then I'll take him."

Michael smiles and returns to reading the screenplay. It feels good to help Evan reconnect with his son, however infinitesimal. It's progress.

4: A Friend of Mine

Evan really doesn't want to be here.

Michael's been living with the Chandlers for about a week now, and while he's great at bringing order to their chaotic home, he's still unable to take Evan's place at Jordan's parent-teacher conference.

Jordan assured Evan that he "probably" wasn't in trouble, and the meetings were compulsory for the parents of every student. But Jordan couldn't properly read the worry on Evan's face; Evan isn't nervous about finding out Jordan might be failing a class or misbehaving. He's nervous about reappearing in the public eye since the funeral.

Also no one seems to really know what Evan does for a living. Todt Hill isn't a exactly small town where everybody knows everyone else's business, but the ambiguous nature of his work and the whispered rumors that he's "mobbed up" have earned him a reputation in their neighborhood. He's tossed around the phrases "garbage business" or "waste management" at various school functions, but some people have probably figured out that Evan's 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 Evan was, so she was on a first-name basis with most of the parents of Jordan's friends. Evan, on the other hand, stayed confined to his small umbrella of social contacts.

Ray volunteered to accompany Evan to the conference, an offer that Evan takes him up on; he knew he'd need Ray's presence to ground him. So while Jordan stayed home to help Michael with the chores around the house, Evan goes with Ray to Jordan's school for the meeting.

The conference is a simple one-on-one meeting where Evan is told his 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 Evan pulled him out of school after June died might have had something to do with that. Jordan's teacher is considerate of the family's trauma, not lingering on the issue or pressing for details.

But it's not her Evan is worried about seeing. It's the other parents. Some of them he knows, some of them he doesn'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 Evan.

He feels their judging eyes raking over him with condescending disdain or, worse, pity. His name has become synonymous with "poor thing," spoken in hushed, sympathetic whispers. The neighbors and folks Evan knew before the accident have been supportive in the best of ways, never patronizing, but he seems to remain almost a social pariah amongst those he doesn't know. Though Evan's reclusive behavior has more to do with that than the circumstances.

"Try not to look like you're going to cry," Ray mumbles to Evan as they leave the classroom.

"That's just how my face looks."

* * *

"Well, you know what Ma always said about your face stickin' that way."

Evan feels like he's navigating a minefield. He has to get out of this place before —

"Evan Chandler? I've been meaning to call. How are you doing?"

God. Fucking. Damn it.

A woman Evan doesn't recognize approaches him, sort of nudging Ray off to the side as she squeezes in between them. Her hair is golden blonde and teased more than a bedwetter. She's wearing more jewelry than Evan has ever seen on one person, himself included.

"Have we met?" Evan asks dumbly.

"Gloria. I was a friend of June's," she says, then lowers her voice. "I was at the funeral, remember?"

Evan doesn't, but the fault line in his chest begins to tear at her mention of the funeral. "Oh."

Gloria places a hand on Evan's arm. "I'm very sorry for your loss. When I lost my husband, I was a wreck too." Phony sympathy is the horror movie monster that won't die. "If you or Jordie ever need anything, just let me know."

"We have a housekeeper of sorts. But thank you for offering."

Ray moves in after Gloria says her goodbyes and leaves. "Jeez, Ev, just shut her down, why don't ya?"

"What could she possibly do that would help me? Bake me a casserole? I didn't lose my oven."

"Then why do you have a live-in drag queen cooking and cleaning for

you? 'Cause he batted his fake eyelashes and offered to suck your cock?"

Evan almost punches Ray in the mouth for that one. "Are you confusing porn for reality again?"

"All I'm sayin' is it's a little weird you let Michael be your live-in maid, but in the same breath you shut down anybody else who even offers to help. You didn't notice that subtle hint when she mentioned she was a widow?"

Evan noticed, but only because he hates when other people whip out their own tragedies like secret fraternity handshakes.

"She was flirting with you, you idiot." Ray makes a sound of disgust, but probably not for the same reasons Evan might. "You're a rich, widowed father. Every straight single woman here is practically salivating."

"So you offered to come as my wingman? What the fuck?"

"No! I'm keeping the gold-diggers away."

"Yeah, you're doing an awesome job with that," Evan says, his tone implying the exact opposite.

Evan watches the parents as they pass through the halls. He surveys 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.

A soft female voice says his name, and Evan turns to see a familiar-looking woman approach him. She has shoulder-length black hair and ruby lips. "How are you doing?"

* * *

Ray's leaning against a row of lockers and looking at Evan as if to say, "Don't be a prick."

"Do you really want to know how I'm doing, or do you just want me to say 'I'm fine' so we can move on?" Evan says.

"I guess I walked right into that one," she says with a purse of her lips and an eyebrow lift.

"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 Evan's forgetfulness. Would she find it as endearing if the tables were turned and Evan was a mother who'd lost her husband? "If you need me to take Jordie to school one day or pick him up—"

"He takes the bus," Evan says, starting to see the logic in Ray's earlier theory of the single mothers being drawn to his male helplessness. "But thank you."

"What exactly is it you do again?" It doesn't sound like a probing question, but Evan thinks she's trying to verify the rumors or find out how much money he makes.

"I work in construction."

Monique just nods, but Evan sees 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, Evan finds Ray by the lockers. "Construction," Ray says with a scoff of a laugh. "Nice."

"Oh, shut up."

They walk outside, and Evan just wants to be home already so he can see Michael. Maybe that's a little fucked up, but Evan doesn't much care. Michael is kind and sweet and offers a short parole from Evan's prison of grief, so of course he's going to take advantage of that. And Michael doesn't seem to take it personally when Evan lashes out like a wounded animal.

Because maybe Evan catches himself lusting or wanting more from Michael than what they have, but wanting those things feels like a slight against June, an indication of an inferior love, so he snaps at Michael in tiny acts of self-sabotage.

Could Evan have a crush on Michael because he misses June? He can 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 Evan is lonely. He needs something to feel good right now, and this feels good.

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 Evan's 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 Evan a skeptical look now that they're in the car, as if he can read Evan's mind and see the deplorable wants there.

Guilt sinks its claws into him. There is no good reason for Evan to

want Michael this way.

Michael's first few weeks in New York pass by in a blur of activity. By the end of week two he managed to get the bar open again, and by the end of the third week he'd gotten used to the work schedule. Most of the patrons 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 harassing Michael. The guys he came in with seemed to know who Michael was, or at the very least that he had connections to Evan, because they tried to stop their buddy from making a drunken ass out of himself. When Michael refused him another drink, Drunk Moron reached for his gun. Michael popped him in the nose, and the subsequent elbow lock ensured that guy never bothered him again. His friends even tipped extra.

Michael's friendship with Jordan continued to blossom, but he couldn't suppress the worry that their rapport was responsible for Evan's continued gruff demeanor. Michael tried to nudge him in the direction of spending more time with Jordan, but it didn't seem to matter; Jordan preferred Michael's company. He wanted to show Michael the sights around town, wanted to play video games with him, wanted to go to the movies with him. Michael enjoyed the quality time but felt Jordan should be spending more time with his father.

Tonight finds them lounging on the couch, lazily flipping through channels. It's past midnight, so there's nothing on that catches Jordan's interest. His head leans against Michael's 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."

* * *

"He'll be home. I promise."

"I wanna make sure."

"Jordie..."

"Please? Just one more hour."

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

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

"He'll get mad at *me*."

"Oh."

Michael says, "C'mon, it's bedtime. You got school in the morning." Jordan frowns, clearly displeased with this decision. "You won't be alone. I'll be right here."

That seems to ease his worries, if only a little bit, because Jordan drags himself up the stairs at an almost snail-like pace. When Jordan finally gets into bed, Michael tells him, "If I'm up when your dad gets back, I'll have him come in and say goodnight."

Jordan nods, giving Michael his trust. It's a fragile thing, and Michael hasn't been around long enough to break it.

Michael switches off the bedroom light and goes back downstairs. He dozes off at some point and wakes up to the sounds of someone jiggling the doorknob and trying to shove the key into the lock. Instantly Michael panics, fearing the worst.

The door opens. Ray staggers inside the foyer, carrying Evan along with him. Panic sets in again for an entirely different reason.

* * *

"What happened?"

"He's fine," Ray says, handing Evan over to Michael. Michael struggles with the weight of him. "Just drunk."

"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."

Ray gives Michael 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 weird nose outta shit that ain't your business."

Kind of a low blow to go after Michael's appearance, but Ray's just that kind of guy.

Michael bites back a remark and lets Ray leave without any argument. Evan stumbles over to the couch and flops down.

"Are you just gonna sleep there?" Michael asks.

Evan groans and lies 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.*" Michael mutters that last part under his breath, but Evan doesn't seem to hear 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. "You should go upstairs and say goodnight to him."

* * *

"You tell 'im," Evan mumbles.

"I'm sure he'd rather hear it from you." Evan doesn't say anything after that, totally checked out. So it's Michael's job to inform Jordan his father's too drunk to say goodnight to him. From what Jordan's told Michael, Evan's drinking is an unpleasant habit he's all too familiar with, but Jordan would probably rather know his father's alive on the couch than worry over his whereabouts.

Michael sits on the edge of the bed and gently shakes Jordan's shoulder to wake him up. "Jordie?"

"What's wrong?" Jordan 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."

"You can just say he's drunk," Jordan says, and the bluntness cuts through Michael like a hot blade. "But at least he's alive." Jordan glances away, embarrassed about this vulnerability, and pulls the blankets back over his head.

Evan's still on the couch when Michael returns to the living room. Michael jostles his shoulder to wake him up. Evan lifts his head slowly and glares. "What?"

"You need to get up."

"You need to *shut* up," Evan mumbles.

Michael grabs Evan's arm, which is dangling off the side of the couch, and tugs, hoping to convey the message without dislocating his shoulder. "You wanna let Jordie see you like this?"

Evan huffs an angry sound. Michael knows Evan is scowling despite his face being pressed into the pillow. With Evan there are only scowls, scowls directed at Michael just for existing. It's very unfair.

* * *

Evan shakes his arm out of Michael's 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. Michael's at his side, righting him, and he scoffs at the assistance. "I don't need your help."

"Of course you don't." Michael loops an arm around Evan's waist, presses the other against the hard muscle of his chest to keep him from tipping forward. Maybe Michael shouldn't have mouthed off to Ray. A second pair of arms would be useful here.

They take the stairs slowly, and Michael feels the warm press of Evan's body. *You got no business lusting after a widower*, Michael tells himself. *Some things are just wrong*.

Halfway up the stairs, Evan sways, stumbles, and grabs onto Michael. He pulls Michael sideways, slamming them against the wall. Michael reaches out to stop himself from crashing into Evan and ends up with his arms planted against the wall. To the casual observer, it looks like Michael is boxing Evan in for a kiss, or at least some serious eye contact.

Evan's fists are bunched in Michael's shirt, and he's staring in a way that makes Michael's throat tighten and his cheeks burn; it's not so much angry as it is inquisitive, confused, even. Michael wants to touch it and memorize how it feels on Evan's face.

Michael drops his arms to his sides, mortified by the erratic thrum of his heart. Then Evan's back to looking all scowly again, and he shoves Michael away with a grunt. His searing stare drops to the floor as he takes the rest of the staircase alone.

Michael's trying to calm his own frantic heartbeat when Evan shuts himself in his room. *He was so close*, Michael thinks with a flush, recalling Evan's disheveled hair and his lazy stubble and his piercing eyes.

* * *

When Evan wakes up, his head feels like someone drove a railroad spike through it. Although he slept soundly, distressing visions of chocolate eyes and rosy lips plagued the sightline of his internal cinema. Memories of how close Michael had been, how he bit his lip and glanced away with nervous eyes flickered in Evan's subconscious throughout the night. Evan feels a sense of relief to be awake, despite the throbbing in his head and groin.

He sits up in bed to find two aspirin and a glass of water on the nightstand; Jordan must have left them here before he went to school. After a cold shower, Evan swallows the pills and heads out to the bar, the thought of Michael still tugging at his memory.

Michael is there casually pouring drinks like he has no idea how he's thrown Evan's entire world off its axis. Dave is sitting at the far end of the bar, and his presence helps ground Evan to reality. To his credit, Dave looks happy to see Evan.

"You got a minute?" Dave asks around a mouthful of food. Evan glances down at the basket of chocolate chip cookies on the bar. Dave doesn't wait for an answer. Typical. "Have you tried these? They're amazing." Dave shoves the basket towards Evan.

The smell and sight of the cookies does something to Evan's stomach. He skipped breakfast, so he might be hungry, but he's also sort of dealing with a hangover.

Decisions, decisions.

"You make these?" Evan asks. 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 "prowess" to man the grill themselves.

* * *

"No way. This is all Michael." So the cookies probably aren't poisoned. "Try one."

Evan does as Dave asks. The cookie is chewy with a little snap and just the right amount of chocolate.

A pale hand sets an icy glass of water in front of Evan. "What do you think?" Michael asks with a hopeful smile. "Good?"

Evan makes a sound that's supposed to be a yes. He swallows, says, "How much do these go for?"

"I'm not selling them. I just think it's nice to offer something besides crappy over-salted peanuts or pretzels."

"Let me guess, your childhood dream was to open a restaurant?" Evan says, taking another bite.

Michael chuckles a soft sound. "Not exactly, but I guess I got carried away."

"It's alright. 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 Evan. "Man, Michael's done a fantastic job with this place. It looks brand new."

Evan hadn't really noticed the subtle changes Michael had made here until Dave pointed them 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 enjoy working here, for some reason unbeknownst to Evan.

"If he starts serving food here, you guys might actually make a profit this month," Dave says, stealing back the cookie basket.

* * *

"Don't be a hog," Evan says.

A familiar voice sounds behind Evan, and the speaker takes a seat beside him: "Oh good, you're here."

The voice belongs to Larry Feldman, the Chandlers' consigliere. Ray has a law degree, but he doesn't practice anymore since his job as underboss monopolizes his time, so Larry handles the Family's legal work and advisement. Larry slips Evan an envelope with a wad of bills inside. Evan pockets the tribute unceremoniously.

"So I got a call from Ray," Larry begins.

Evan gives Dave a look and he makes himself scarce. For all his faults, Dave doesn't hover when it comes to mob business.

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

The last time those bastards came here...

"Why the hell didn't anyone tell me about this?"

Larry shrugs. "Hell if I know. Ray just told me he's making J.D. go pick 'em up."

"What business they got here?"

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

"I'm glad you're such an astute listener."

What are the Jacksons doing in New York again? And why hadn't Ray told Evan about this? Come to think of it, why hadn't Michael mentioned it? Surely one of them should have tipped Evan off about this. Even with all of Michael's posturing that he doesn't like what his

family does, at least one of his siblings would have dropped him a line that they'd be in town.

Evan goes into the back room, the one reserved for *persuasion*, though most of the time it's just used for gambling. He picks up the phone and dials. "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.

Evan stops. "You did?"

"Yeah."

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

Ray sighs like they've been over this before. "I told you that last night too."

"Be a pal and repeat it for me."

"The Jacksons decided to arrange business through me so they wouldn't bother you. They're trying to be considerate and give you some space."

Evan snorts a humorless laugh. "That's one way to look at it."

"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."

* * *

Evan can almost see the way Ray's rolling his eyes right now. "Any more questions? I got shit to do."

Evan says no and hangs up. Well, that solves one mystery. Evan returns to the main room, looking for Michael. He'd like to know if one of Michael's brothers notified him about this little trip. But Evan can't seem to find him. Dave tells him Michael went into the back room.

Since Evan was just in the back room and Michael wasn't there, Dave must mean the storage room. It's deductions like these that put Evan at the head of the family business.

Michael's at the far end of the storage room. His back is turned, and he's struggling with the door to the storage closet, trying to get it closed. The door 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. Evan hears him muttering G-rated 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, does Evan admit to himself that, yeah, he's got a big ol' crush on Michael.

"Don't let it outsmart you," Evan says with a kind laugh.

Michael jumps, and Evan sidles up beside him to help. The scent of Michael's cologne makes Evan's heart race.

"How long were you standing there?" Michael asks. His long, thin fingers are still wrapped around the door handle.

"Long enough."

Blood pools beneath Michael's cheeks, and he tears his gaze away, focusing instead on how Evan's hands come to grip the handle. Michael lets his own hands slip down, and Evan shivers when the tips

of Michael's fingers brush over the back of his hand. The touch is menial, but it burns him nonetheless, reminding Evan of how he should not want to be touched by this man.

"Watch and learn." Evan forces the door closed with his shoulder, making sure the suction between the rubber and the frame holds it in place. The task is performed on autopilot, as Evan's brain is occupied with Michael's proximity and the sweet scent wafting off of him.

"I never had my brothers' upper arm strength." Michael laughs an angel's laugh, making Evan's knees a little weak.

Evan watches Michael's expression change, studies the flush of his cheeks and how he ducks his head. "I'm sure you made up for that in other ways," Evan says, shoving his hands into his pockets. He has to resist the urge to hook a finger beneath Michael's chin or tuck a stray curl behind his ear. Acknowledging this attraction in his own head is enough. Best not to go any further. "So what's this about your brothers coming here tonight?"

Michael's brow creases. "Here as in New York?"

"Here as in the bar."

"Oh no." Michael's shoulders slump as he lets out a sigh, and he leans against the cold metal of the storage closet. "All of them?"

"Just two. Jermaine and Randy."

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

"Is this a problem?" Did one of them kill June? Or is Michael's worry completely unrelated to Evan's situation?

Michael licks his lips before he speaks; Evan wonders what it might be like to lick them for him. "They're very opinionated about me not

having a girlfriend.” He frowns like the words taste sour in his mouth.

“You think they’re gonna take you out?”

“Definitely, unless they’re setting me up with someone.” Michael grimaces.

“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.”

“You’d do that for me?” Michael asks, his lips parted in awe. For a moment, Evan’s lost in thoughts of what those perfect lips might look and feel like wrapped around his cock.

You’ve really got a thing for lips, don’t you?

Guilt shakes Evan back to reality. “Y—yeah, why not? It’s the least I can do.”

It happens before Evan can properly comprehend it. Michael wraps him in a tight hug, and the heat of him burns through their clothes. Evan tries not to think about how the rigid muscle of Michael’s body is pressed against him. His arms dangle limply at his sides.

If Evan touches Michael now, he won’t be able to stop himself from raking his hands through Michael’s hair and shoving him against the wall, guilt be damned.

“Thank you! You have no idea how much this means to me,” Michael says as he breaks away before they’re officially hugging too long.

Evan feels the void where Michael was pressed against him. “Yeah, well, it’s nothin’. Forget about it.” Evan claps a friendly hand on Michael’s shoulder. One more excuse to touch him.

“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.”

5: An Offer He Can't Refuse

At the bar that evening, Evan sits at a table with Ray and Larry. The tables are empty aside from their little group, so Michael's stuck serving drinks while Jermaine and Randy chat him up. Evan thought tonight would be busier with the Jacksons coming in to talk shop.

Jordan wasn't too happy to hear that Evan and Michael wouldn't be home tonight. "You're making him work?" Jordan whined when Evan told him the news.

"He asked for extra hours," Evan said.

"You're just saying that," Jordan countered, and while Michael had asked for the overtime, he didn't necessarily ask for Evan to come along.

Evan sent Dave over to the house to keep a watchful eye on Jordan, but he doubts that eased the kid's worries. Ever since Michael showed up, Evan feels as though he's losing his place in Jordan's life. Dave is a poor substitute for the person Jordan really wants.

Evan watches Jermaine and Randy interact with Michael. Jermaine must be the joker of the bunch, cajoling Michael and slapping him on the back at random intervals. Michael seems to be enjoying himself, but Evan notices distress creep onto Michael's face when the

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 Evan a brief, worried look, his forehead crumpled in pain, before directing his attention back to his brothers.

Evan wants to go Michael's side and offer some sort of comfort, but what can he really do? Instead he stays seated, listening intently — not like that's hard, since the place is nearly 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."

Evan deflates in his chair a little bit, though he can't truly say he's surprised to hear that. Michael is too busy working here and at the house to even consider dating someone.

Ray says, "You gonna do somethin' or just sit there jerkin' off?"

Larry tries not to smile at that but fails. Evan gives a cursory glance to the cards in his 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 says to Michael, "Who said anything about dating? You can have fun and not be tied down, you know that, right?"

"I know, but that's not my style. I want to fall in love and have a family, but not right now."

"A date will 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. Evan stays another hand, and Ray grows increasingly irritated with his poor luck of the draw. "I got a friend in the city. She's real sweet and real easy on the eyes, if you know what I mean. Take her out, have fun."

"I can't. I have to work."

Evan's turn comes again, and he passes. Ray swears under his breath and shows his cards: twenty-five. Larry and Evan split the winnings before Ray starts dealing again, but Evan opts out of this hand. He doesn't need any distractions from eavesdropping.

"Aww, can't you trade with someone?" Jermaine pleads with him.

"I can't. My boss is a real hard-ass," Michael says. Evan smiles to himself.

"Yeah, so I've heard," Jermaine mutters. "Why don't I just bring her here?"

Michael blanches. "You — you really don't have to —"

Randy cuts him off. "Mike, what is your deal? When was the last time you even had a date anyway? Are you not into chicks? Are you gay?"

Michael holds that awkward smile on his lips, but Evan sees the panic racing through him right now. "N — no, of course not!"

"It's okay, dude. You can tell me if you are. This ain't the deep south."

"I'm not gay," Michael says. "I'm just shy."

* * *

"I'll tell her to go easy on you, then." Jermaine strolls over to the far side of the room and picks up the phone.

Ray perks up, giving Evan a questioning look. Evan waves off the suspicion. Jermaine would have to be impossibly stupid to try something so soon, especially when his family's still in the doghouse as far as the Chandlers are concerned. But even if he was planning to send someone over here to whack Evan or Ray or Larry? He wouldn't do it when Michael was in the building. No fucking way. Too big a risk.

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

Evan finds Michael fretting uselessly with a half-full shot glass of whisky. Michael sees Evan coming and tells Randy to put an egg in his shoe and beat it. Randy obliges.

"Well, you look miserable. What did they wrangle you into?" Evan asks, as if he didn't hear the entire conversation.

Michael swallows the remainder of the whisky, looking every bit the beleaguered bartender. His face scrunches up at the bitter taste. "Jermaine wants to bring some girl here for me to meet. I really thought our plan was foolproof."

"It can still work. It saves you from actually going 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. Michael looks even less happy now.

"What's the problem?" Evan asks, leaning in a little closer. "Are you gay?"

"Why does everyone keep asking that?"

"It's the nineties, Mike. It's fine if you are. Doesn't bother me."

* * *

Michael's smile has a story behind it, but Evan doesn't pry for details. "Is it really so wrong that I don't want to be forced into a date? Would you want Ray setting you up with random women?"

Evan sees Michael's point, but Michael dodged that gay question pretty smoothly. Evan's about to ask something else when Jermaine returns from the phone. Evan heads back to the table and joins another round of blackjack.

Jermaine's lady friend drops by about fifteen minutes later. She introduces herself as Tatiana and spends 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. She's tall and lean, with an almost boyish figure, her skin a soft brown and her dark, voluminous hair twisted in tight curls.

Evan's surprised at the jealousy that bubbles up inside of him while watching Tatiana and Michael. He has no real reason to feel possessive of Michael, not now, not ever. Losing June was pure destruction, each day a struggle against the grating drag of grief like shards of glass beneath his skin. But Michael just gives and tries his best and loves; why is Evan not allowed to be attracted to that?

Evan tries to distract himself with a few hands of poker, but every so often he hears her giggle at something Michael says, and the sound only infuriates Evan more and breaks his focus on the cards.

To be fair, she does keep Michael talking, and Evan learns a little bit more about Michael through his side of the conversation. But that only makes Evan angrier because he's not the one unlocking those secrets.

Ray stares at Evan over his concealed hand of cards. "Ev, you alright?"

"Fine and dandy."

* * *

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

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

Ray focuses on Evan once they'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?"

Evan scowls at him.

"You're makin' that pissy face again. Tell me what's bothering you." Larry returns with the drink, and Ray slides the full glass over to Evan. "Drink. You'll feel better."

Evan doubts that, but he swallows down the drink anyway. Evan risks a glance at Michael. He turns his head, and their eyes lock. Evan feels a strange, jittery high from the contact, like he's stolen Michael away from Tatiana in this moment. Then Michael turns his attention back to her.

Evan has no right feeling jealous when someone else expresses interest in Michael. Maybe Michael isn't interested in dating now, but the time will come when he is, and what protests could Evan make then?

Finally, the night draws to a close. Michael's scrubbing down the countertop: his go-to task when he's distressed. Evan moves over to him and leans on the counter. "See, that wasn't so bad?"

* * *

Michael ducks his head, hiding his face. "I screwed up."

"You're too hard on yourself. She probably doesn't even remember anything embarrassing or awkward you said. And even if she does, so what? It's not like you're gonna see her again."

Michael swallows thickly before he answers. "Well... I said I'd go out with her tomorrow night."

"You what?" Evan blurts out, trying not to sound mad and not succeeding.

Michael 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 I heard myself saying yes before I could take it back! Can I leave two hours early tomorrow night?"

Evan clenches his fists at his sides where Michael can't see them and says, "Yeah, go ahead. I don't care." He finishes the rest of his drink before walking out to the car.

The next twenty-four hours seem to drag by endlessly. Michael isn't looking forward to his date with Tatiana, but he doesn't have the heart to cancel. Maybe if he'd met her under some other circumstances he wouldn't feel burdened by the expectation of a date. After all, the pressure isn't coming from her, but from Michael's brothers. They just don't listen, and now Tatiana has to suffer through a lackluster evening because of it.

Of course, there's also the ever-present magnetic pull Evan has over Michael that muddies his thoughts. Make no mistake, Evan is difficult; he doesn't talk much, and when he does his words are harsh and angry. But Michael sees 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 Evan offers an honest piece of himself, Michael revels in it, wanting him to spill them all. But Michael knows he needs to be patient with Evan.

"Michael?"

He looks up at Tatiana, who's staring at him so intensely he thinks he might be on fire. "Yes?"

"You okay? You're zoning out on me," she says with a smile.

They're eating in a quaint little sushi restaurant, and Michael's been drinking a little. "I'm sorry. Alcohol makes me sleepy."

"You should eat more," she says playfully, gesturing to his plate with her chopsticks. Michael takes her advice and pops a piece of sushi into his mouth. "Your boss seems really scary, by the way."

"He's" — Michael searches for the proper word — "interesting."

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

Michael feels a twinge of disappointment, though he's not really sure why. Despite the fact that he's concocted silly fantasies of himself and Evan together, Evan is still in mourning, irrevocably in love with his lost wife. How can Michael ever hope to change that?

"I feel bad for him."

"You live with him and his son, right? Is that weird at all for you?"

"Not really. It's nice. I like—" Michael catches himself before he reveals too much, but then upon reconsidering realizes it might be best to just plow ahead with that one. "I like having the illusion of family."

* * *

"Is he a nice guy underneath all the scowling?"

Michael catches himself wondering if Tatiana's interested in him or Evan.

"I think he is. He's been through a lot, so I cut him some slack." The flickers of kindness Evan's shown Michael are too genuine and vulnerable to be fake. Evan is like a puzzle, and with enough time Michael can put the pieces together.

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

Michael would have choked if he'd been chewing at that moment. "Did he?" Jermaine must have pulled out all the stops to get this girl interested in Michael.

She nods. "So what're you doing here, Michael?"

Running away. Breaking free. Michael settles 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."

Tatiana studies Michael's face for a moment, which is awkward since he's eating. "You don't want to run the show, do you?"

Michael tries 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 see for myself."

"What kind of life do you see, then?"

"Something more... normal."

* * *

"You want the whole apple pie life, don't you? White picket fence, two kids, a nice house in the suburbs?"

Evan had teased Michael for these same wants; Michael wonders if his own desires are really so ridiculous, since everyone he tells them to seems to mock them. "It has its own appeal." Sometimes if Michael closes his eyes, he can pretend that Evan's his husband and Jordan is their son, and the mob life is very far away.

After dinner, Tatiana wants ice cream, so they leave the restaurant and stroll down a couple blocks until they find a sweets shop. Tatiana keeps her arms locked around Michael's as they walk, and Michael feels twisted and wrong all at once for craving a different, stronger set of arms.

What is wrong with you? Michael asks himself. She's beautiful and kind, she knows the dirty business your family's involved in and doesn't bat an eye. So why can't you just be satisfied with what's in front of you?

Because Michael can't stay away from Evan. It all seems so wrong to fantasize about a broken, grieving man, even if those fantasies come from a place of empathy. Because Evan is hurting, and it hurts Michael when he thinks about that too much. It's just his nature: he sees someone in pain, and he wants to help. And maybe, in some way Michael doesn't yet understand, Evan can help him too.

Tatiana gets her ice cream cone and eats it while Michael drives her to her apartment. He's been forced to acquire a vehicle of his own, since he can't always drive Evan's Mercedes, and Evan won't let him touch June's Corvette that's eternally parked in the garage. So Michael has a Firebird, because like hell he's taking the subway everywhere.

They reach Tatiana's apartment, and Michael walks her to the door like a gentleman. "Think you can get off early sometime so we can do this again?" Her words are laced with innuendo, and Michael blushes.

* * *

He struggles 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."

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

This is the point where Michael should probably take a step toward her, lean in slowly and press his mouth against hers, but instead he backs away and gives her an awkward wave before descending down the staircase.

Stupid, stupid, he tells himself when he gets into the car. But kissing her would have caused more problems than it might have solved, and after tonight Michael probably won't see her again. The fumbled kiss-that-could-have-been definitely sent a message: *closed for business*.

The drive home leaves Michael with a heavier weight on his shoulders than before. He's tired and frustrated for being such an idiot, for wanting what is denied to him. He feels guilty and awful when he walks through the front door of the house. It takes his eyes a moment to adjust to the dark interior of the living room. Michael fumbles his way toward the staircase, blindly groping for the handrail.

"'Bout time you got back," Evan speaks up from somewhere inside the room. Michael still can't see very well in the darkness, but he's willing to bet Evan's on the couch drinking again.

"Sorry."

"So, how'd it go?"

"It was fine."

"Lucky you." Michael isn't sure what Evan means by that, but the tone of his voice says it's nothing nice.

Michael takes the stairs. "Goodnight, Evan."

* * *

"Yeah, it's a *great* night. Just wonderful."

"Try to get some sleep," Michael says in the calmest voice he can manage. "You'll feel better in the morning."

Evan scoffs an angry sound. "Oh, that's fuckin' rich coming from you. What the hell do you know about suffering?"

It takes all Michael has not to snap back at him. "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?"

Michael grips the handrail with a taut fist. If he needed something to put his crush into perspective, it's this bratty cruelty Evan's so fond of dishing out. Even Jordan isn't this childish, but of course he's had more reasons than Evan to grow up.

Screw this, Michael thinks. *I'm not putting up with this shit anymore*. The only reason he even agreed to go out tonight was so he could keep Joseph's demands satisfied. If Joseph heard Michael was dating a woman, he'd be more inclined to let Michael stay here.

Michael makes his way down the stairs. "Look, I can only apologize so much for what my family's done, Evan, but I had nothing to do with it! I have never in my life wanted to be a part of the things they do, okay? That's why my father let me come here in the first place! He knows I'm not like them!" Michael's standing over Evan, looking into those dark, haunted eyes. Evan's expression tightens, making him look lost. "I am so sorry for what happened to you and your family, but please stop taking it out on me! I'm just here to help you!"

Evan rakes a hand through his hair, shutting his eyes as if the gesture might make Michael disappear. When he opens his eyes again, his gaze is full of renewed pain. "I just keep fucking this up, don't I?" He

laughs humorlessly and shakes his head, his other hand balled into a fist on the armrest of the couch.

Michael navigates around the coffee table and sits beside Evan, just close enough to show concern and silent support if he wants it, but not to crowd him or make him feel pressured. "I know you're angry, and it's okay to feel that way."

Evan 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?" Michael waits for him to elaborate. "I—I was supposed to go to the bar that night and let the guys in for a meeting, but I got into a stupid fight with June. We were arguing a lot back then. I thought she was cheating on me." He gives a small, disparaging half-smile. "I guess it doesn't matter anymore, does it?"

Michael wants to tell Evan he doesn't have to tread this fragile emotional territory, but if Evan wants to (*needs to*) open up, Michael ought to let him.

"Anyway," Evan says, "we got into a fight, and she stormed out, said she'd go over there herself." Michael feels sick at the sight of Evan's forlorn expression and the way his hand twists helplessly into his T-shirt. "It should have been me."

Michael wishes he was better at this. He's always been best at communicating with words, but this is a situation where words will only be superfluous or harmful, and he can't begin to guess the proper avenue to help Evan. Michael covers Evan's free hand with his own, hoping the gesture isn't too forward, but it's all he can give that doesn't have the potential to hurt. Evan flinches away from the touch at first, almost as if instinctual, then he relaxes back into it like he wants it and needs the warmth of another human being in his world.

He looks over at Michael, his eyes filled with unfamiliar emotions. "I don't blame you, Michael. Really, I don't. I'm sorry I've been so fucking hard to live with. I can't help it. I'm just an asshole, and these things

sort of... explode out of me like a violent sneeze. 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."

Michael gives Evan's fingers a tender squeeze. "I came here to help you."

"You shouldn't have to put your life on hold to help me." Evan's words are hot and angry, and he wrenches his hand from Michael's own, balling it into a fist as he stares off at nothing in particular. "You shouldn't have to fix me because I'm too fucking hopeless to do it myself." His jaw clenches under the strain of biting back more harsh words.

"You're not hopeless. You're doing your best. You suffered an unimaginable tragedy, Evan. Of course it's going to affect you."

"Why don't you just go home and be done with all this?"

Those words reach into Michael's chest and squeeze his heart. "You want me to leave?"

"Save yourself the trouble." Evan exhales a tired sigh before he stands up slowly and moves towards the stairs.

"But I want to stay!" Michael follows Evan to the staircase, suddenly feeling as if he must plead his case. "I like it here."

"Why? What kind of life is this for you?"

"It's pretty much exactly what I want! All I've ever wanted is a normal life and a family of my own — a partner, kids, maybe a dog or a cat — and a job I enjoy! That won't happen if I go back home. You know Joseph will turn me into his apprentice."

Evan turns away, his breathing sort of shaky. "If you want something normal, why are you *here*? I'm as far from normal as you

can get. I'm fucked up, I have poison inside me, and, oh, right, I'm a fucking mob boss!"

It's hard not to reach out and hug him, to try and pull some of Evan's pain into Michael's own heart. "I'm just here to help," Michael says, at a loss for anything more.

"Fine, I'll *make* you leave." Evan starts towards Michael, and for a moment Michael fears he'll be forced right out the door. But instead Evan grabs Michael's face in his hands and pulls their mouths together. Their lips crash, but Evan is drunk so it doesn't seem to bother him. Michael smells the alcohol on Evan's breath, knows this is coming from a place of anger and loss and frustration, and that the best thing he can do for Evan is to push him away.

Instead, Michael grabs fistfuls of Evan's T-shirt, pulling him closer, kissing him back in earnest. His lips are rough, his stubble scraping over Michael's chin. Evan's fingers drag through Michael's hair before one hand drops away and slithers up his shirt. Michael gasps, but it doesn't sound scared or unsure, at least not to his own ears. It sounds like he's wanted this, waited for it.

Evan's thumb curves over Michael's nipple, his wide hands wandering over skin. Then he nudges Michael backwards, shoving him against the front door and sticking a knee between Michael's legs. Michael grinds his hips into Evan's thigh, desperate for the friction. Evan can't be too drunk to notice how hard Michael is. He bites Michael's bottom lip before reaching down and tugging the waistband of his jeans.

"Evan, stop," Michael sputters out. He's surprised at how forceful he sounds, even more surprised when Evan actually obeys and backs off.

One side of Evan's mouth pulls up into a laconic smirk. "See? It worked." He snorts an angry, dark chuckle, turning away and retreating up the stairs. Michael doesn't react until the bedroom door slams. He slides to the floor and tries to remember how to breathe

properly.

Michael would be certain he hallucinated all of that, but his lips burn from the kiss. He still feels Evan's hands on him. It's not unpleasant, and acknowledging that makes Michael's stomach twist. Evan was drunk; it doesn't matter what he did or said or made Michael feel. But Michael wasn't compromised, and he still kissed Evan back.

Michael stumbles upstairs and shuts himself in his room before curling up in the empty bed. It's not like Michael hasn't fantasized about something like this before, but those fantasies certainly never involved Michael taking advantage. How could he allow himself to get caught up in the moment when Evan just poured his heart out? The kiss was a last-ditch effort by Evan to force Michael to leave.

He doesn't want me here. I shouldn't want him.

I shouldn't...

6: *Want*

“Dad, get up.”

Jordan’s voice is way too fucking loud as he pulls the curtains open, and the sunlight punishes Evan’s aching eyeballs when it pours into the room. Even with his eyes squeezed shut, it’s like the light wants to drill through his head.

“No,” Evan mumbles, pressing his face into a pillow to hide from the sun.

Jordan sits on the edge of the bed. The mattress jiggles at his weight, and Evan feels like throwing up. “C’mon, Michael made breakfast—”

“He’s still here?” Evan pops up like something out of a toaster. Not the best idea he’s ever had. He swallows back bile and blinks away the bright white.

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

Immediately Evan glances away, looking at everything in the room but Jordan. “Maybe...”

“What? Why?”

* * *

Evan doesn't answer, still staring at nothing in particular. The pattern on the comforter holds his interest for a bit. His eyes follow the convoluted swirls. He feels a little dizzy looking at it.

Jordan groans an exasperated sound. "Were you drinking last night?"

"A little."

"You said you were gonna stop..." Jordan 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?"

Evan scrubs a hand over his face. "Doesn't matter. I screwed up, and I told him I wanted him gone." His stomach curls with nausea. He isn't sure if that's from the hangover or his own guilt at how he treated Michael last night. "Do I have to remain vertical for this conversation?" Jordan shakes his head no, so Evan eases himself back against the pillows.

"You wanted him to leave?"

"I don't want him to, but he should want to."

Jordan makes a face like Evan's being purposely obtuse. "What does that even mean?"

Evan shrugs. "That made sense in my head."

"What'd you say to Michael?"

Evan would rather keep that can of worms closed for now. "Just... awful stuff. Blaming him and his family for what happened to your

mom..." Even the explanation tastes bitter. How can Evan expect Michael to like him when he's throwing baseless, vengeance-fueled accusations at the guy? "I don't know how I'm going to look him in the eye after this. It's all a terrible, awkward blur." Evan smashes his face into the pillows again. "Why is Michael still here?"

"I dunno, ask him." Jordan climbs off the bed and leaves Evan to his misery without closing the goddamn blinds. Well, great. Not only is Jordan rightfully pissed off, but Michael probably is too. And if he's not angry, he'll want an explanation for that kiss, and Evan doesn't have one that's not completely fucking crazy.

You might be the actual worst person on the planet, Evan tells himself. You do realize you've sexually assaulted your own employee? Michael could sue the fuck out of you, or at least spread around the idea that you're a queer. Maybe it'll take hold, maybe not, but it will be out there, and you can't unring that bell.

Michael probably won't mention Evan's horrible behavior in front of any witnesses. So he's safe until Jordan leaves for school, which is in about ten minutes.

Evan lies in bed contemplating his miserable life for a while until Jordan returns with a glass of water and some aspirin. Jordan stays begrudgingly silent as he sets the glass and pills 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, Evan wants no part of it.

A little bit later, he hears the front door close. From the window, he can see Jordan walking down the street to the bus stop. Evan expects Michael to come up here and chew Evan out now that Jordan's gone. So Evan waits. And waits.

Michael, what the fuck are you waiting for, a goddamn bus?

* * *

Michael doesn't come upstairs. Evan doesn't know how much time passes, but eventually he hears the front door close when Michael leaves for work. Evan crawls over to the window and peers out at Michael, 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 that awful, awkward groping session would put him in a good mood?

Evan swallows the aspirin and curls back into bed. If he's going to figure out how to apologize, he needs to be running on all cylinders.

Downstairs, about three hours later, Evan finds a note from Michael in the kitchen. It reads, *Evan, look in the fridge*. Evan does so, fully prepared for some kind of ridiculous scavenger hunt.

His gaze is immediately drawn to a tupperware container with another sticky note attached. This one says: *remember to eat breakfast! We need you around*. It's signed with a goofy-looking smiley face, and inside the container is what Evan assumes are the remnants of this morning's breakfast: scrambled eggs with onions and baby red potatoes, and two strips of bacon, all hiding underneath a piece of toast.

All at once, Evan realizes he loves Michael, and that he'll do anything to make Michael stay. Even if Michael could never entertain the feelings Evan has for him, his presence in this household is worth the pain of unrequited love. Evan will take it all with a smile, as long as Michael sticks around to reaffirm Evan's right to exist.

Evan heads to the bar that night for a healthy meal of eating crow. The wind chills his skin, and he shoves his hands into the pockets of his jacket to keep warm while contemplating what to say to Michael. Evan had a vague idea of the right words before leaving the house, but as each step carries him closer to Michael, he's less convinced of his own words and absolutely certain he'll fuck this up.

* * *

At least it's after hours at the bar, so there won't be anyone else there to witness this humiliating social disaster.

Evan understands his panic is sort of silly. Michael isn't a total stranger; they're past the awkward, forced pleasantries part of their friendship. Although it's possible they're not even friends, since Evan's been nothing but a huge asshole to him, and Michael's taken it like a champ. Forgiving to a fault, much like June is.

Was.

Evan pushes down the ache in his chest and approaches the bar's front door. He peers through the glass and sees Michael cleaning dishes with his back facing the window. Evan could probably turn around and leave right now, and Michael would never know he was here. No one would be the wiser.

Or he could just get this over with. Evan takes a deep breath and open the door.

Michael turns his head at the sound, looking way too earnest when he sees Evan standing in the doorway. "Hey, Evan. Feeling better?" He's got his hair tied back in a way that should absolutely be illegal. A few tendrils of hair hang over his face, and it's so, so tempting to want to reach out and brush them away for an unobstructed view.

"What do you mean?"

"Jordie told me you had a hangover. That's why you didn't come down for breakfast," Michael says, sounding distressed by this particular fact. Then his mood brightens. "Did you find the food I left you?"

Evan nods. "It was good. Thanks." He sits on a bar stool and watches Michael's thin, nimble fingers handle an empty glass. He imagines those fingers wrapped around him, stroking him off. He shakes his

head, as if shaking away the distraction. He came here to apologize, so that's what he's going to do.

"Look, Mike, 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 alcohol was involved."

"I figured that out when I smelled it on your breath," Michael says with good humor.

"Great, well, I'd like to apologize for any, uh, inappropriate touching" — shit, it sounds really bad phrased that way — "that might have occurred on my part, and I would really like to make it up to you somehow. So if there's anything you want, now's the time to ask."

"Anything?" Michael raises a perfectly-plucked eyebrow.

Evan nods and tells him that, yes, anything is acceptable here.

"Depends if you still want me around."

"Of course!" Evan sort of blurts out. "I don't really *want* you to leave. Jesus, that was just — I don't even know. But, I mean, if you want to get the hell out of here after putting up with all my crap, be my guest. I wouldn't blame you for a minute." Evan tries to laugh it off, but it sounds weak. "No one would blame you, not even Jordie."

"Evan," Michael starts with a sigh, reaching across the bar for Evan's hands. Evan lets him take them and feels a wicked thrill at his warmth. "I'm not going anywhere. And I'll take you up on your offer. Just give me an honest answer: why did you kiss me?"

Evan braces himself. "Because I like you, and I was drunk, and I thought maybe the latter might excuse the former." He stares at the way their hands are touching, hoping Michael doesn't see the panic and horror brewing inside of him.

* * *

Michael's voice comes out in a tiny whisper. "You like me?"

Evan remembers Ray's repulsion at how he admired Michael the first time they met. He thinks about what people in this mob world might say — or do — if they knew. He wonders what June would think of this.

None of that stops Evan from telling the truth. "I like you a lot. Probably too much."

A grin spreads over Michael's face. "Well, gee, you big dope, why didn't you just tell me?"

"It's not that easy," Evan says, and Michael seems to understand.

"For what it's worth, I like you too. That's why I kissed you back," Michael admits, his face flushed with embarrassment.

"Then why'd you stop?"

"Because you were drunk. You weren't thinking clearly, and you just told me all that stuff about your wife... It didn't feel right."

"I'm sober now," Evan reminds him. "But I thought you weren't into guys."

Michael's voice is quiet again. "You'd be surprised about a lot of people in this business."

Evan wonders what that means and how Michael knows.

"The less my brothers know about my sexuality, the better. Jermaine and Randy and Marlon might be okay with it, but Tito and Jackie won't take it well. And you can be sure it'll get back to them." Michael's expression tightens. "I don't even want to think about how Joseph would react."

* * *

"Then it'll be our little secret," Evan says with a smile.

Michael smiles back. "So what do we do about this?"

"For starters, you could come home with me."

"Buy me dinner first, pig."

"I'm kind of a cheapskate. Can I 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."

Evan gestures to his parked Mercedes outside. "Your chariot awaits." Michael smiles, shaking his head, and Evan watches his long fingers twist the rag between them and wipe down the already polished countertop. Evan wants Michael's wide hands on his shoulders, over the curve of his spine, wrapped around his dick. He wants them entwined with his own and pressed into satin sheets.

I want. I want. I want.

Evan watches Michael close up the bar and tries only to watch, not to need, but when Michael glides past, all sharp angles and subtle curves, Evan feels the burn of want.

"Can we try again?" Michael asks, stepping closer with cautious feet, his cheeks blazing. "Just the kiss, unless—" He pulls back and glances away, chagrined. "Or — or not. It's okay. Never mind. I'm sorry —"

Evan settles his hand against Michael's cheek. Michael watches through the fringe of his lashes, his lips uncoupled. Evan's close enough to inhale the minty sweetness of his breath. Michael deserves a proper kiss, one where Evan's intentions are clear and his breath doesn't stink of whisky.

* * *

With a quick glance to ensure they're alone, Evan takes the plunge and brings their mouths together. Michael's delicate fingers press over Evan's chest when their lips meet. Evan savors the taste of him, the sensation of heat rising in Michael's cheeks, and he has to stop himself before he goes too far.

"Wow," Michael says, slightly breathless. "It's been a while since I've been kissed like that."

"Me too."

Michael reaches for Evan's fingers, giving them a gentle squeeze. "I like you a lot, Evan. And I'll be good to you, I promise."

The right thing to do is say no. Michael doesn't know what he's asking. He shouldn't want this, not after he's seen the wreckage of Evan's life. "I'm poison, remember?"

"You were drunk when you said that."

"Doesn't make me a liar. Maybe that's as honest as I've ever been."

Michael frowns, still holding Evan's hands. Their fingers fold together as if they've been doing it for years. "Then I'll be honest now. I want you to be with me. I won't push you if you're not ready, but don't you think you deserve to feel good?"

No, Evan doesn't think he *deserves* to feel good, but he can sure as hell be selfish enough to want it. "Alright, you won me over."

Michael grins and rests his forehead on Evan's chest. The spike of heat that rises in Evan's belly fills him with more guilt than the kiss. "Good man," Michael murmurs, his thumbs rubbing small circles over Evan's knuckles.

"I think you have me confused for someone else."

* * *

"You don't see what I see," Michael says, standing on his tiptoes to give Evan a kiss of his own.

In the morning, it's business as usual, though a great deal of tension between Michael and Evan has evaporated entirely. Michael cooks up a breakfast of French toast and eggs, the aroma of which coaxes Evan downstairs.

Jordan's already seated at the table, halfway finished with his own plate. "Hey, Dad," he says with his mouth full.

"Morning, kiddo." Evan slinks into the kitchen and brews himself a pot of coffee. His hair is rumpled and messy, and Michael reaches out and pushes his fingers through it. Evan smiles, and Michael feels the stare in his bones. "Good morning to you too. Something smells great."

Michael pushes a plate of French toast towards him. "Better take some before it's all gone. My mama's special recipe, but I added a few things." Mama Katherine didn't serve her version of French toast with chopped pecans and a caramel drizzle, that's for sure. And definitely not with a dollop of Cool Whip.

"It's really good," Jordan pipes up from the table. "If you don't want it, I'll take it."

"Slow your roll, young man." Evan swipes the plate for himself and pours a mug of coffee. "I'll eat anything Michael cooks."

"Is that the first time you ever complimented his cooking?" Jordan asks, looking surprised.

Evan drops a couple spoonfuls of sugar into his coffee and pours in an abundance of creamer. "You know, just because you're not around to hear something doesn't mean it never happens."

* * *

"Whoa, deep," Jordan says, unimpressed.

"If you have to dress it up that much," Michael says, referring to the coffee, "should you even drink it in the first place?"

"Have you ever actually tasted coffee?"

"I have, and that's why I drink tea."

"To each his own," Evan says before taking a sip. He gathers his mug and plate and carries them to the table.

"You'll tell me what you think, won't you?" Michael asks. "I hope it's not too sweet."

"Too sweet?" Evan laughs, a real, genuine laugh not borne from self-deprecation or at someone else's misery. "I have a hell of a sweet tooth. The old man always crawled up my ass about it, but he was a dentist as a side gig, so I guess that was sort of his job."

Michael joins the two of them at the table. "You never told me that."

"The dentist thing?"

"Well, that too, but I meant the sweet tooth thing."

"I can't believe you never noticed," Evan says, sounding genuinely surprised.

"I could've told you that," Jordan says to Michael. "Dad loves sweet stuff." He finishes up the last bites of his breakfast and jogs into the laundry room to fetch something from the dryer.

Michael gives Evan a pointed look. "Is the way to a man's heart really through his stomach?"

* * *

"No, it's a little further south," Evan says with a wink, causing heat to rise in Michael's cheeks. "But I won't fault you for trying either way. Your cooking" — he pauses, then decides to soldier on — "it makes a house a home."

Michael blushes to his hairline. "I try my best. I have lots of fond memories of eating together as a family. It was the only time I really felt like I belonged with them, 'cause Mama didn't allow business talk at the table."

"Then that'll be our policy too," Evan says.

Jordan emerges from the laundry room, sticking his arms into his Batman sweatshirt. "As long as you don't make me eat vegetables, I'm fine with whatever." He grabs his backpack near the door and slings it over his shoulder.

"You want me to walk you to the bus stop?" Michael offers.

Jordan makes a face, like he appreciates the offer but thinks his friends will make fun of him if he shows up with Michael. "I'm almost thirteen. I think I can handle it on my own."

Michael laughs. "Alright, have a good day at school."

Jordan says goodbye and walks out the front door, leaving Michael and Evan alone in the kitchen. Michael steals Evan's mug and takes a sip. Evan can dress it up with all the sugary-sweet accessories he wants, but coffee still tastes like bitter bean juice to Michael. He makes a face and sets down the mug.

"When's Jordie's birthday?" Michael asks.

Through a bite of toast, Evan tells him it's in January, so they've got a few months.

"We should do something special. He'll only turn thirteen once."

* * *

"He'll only turn every age once," Evan says, just to be pedantic. He softens his words with a smile. "But I know what you mean. It's a milestone."

"What did you usually do for him?"

Evan's smile fades a bit, as if he's thinking of how he once coordinated Jordan's birthday parties with June. "We used to just take him to Chuck E. Cheese, but he might be getting too old for that."

"How about Disney World?"

"It's his birthday, Mike, not yours," Evan says gently, and it probably doesn't help that Michael's wearing a Mickey Mouse T-shirt. "But you can ask him and see what he wants. Maybe he'll forget by the time his birthday rolls around, and it'll be a surprise." He takes another heaping bite.

"I hope I'm not overstepping." Michael's aware of how all of this must seem, and the last thing he wants is to move too fast. "If you just want someone to feel normal with again, I get it. And I won't make it something it isn't if that's what's going on."

Evan looks up from his plate, confused, like he isn't sure what he might have said to give Michael that impression. "No, it's great that you care about Jordie as much as you do. I..."

He pauses, mulling over his words. Michael gets the impression that Evan doesn't talk about his feelings a lot and therefore has trouble putting them into words.

"I heard a lot of horror stories about people who started dating again, because it's harder when kids are in the picture, y'know? If I met somebody I really hit it off with, but Jordie didn't like 'em, well, it's not like I'm getting rid of the kid. So you and me, whatever this is, I'm glad it works for Jordie, too."

* * *

"It might only work for him because he thinks we're just friends."

"Maybe, but at least I won't have to figure out if he hates you or just hates that I'm dating someone."

"Is that what we're doing? Dating?" Michael doesn't mean to blush and grin like a thirteen-year-old girl on her first date at the soda shop, but he can't help himself.

"Well, we're definitely not 'just friends,'" Evan says, sliding a leg against Michael's own underneath the table.

The bar is relatively calm that night, which is no good for Michael's overactive imagination. His mind keeps drifting to thoughts of how his relationship with Evan might progress: a future with them raising Jordan together, living in a house without ghosts. It may be silly and old-fashioned, but Michael happens to take pleasure in those kind of things. And to think Joseph wants him to oversee a business that makes its name taking advantage of other people.

Joseph should know better, really.

Evan stops in around one in the morning with Ray and a few other men Michael doesn't recognize. They're obviously 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 at Michael 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, Michael grins back at him like a lovesick fool, and each time he notices the corner of Evan's mouth pull up into an almost-smile, like they're privy to an inside joke. And maybe they are.

Most people in this business would find their "relationship" a laughing stock — or a punishable offense. It may be the nineties, and Evan and his crew may be 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 full-blooded Italian — a harsh lesson the Jacksons learned when they came into power. The Young Turks have a more open-minded outlook, but that only applies to whatever turns a profit; what people do behind closed doors is still viewed with an old-world lens.

Dave's been sitting across from Michael at the bar for most of the night, talking at him about one topic or another — talking "at" because Michael hasn't been paying much attention.

"Mike, you alright?" Dave asks, toying with the label of his beer bottle.

"Never better."

"You seem distracted."

"I'm off in my own head a lot," Michael says. "Hard habit to break."

"I guess you'd have to be, living with Evan and all." Dave has dropped by the house a few times and found Michael performing his housekeeping tasks.

"What's that supposed to mean?" Michael, of course, knows exactly what Dave meant, but he wants to hear it from the source.

Dave looks flustered to be put on the spot this way. "I just meant Evan might be difficult to live with, is all. He's grieving, and grief is brutal." He says this as though he has personal experience with this, and

maybe he does. Michael hasn't heard Dave mention a wife (or ex-wife), hasn't spotted a ring on his third finger, though the lack of such things doesn't mean Dave is a permanent bachelor.

Michael nods. "I lost my grandmother two years ago. It was hard on me, but it really took a toll on my mother. I don't think she would have made it through if it weren't for the family, and the church, of course. Sometimes it helps having someone to fill the void."

Dave makes a face like he doesn't really believe that but isn't willing to argue. "How's Jordie doing?"

"He's doing alright considering the circumstances. We seem to get on really well. He's been showing me around town, and it seems like he's happier when Evan's in a good mood."

Dave takes a sip from his beer. "Sure, but I bet he misses his mom."

"Of course, I can't imagine losing Mama at Jordie's age." Michael doesn't even want to go there in his own head. "But I think children adjust easier than we do. Every year is like a whole new life for them, so they're used to things changing."

"Does Jordie ever talk about her?"

"Sometimes. Usually it's something like, 'Mom used to do this,' or 'Mom would have liked that.' But that's more than Evan says about her. Not that I blame him."

A sudden draft of cold air floats into the bar, and Michael 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. Michael looks away when he sees where this is headed. Dread knots his stomach over the things to come in that room.

Evan's going to oversee — or participate in, even — a brutal, violent

“negotiation.” Irrefutable proof that he’s as entangled in this business as Joseph is. Maybe Evan doesn’t get his own hands dirty, but that doesn’t change that he’s involved in it. Giving orders. Calling the shots. Causing violence. The top of the Family chain.

How can Michael reconcile that with the idyllic life he imagines for them?

“What was June like?” Michael asks to distract himself.

“She was beautiful,” Dave says. “Loved Jordie more than anything or anyone. He was her world. It’s a shame that world couldn’t get any bigger.”

“How’s that?”

Dave takes a short breath before speaking. “June wanted to have a baby a few years before... Well, before all of this mess. She and Evan tried, but I guess he ran out of bullets in the chamber, because it took a long time for her to end up pregnant again. She was so happy.” Dave pauses as though recalling a memory. “It would have been a girl.”

The words squeeze around Michael’s throat like a vise. He has pried too deeply into Evan’s past. He feels the urge to run into the back room, wrap his arms around Evan and hold him close, try to take on some of the pain in his heart.

“Of course, she was devastated when she lost the baby,” Dave continues, oblivious to Michael’s damp eyes. “To his credit, Evan was too, but...” He lets out a sigh. “I don’t know. Something about the miscarriage always sat wrong with me.”

“You think Evan had something to do with it?” Michael asks, horrified at the prospect.

“I never saw any bruises, if that’s what you mean. But you know what it’s like living with him. He’s unstable, and you know the kind of

family he comes from.”

Michael lifts an eyebrow.

“Don’t mistake that for anti-Semitism,” Dave says. “I’m a member of the Tribe myself. I’m talking about all that mob shit. They kill anyone that even looks at ‘em funny. Just look at John Gotti.” Earlier in the year, Gotti was sentenced to life in prison for racketeering and the murder of mob boss Paul Castellano. “And that’s just one guy, and you know he rarely stuck his neck out. They always get the underlings to do the dirty work.”

“Know your audience, Dave,” Michael warns, not unkindly. Dave may not know he’s talking to a Mafia big shot, but he ought to know enough not to trash talk the mob in their own bar.

“All I’m saying is it wouldn’t surprise me in the least if Evan knocked her around, just enough to solve his little problem.”

Michael can’t believe he’s hearing this. He has seen Evan grieve, has seen him agonize over June’s death and the absence of her. He’s seen the way Evan treats Jordan, how Jordan loves and respects his father with no fear of the man. None of that seems to agree with Dave’s theory, and yet...

Michael remembers the fear that curled around his stomach when Evan first discovered him and Jordan cleaning up the bar. *I could still be dangerous*, Evan had warned him. It could have been an early flirtation, but what if it wasn’t?

Michael jumps when the door to the back room swings open. Evan and the others step out. One member of this entourage has a black eye that wasn’t there before.

“You’re still here?” Evan asks Michael, unaware of how the earth feels unsteady and frail beneath Michael’s feet. “Why don’t you head home? I’ll close up.”

* * *

"You'll be alright?"

Evan snorts a laugh. "I can take care of myself, Mike."

"Yeah, you know Evan," Dave adds.

Evan gives Dave a look. "Go home. And make sure Michael gets home safe while you're at it."

"You sure?"

Evan looks annoyed to even be asked. "One more person second-guesses me, and I'm gonna start throwing punches."

Michael nudges Dave out the door. "Let's go." As they trudge into the night and to Dave's pickup truck, the cold chills Michael's nose and fingertips. Michael climbs into the passenger seat while Dave warms up the engine.

"I guess I don't have to ask if you heard that back there," Dave says over the roar of the truck.

"That's just macho crap," Michael says, dismissive. "Guys talk that way all the time."

"You don't," Dave points out, and Michael wonders if that's a dig at his masculinity, or perceived lack thereof.

"I'm not like other guys."

"So I've noticed." Dave gets them moving through the little court of shops and restaurants that line the street.

Michael ignores the jab, if it could even be called that. "You said Evan was unstable?"

* * *

"Is," Dave corrects, turning the wheel and putting them en route to the dark, winding road that leads to their shared block of houses. "He's got bats in the belfry. June told me once that living with Evan was like playing a non-stop game of 'What Benign Thing Will Set Evan Off Today?'"

Michael played that game for the first couple of weeks living with the Chandlers. But knowing how fresh the pain of losing June must have been, Evan's frustration didn't seem out of place.

"He's supposed to be on medication, but if you ask me I don't think that shit works," Dave says.

Michael decides not to mention that Evan may not be regularly taking his pills. "I thought you and Evan were friends."

"Doesn't mean I can't call it like I see it. Sometimes it takes a friend to point out when you're being a prick."

A voice buried deep in Michael's subconscious speaks up: *This guy might be trouble*. Michael isn't sure how exactly, but the ease with which Dave's willing to badmouth Evan to whoever will listen doesn't bode well.

Dave slows to a stop in front of the Chandlers' house. Michael lays a hand on the door handle, ready to flee this unpleasantness, but Dave stops him with more words. "Just between you and me, Mike, I don't think this mob shit is a good environment for Jordie."

"I don't disagree with that, but it's a hard life to get free of." Michael pops the door open.

"One of these days Evan's going to cross the wrong guy and end up dead. What'll happen to Jordie then? He gets shuffled off to Ray?" Dave scoffs. "Now there's an improvement."

"Maybe June had family..." Michael starts before abandoning that line

of thought. Arguing Evan's virtue with Dave seems like a lost cause. Michael slides off the seat and out of the truck in one smooth motion. "Thank you for the ride home."

Dave nods, seeming to understand that he's stepped in it somehow. "Don't mention it. And I only said all that stuff because I'm worried about you. You're not like other guys, all right. You're sensitive and trusting, and people like Evan take advantage of that."

"People like Evan?"

"For fuck's sake, Michael, you know what I mean."

Michael does, but admittedly it's kind of fun to needle Dave. "Careful who you badmouth the Families to. Where do you think Evan found me? The Yellow Pages?" Michael turns and heads up the walkway to the house, but not before catching a glimpse of Dave's pale, stricken expression.

7: We'll Always Have Ghostbusters

Jordan's sprawled out on the couch, forcing Michael and Evan to sit way too close to each other while they watch TV. Evan enjoys the warm press of Michael's body, but Michael is all fidgeting and nerves, his spine impossibly straight. Evan can't figure out why Michael might be nervous here.

The phone rings in the kitchen. Jordan sighs, knowing a call this late means a job for Evan.

"I need you on the Gardner job," Ray says when Evan answers the phone.

Dr. Richard Gardner is a potential "protection" payment. He served as consigliere under Evan's father, but Evan sacked him after coming into power.

"No, you don't," Evan says.

"Did ya take care of it already?"

"No, but you don't need me to hold your hand. This isn't even what we do. Christ, what the fuck do we even pay J.D. for?"

There's silence on the other end of the line for a moment before Ray

pipes up: “We *don’t*.”

“This is his gig. Give ‘im something to do. You’re the one who thinks I should be home more. I thought you wanted to run the show anyway.”

“I do, but—”

“Then look at this as an opportunity to take charge.”

Ray thinks about that. “Who are you and what have you done with my brother?”

“Just give the order, Ray.” Evan hangs up and returns to his spot on the couch. Michael’s still sitting tense and petrified.

“Are you going out?” Jordan asks.

“Not tonight, kiddo. I think your Uncle Ray can take care of things.” Evan leans against the cushions and resists the urge to pull Michael closer. They watch the last thirty minutes of *Back to the Future Part II* before Jordan starts yawning.

“I’m going to bed,” Jordan says, rising from the couch.

“You sure? *Ghostbusters* is on after this. You love that movie.”

Jordan half-smiles. “I know, but I’m tired.” He says goodnight and climbs the stairs.

When Jordan’s bedroom door closes, Evan sling an arm around Michael’s tensed shoulders. “You’re not checkin’ out on me too, are you?”

“I can stay up.”

“Great. I could use some company.” Evan pulls Michael close, pressing

him against his chest. "Any reason you're so tense tonight?"

"Am I?" Michael shifts his shoulders and nestles against Evan. "I guess I'm worried about being too chummy with you while Jordie's around. I don't want to be cast as the wicked stepmother so soon."

Evan chuckles and kisses Michael's cheek. Michael squirms with a giggle at the sudden rasp of stubble. "He ought to have more sense than that. And if he does lash out, it'll be me who takes the brunt of it, not you."

"The last thing I want is to be an obstacle between you and Jordie."

"You worry too much," Evan says, running his fingers through a length of Michael's hair. "Can't you just relax for a couple hours and watch a movie with me?"

Michael nods and says he can do that. He snuggles closer and lets Evan wrap an arm around him. The scent of his hair is intoxicating, and throughout the film Michael makes a breathy sort of laughing sound. Then when something's really funny, he'll start giggling and making "tee-hee" noises, and it's the cutest thing Evan's heard in a while. Evan thinks he could endure months of Jordan's potential bad behavior if it meant hearing Michael laugh like that every now and again.

By the time the movie's over and the late-night infomercials start rolling, Michael is completely relaxed. He's warm and lean and yet still soft, and he seems to enjoy the way they're pressed together almost as much as Evan is. Evan plays with the curls draped over Michael's shoulder. His hair is a new, tantalizing thing Evan wants to explore. Depending on the day, June had either long, straight locks or soft waves, nothing like Michael's tight curls.

Do the curtains match the drapes, Evan finds himself wondering, feeling deliciously filthy for the thought. As much as he'd love to push his hand down there and find out, touching someone else that way seems like a betrayal at this stage.

* * *

Instead, Evan touches the notches in Michael's spine, starting at the base of his neck. Evan's free hand grazes over Michael's wrist. The skin is warm and inviting, and Evan can feel the subtle throb of Michael's pulse. Should he curl his fingers around it? Make some sort of tender gesture or let the moment drift into the ether?

Michael takes the initiative, his fingers wrapping around the breadth of Evan's palm. He traces the knuckles and joints until pulling his hand away like he's been burned.

Evan examines his own hand, curious what might have repulsed Michael. Are his knuckles too bony? His fingers too thick? Too small? Are the backs of his hands too hairy?

This moment of examination is when Evan sees the silver band wrapped around his third finger.

"It's okay," Evan reassures him, taking Michael's hand again. "You're allowed to want me."

"It seems too soon," Michael says in an almost whisper.

"Maybe it does," Evan agrees, "but I'm the one who gets to make that call, don't you think? I like spending time with you, and I'm going to do it if we're dating or not. So Jordie's gonna get whatever impression he gets regardless."

"Do you think I'm silly to worry about that so much?"

"If you didn't worry about Jordie, I'd worry about you." Evan kisses Michael's blushing cheek. "Do this with me again sometime?"

Michael looks at Evan with a coy glance. "You really have to ask?"

Evan's hand finds the soft plane of Michael's cheek. "I'll take that as a yes." Michael gazes at him expectantly, and Evan kisses him. Michael

mewls out a gasp but doesn't push Evan away or make any indication this is unwelcome. He curls his fingers in Evan's shirt and tugs him forward.

Evan licks Michael's bottom lip until his mouth opens, and his tongue tastes slick and sweet. Michael moans, and the hum of that sound against Evan's mouth buries any guilt he might feel under a wave of desire. Evan pushes a hand underneath the thin material of Michael's shirt, skimming his fingers along the valley of vertebrae. His hand moves up, up, all the way to the taut bunches of muscle near Michael's back and shoulders.

It would be impossibly easy to escalate this warm moment they're nurturing. Evan could pull Michael's T-shirt over his head, slip a hand down the front of his sweatpants, and Michael would go easily enough if Evan worked him up to it slowly. Then it would be impossible to stop when they're palming naked curves and angles.

Michael picks this thought from Evan's head with stunning precision. He breaks away very slowly, his hands sliding free from Evan's chest.

"Let's leave a little to the imagination for now," Michael says, but his eyes say he wants the same things Evan does. "Good night, Evan." Michael flashes him a smile before heading upstairs.

The next day, Evan finds J.D., Larry, and Ray at the bar, crowded at the same table. They're all scowling with an unnecessary amount of scorn. J.D.'s got his arm in a dramatic-looking sling.

"The fuck happened to you?" Evan asks.

J.D. gives him 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."

* * *

"The crazy son of a bitch stabbed me!"

"So you didn't make the deal?"

"He said he didn't want anything more to do with us," J.D. grates out. "When I tried to make an offer, he pulled a knife and stuck me like a slab of meat!"

"You should be more careful next time."

"No, *you* should!" J.D. draws up to his full height and tugs Evan 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 throw me to the wolves?"

"Any time we show up somewhere, we take a risk," Evan says.

"You knew Gardner wanted to meet with you directly, not with some middleman! Why couldn't you be bothered to show up?"

"I got other shit to handle, alright?" The other wiseguys in the bar are starting to look at this nasty little stinkbomb, and they aren't being subtle about it. "Your job is to represent my interests and lead your crew. Why didn't you take backup?"

"Why didn't you warn me that guy was a psycho? I'm sick and goddamn tired of the utter disrespect I get around here!"

Evan wouldn't call J.D. Shapiro a sweet-natured man even on the best of days, but an outburst like this is uncharacteristic. A caporegime has no right to argue with his superior like this. The fact that Evan's let this go on as long as it has speaks volumes to the other wiseguys.

"I was the one who canned him, so I figured he'd go after me. My bad." Evan shrugs and claps J.D. on the arm — on his bad arm, because Evan's not above knocking his own guys around a little. J.D. winces in pain and bites down on an obscenity. "Won't happen again." Evan

scurries off to the bar for a drink before J.D. can protest.

Evan's enjoying his second shot of Jack Daniel's when Ray takes the seat next to him. "You're slippin', Ev. Gettin' careless again."

"Fuck off. It was a simple mistake."

"So it's got nothin' to do with how J.D's sold screenplays and you haven't?"

It might have a bit to do with that, but Evan's not going to admit it. "'Course not."

"Nothin' at all?"

"Nope."

"Nothin' to do with Dad?"

"What about him?"

Ray shrugs, leans in a little closer. "Well, he made J.D. capo', and you've got a pretty notorious track record for trying to stick it to Dad."

It was 1978; Evan was thirty-four years old and absolutely sick of the life his father forced him into. He moved out to New Jersey with June and worked on his first screenplay, exiling himself from the Mafia underworld.

But the life caught up with him. One December evening, a group of wiseguys from a friendly Family cornered Evan in a parking garage and beat him mercilessly. His nose smashed, his body bruised and broken, he stared into his father's dry eyes as the man stood over Evan's hospital bed.

"Come back to your Family," his father said, a coldness to his voice, "and no one can ever touch you again. Your enemies will become my

enemies." Evan moved back to the Bronx and worked for the Family. If Evan was doomed to a life sentence as a mobster, he would become powerful enough to never be hassled again.

"That was different," Evan says. "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. You don't wanna mess with that."

"Why do I have to be a part of this? What about me, huh? 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?" Evan shakes his head and swallows the rest of the whisky, smothering those fleeting thoughts of a better life.

Michael makes good on his promise for another movie night. Jordan's in the basement, playing a new game on his Super Nintendo, so Michael isn't too worried about Jordan seeing them entangled on the couch.

Evan has his arms wrapped around Michael's waist, and throughout the film he brushes Michael's hair aside to kiss the back of his neck. Michael has to squirm and edge away. "Stop," he giggles, his skin tickled by the sandpaper scrape of Evan's chin. "I'm trying to watch."

"You've never seen *Spies Like Us*?" Evan wonders. "Even with your weird crush on Chevy Chase?"

Michael blushes hot. "I really regret telling you about that." Michael had, in fact, only mentioned he thought Chase was kind of cute in *National Lampoon's Christmas Vacation*, but Evan's taking that one all the way to the finish line.

* * *

"Now I'm really curious who else you think is good-looking."

"I think *you* are. Isn't that enough? Or are you going to play the role of Mr. Insecure tonight?"

"I'm Mr. Insecure all the time. Pay attention."

They manage to make it through the movie, but after the credits roll Evan's gentle kisses grow legs and become something more. His hands are slipped under Michael's shirt, his mouth nipping at Michael's jaw, then his earlobe, then his hand is on Michael's thigh, only inches away from crossing a line.

Michael feels a tingle of electricity and nudges his hips forward, desperate to be touched. Evan grunts when his hand bumps against the bulge in Michael's pants; he brushes his fingers over it, as if testing his resolve.

Michael breathes out a noise of relief, of encouragement, of permission for Evan to do whatever he likes. Evan's gaze drops to Michael's lips, and he stares at them for a moment before pulling Michael off the couch and leading him upstairs.

Their mouths are disconnected only briefly, then they're in Michael's room, kissing and stroking and gasping and grinding against each other. Evan pushes Michael onto the bed, and Michael rocks his hips into the thigh placed between his legs. Michael makes a distressed noise, craving more friction, and Evan grants it to him by shoving a hand down the front of Michael's pants.

His touch is overwhelming; the heat and texture of him fill the world, and Michael is instantly harder than he's ever been. He squirms, groans, rocks his hips into Evan's hand. Evan gives him a quick squeeze, teasing the head with his thumb, then he's gazing down at Michael, his face flushed and his lips parted, and Michael can sense that some vital element in their chemistry has changed.

* * *

"I can't," Evan says, like he's only now realizing it. "I'm sorry." He draws his hand away and sits on the edge of the bed to put distance between them.

Michael sits up slowly, careful not to aggravate his erection, and scoots beside Evan. "You don't have to apologize."

"It's not that I don't want you, 'cause, believe me, I do, but past a certain point it starts to feel like I'm cheating." Evan sighs, raking a hand through his hair. "I know that sounds fucking crazy, but... I can't help but feel guilty, Mike. She'll never forgive me."

Michael risks a hand on Evan's shoulder; Evan doesn't shrug away from it. "We can wait. I never wanted to push you into anything." He needs to convince Evan that what they have together is okay, that their false starts don't mean the two of them are doomed.

"It's not just the sex. It's everything," Evan admits, his voice and gaze strangely reverent. "The way I feel with you... It's real, and, God, I want it so much, but it still feels like a betrayal. Like I didn't really love her if I can be with someone else."

Michael's way out of his element here. He doesn't know the right words to say or if any even exist. He doesn't know if touching Evan will help or hurt. He just *doesn't know*. Has his presence here benefited Jordan and Evan in any real way, or has he simply ruined this family even more?

"It's not wrong to want things, especially when you're hurting. I think that's when we need love the most." Michael runs a hand over Evan's arm. "Do you... I mean, have you ever... Since she..." He's trying to find a tactful way to ask if Evan has masturbated since June died, but Michael's always been too shy to approach such things directly.

"Spit it out," Evan says, looking amused by the flustered expression on Michael's face.

* * *

"Do you..." Michael just makes vague hand gestures at Evan's crotch.

"Are you asking if I jerk off?" Evan laughs when Michael answers with a timid nod. "Of course, but it's different when an actual person is involved."

Michael understands, but he wishes he could convince Evan to drop the guilt complex and just allow himself to feel things without self-recrimination. "Well, take all the time you need to figure things out. I'm not going anywhere."

Evan smiles and tucks a curl of Michael's hair behind his ear. "Thanks."

8: He Knows Too Much

November 1992

Jordan spends the next few days in a cloud of broodiness directed at Evan and Michael. Evan chalks up this surly attitude to teenage hormones kicking in, because he can't think of anything in recent memory to earn such scorn.

The troublesome part is that Jordan's pushing Michael away too, and Michael has been nothing but welcoming and loving to practically everyone he makes eye contact with. So Evan can only assume Jordan's disgruntlement is a phase and nothing personal. Considering what he's going through, it's no surprise he's acting out. Evan certainly did his own share of that since June passed.

After dinner one night, Michael's warming up mugs of hot cocoa for himself and Evan. They've fallen into a comfortable routine; when Evan isn't called away on business, he and Michael spend the evening in front of the TV watching programs or movies until one of them falls asleep.

Jordan used to be thrilled to join them, eager to stay up late on school nights and watch *Dinosaurs* or *Seinfeld*. But lately Jordan's sequestered himself to the basement to play Super Nintendo, so Evan figures it'll be just himself and Michael tonight.

* * *

As Michael's sprucing up the cocoa (Evan likes vanilla creamer in his mug), Jordan emerges from the basement. He opens the fridge and searches for something.

"Hey, Jordie, you want to watch TV with us?" Evan asks.

"*The Simpsons* is about to start," Michael adds cheerfully.

Jordan grabs a Gatorade from the fridge. "I'll catch it in reruns," he says, sounding annoyed to be asked.

"You sure?"

"Yeah, you two don't need me there anyway." Jordan huffs and heads for the basement stairs.

"Want me to make you some hot chocolate?" Michael asks with an edge of desperation.

"No. I want you to leave me alone." Jordan shuts the basement door behind him as he leaves.

"I don't know what I did wrong," Michael whimpers, and when Evan looks at him his lower lip trembles. "What's got him so upset with me?"

"He'll be a teenager in a couple months. It's probably just hormones gearing up, plus all the shit he's had to deal with."

"So you don't think it's me?" Michael sits beside him and places the mugs (topped with whipped cream and marshmallows, bless him) on the coffee table.

"Maybe that's part of it," Evan admits. "Maybe it's sinking in for him now that June's really gone. I guess he takes after me when it comes to dealing with things."

* * *

Jordan didn't know how long this arrangement with Michael was going to last. He may have figured Michael would stay for a couple weeks to get the bar up and running again and then go back to Encino. The longer Michael stays here, the more it may appear to Jordan that Michael's taking over June's role in their lives.

He thinks you're replacing her. And in some deep, dark place you won't admit to anybody, that's exactly what you're doing, isn't it?

"Should I talk to him about it?" Evan asks.

"I don't think it could hurt. I wish my father had cared enough to ask how I felt about things."

"Well, that clinches it, then."

Jordan's lying on the fold-out couch in the basement playing a violent video game. There's no blood on-screen, but the way one fighter upcuts the other into a pit of spikes is gruesome even without the gore.

Evan considers raising the subject, but at least the violence is fake. He'd be the world's biggest hypocrite to condemn video game violence while performing worse acts in the real world. Doesn't one of those characters turn into a giant scorpion anyway? The line between fantasy and reality is clearly established, Evan thinks.

Regardless, that wouldn't be the best note on which to start this conversation. Any criticism, however gently worded, will make Jordan tune out.

Jordan hears the groan of the stairs as Evan approaches. He looks over his shoulder, and the simmer of anger in his eyes is familiar and terrifying. He picks the worst times to look like his mother.

Evan swallows thickly. "Hey, kiddo." He sits in a nearby chair and

glances at the screen. "Which one are you?"

"The one that's winning," Jordan says in a colorless, emotionless voice.

That's not helpful at all, since Evan doesn't know which lifebar belongs to which character. "Good job. Say, Jordie, I know you and I don't talk about things that much anymore, but we should. If I'm wrong, tell me why I'm wrong, but I want to know why you're so upset lately. Problems at school? You know we won't be mad at you if you're having trouble in class."

Jordan's shoulders tense up, and he presses the controller buttons a little bit harder.

"Is that what's going on? Or is somebody giving you a hard time? A teacher? Another kid?"

"Like you care."

That takes Evan by surprise. "Of course I do! 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," Jordan says, and Evan hears the angry eyeroll in his voice.

"So you're mad at Michael too? Did he do something wrong?"

"It's both of you!" Jordan says, pausing the game so he can face Evan with the full force of his anger. "The only reason you're home so much now is so you can make out with him! I heard you two the other night. You were in bed with him, and you were gonna" — he makes a face — "*do it*, but you stopped. You said it felt like cheating. Well, maybe it is!"

Evan shouldn't be surprised by this ruthless attack. June had been the same way when they argued. "I... I didn't know you felt that way."

* * *

"Some things are just wrong," Jordan says, and two fat tears roll from his eyes and down his cheeks. "You brought Michael here to be Mom, but he's not. And you never asked me about any of it."

Evan remembers asking if Jordan liked the idea of a live-in housekeeper, but he gets the feeling that's not what Jordan's talking about. "You're right, and I'm sorry. I shouldn't have kept this from you. I guess, in a roundabout way, I was trying to protect you."

"From what? Finding out you don't love Mom anymore?"

Evan makes a choked noise of distress. *Jesus, kid, go straight for the jugular, why don't you?* "That's not — No, that's not what any of this means."

"Then why? How can you be with somebody else?" Jordan looks at him with watery eyes, like he's been wounded in the worst way possible. And, perhaps, he has.

The moment drags on while Evan struggles to express his feelings. Evan puts a hand on the boy's shoulder; Jordan doesn't pull away. "Jordie, no, of course I still love her. I always will. Just because a person is gone doesn't mean your feelings for them disappear. You know that."

Jordan gives a grudging nod.

"If things had turned the other way" — *the right way*, Evan thinks but does not say — "if your Mom was here and I was gone, I wouldn't want her moping around and being miserable. I would hope she'd meet somebody else who made her happy. So I think your Mom wishes that for me too. There's no way Michael could ever replace her. He's pretty much the opposite of her, you realize that?"

Jordan's mouth twitches in a weak smile. "Yeah. I mean, he's a guy. That's a little weird."

"Is it?"

* * *

"For you, I guess. I didn't know you liked guys like that."

"Neither did I. But it's not something I think too hard about. It is what it is, y'know?"

Jordan's expression has softened, and Evan thinks he sees a faint gleam of understanding in his son's eyes.

"Is there anything I can do for you?"

"I guess don't spend all your time with Michael."

"I can do that." Evan rubs Jordan's back before he stands up. "You think you might want to come upstairs and watch TV? C'mon, you love *The Simpsons*." Jordan does — the Bart Simpson T-shirt he's wearing says as much.

The three of them get comfortable on the couch. Jordan sits between Michael and Evan, acting as a barricade between any physical affection they might want to share. But Evan is happy to have the equilibrium of his relationship with Jordan restored.

After June died, it had just been the two of them, needing each other more than ever, then Michael came along and drove a wedge between them. Evan is secure enough in himself to admit he wants to be the Favorite Parent (or Favorite Parental Figure, counting Michael). He needs some kind of acknowledgement that he's doing a good job, and, if Jordan likes him best, that speaks volumes.

Jordan starts yawning around eleven o'clock and promptly goes upstairs to bed. Michael and Evan scoot a little closer on the couch now that Jordan's no longer playing the role of Human Berlin Wall.

Michael rests his head on Evan's shoulder and twines their fingers together. "I guess you patched everything up?" he asks, soft and hopeful.

* * *

Evan considers telling him what Jordan said. Michael is so sensitive; for him to know their relationship distresses Jordan would just give Michael one more reason to pull away from Evan.

But hiding things and keeping secrets — even if Evan feels it's in Michael's best interest — will only hurt them in the long run. A large part of why June and Evan fought so much was because they kept secrets from each other, so Evan needs to be honest.

"I did my best. He's still a little upset about you and me."

"Oh no..."

"It's not about you. He thinks I don't love her anymore."

Michael's range of heartbroken facial expressions is impressive, if not tragic in itself. "Maybe this is a mistake."

The mere suggestion of stopping what they have here slices through the tender muscle of Evan's heart. "Mike, no, don't say that, okay? This is worth it. I know it is. Jordie will be fine. As long as I'm not spending more time with you than him, he's willing to call it even."

Michael wakes up the next morning dressed in his pajamas in Evan's bed. The sunlight leaks through the spaces between the curtains and warms the room with a buttery glow. Michael's aware of a warm presence behind him, around him, and realizes one of Evan's arms is clasped around his waist. Michael feels the warm breath on the back of his neck.

Evan's hand creeps beneath Michael's shirt, caressing his stomach. Michael traces his fingertips over the back of Evan's hand. That's when Evan suddenly bolts up in a rush. Michael rolls over to get a better look at him, curious about his sudden panic. Evan's fully

dressed too, wearing the same sweats and T-shirt he wore last night.

"Evan?"

Evan whirls to face Michael, staring as if Michael's some sort of ghoulish hallucination. Then he drags a hand through his unruly hair and groans. His eyes squeeze shut. This isn't the best reaction to waking up with someone you claim to care about. Evan seems to wish Michael's presence in his bed is an awful nightmare.

"Shit, did we — I don't think we did anything," Evan says, and Michael hears traces of panic underneath.

Last night, Evan spiked his own hot cocoa and talked about how he met June, about how happy she was when Jordan was born. Michael explains as much. "All you did was ask me to stay, so I here I am."

Evan exhales a sigh that relaxes his entire body. "Thank fuck." He must see the hurt on Michael's face, because says, "Not that I don't want to — "

"I know."

Evan lies back against the pillows and shuts his eyes.

Michael moves closer. "I can leave, if that's what you want."

Evan shakes his head, his eyes still closed, but his fingers find Michael's wrist and wrap around it. "No. Just... lay here with me." Michael does as he's asked, resting his head on Evan's chest. Evan sighs happily, and his fingers trace lines up and down Michael's arm. Michael pulls the blankets around them as a shield from the chill in the air. He warms a hand over Evan's stomach, feeling it rise and fall beneath his palm.

They lie there together for some time, neither of them speaking, just basking in each other's company. Evan kisses Michael's hair and

strokes his arms. His hands are gentle and never pushing for more than the slow slide of skin on skin. His soft breathing lulls Michael into the relaxing cusp of almost-sleep.

"You got any plans for today?" Michael murmurs.

Evan twirls a strand of Michael's hair around his finger. "I was gonna call the beer distributor to get the new kegs into the bar, then maybe meet Ray for lunch."

"Let me take care of that." Michael presses his lips to the bristly line of Evan's jaw. "You can spend the day with Jordie. Just the two of you. Go see a movie or something."

One of Evan's confessions last night was wanting to spend more time with Jordan. This would be the perfect opportunity for him to do so.

"There's nothing good out now."

"Maybe you could ask him."

"He's got school today anyway."

"No, it's Thanksgiving break, remember?"

"Shit, really?" Evan scrubs a hand over his face.

Michael smooths the creases in Evan's T-shirt. "Do you usually do something special for Thanksgiving?"

"Sometimes. It was usually just the four of us the last couple years — sometimes Ray brings a plus-one — but nothin' like you're probably used to."

Michael does the math in his head: the four of them being June, Jordan, Evan, and Ray, most likely. "I'll take care of the cooking this year. You focus on being a dad."

* * *

"Mike, you don't have to do that."

"I want to. This is the first year I get to actually celebrate the holidays. I'm excited."

Evan lifts an eyebrow. "You've never had Thanksgiving?"

"Mama raised us as Jehovah's Witnesses."

Evan nods, as if that explains everything. "Guess it didn't stick."

"For some of us, like my sisters Rebbie and LaToya, it did. I went along with it to make Mama happy, so this will be a 'what happens in Vegas' kind of situation," Michael says. Evan smiles, and Michael scoots up in the bed to kiss the pleasant curve of his mouth. "Go on, go back to sleep. I'll make breakfast." Michael slides out of the warm cocoon of blankets and closes the door as he leaves.

Jordan and Evan spend the next couple of days together, and Michael gladly makes himself scarce, working extra hours at the bar to give them the time they need. Jordan's still sort of surly where Michael's concerned, but Michael is happy to see Jordan softening to Evan's attempts at bonding.

This afternoon, Evan has taken Jordan to a movie, so Michael uses his free time to call home and talk to his mother, updating her on his life — tactfully leaving out that he's dating Evan — and sneaking in a request for her apple pie recipe.

When Evan and Jordan get home, Evan takes a phone call and goes upstairs to shower. Jordan helps Michael slice the apples for the pie, but he's not talking. Maybe he's upset he'll be left alone with Michael while Evan's out.

Jordan blurts it out against the silence: "Why are you dating my dad?"

* * *

Michael's hand slips while he's chopping an apple and nearly slices off one of his fingertips. His face turns red as something reaches into his chest and squeezes.

"Well, I like him. Don't you?"

"Yeah, but not like *that*. You know he still loves my mom, right? He's not gonna love you like he loves her."

Michael understands that Jordan's trying to hurt him. He'd probably react the same way if Joseph had another woman in his life that wasn't Mama Katherine.

"I would never try to take her place, Jordie, or come between you and your dad. If we're being honest, you're part of the reason I like it here so much. Your dad makes me happy, but so do you, in your own way. I'm here to help both of you around the house, with the bar, with anything. But if you want me to go, that's what I'll do. I won't stay if you don't want me here."

Jordan looks bewildered. "You'd leave? Just like that?"

"I'd let your dad know, of course. I don't have the heart to sneak out in the middle of the night."

"He'd be really mad if you left."

"Maybe, but your feelings matter too."

Jordan considers this and continues slicing the apples.

"Do you think you'd want that?" Michael asks. "For me to go, I mean."

"No, not really," Jordan says after a moment. "I don't hate you. I'm just mad at you. And Dad, too. It's like... Dad's ready to move on from Mom, but I'm not. And I can't tell him not to go out with you, 'cause

you make him happy. I want him to be happy, but I guess I'm sad that he's happy without Mom."

"That makes a lot of sense," Michael says. "You have a lot of self-awareness for someone your age. I'm proud of you."

Evan comes down the stairs, dressed in an ocean blue sportcoat with a light blue collared shirt underneath and white slacks. He looks like Don Johnson in *Miami Vice*. "Hey, Jordie, you okay staying here with Michael while I'm out?"

Michael holds his breath waiting for an answer.

Jordan nods. "Yeah, we'll be okay."

Evan gives them a weird, pleasant sort of smile that actually reaches his eyes. "Great, I'll be back in a bit."

Michael really wants to tell Evan how good he looks right now. But Jordan probably wouldn't appreciate hearing Michael say his dad looks hot so soon after they've bridged an awkward gap. So Michael settles for a flustered, "Oh—okay," as Evan walks out the door.

Be still my heart.

Jordan watches Michael for a moment. "Dude, gross! Were you checking my dad out?"

"No!" Michael sputters, but the way his face heats up contradicts his denial. "No, I was just — And what if I was? Is that so wrong?"

"He's my dad," Jordan says with disgust, as though this ought to preclude anyone finding Evan attractive.

"Yeah, so?"

Jordan looks at how hot Michael's blushing and laughs. "You're such a dweeb." At least he's comfortable enough with Michael to start

teasing again.

It's fifteen minutes 'til noon on Thanksgiving day, and Evan's making out with Michael in the kitchen. His hand is a fist in Michael's hair while Evan pins him against the counter. Michael sighs around Evan's mouth and tugs at his shirt. He places a hand over Evan's heart, as if trying to heal it, and crushes their mouths together.

"Does Ray *have* to come here?" Michael whines.

"It'd be pretty sad if it was just us and Jordie."

Michael pouts and spreads his fingers over Evan's chest. "But I wanna be able to touch you." That makes one of Evan's eyebrows jump up, and Michael laughs, lightly smacking his arm. "Don't make it dirty. You know what I mean."

Evan has no idea how to break the news to Ray that he's dating Michael without risking the threat of apoplectic swearing. Ray seemed opposed to Evan even *thinking* about someone else, so the actual reality of this situation might give him a coronary. It's a fifty-fifty chance, but Evan doesn't want Michael's first Thanksgiving to be emotionally scarring and embarrassing.

"Well, then maybe we should tell him," Evan murmurs.

Michael toys with the gold chain around Evan's neck. "And you think he'll be fine with that? You *have* met your brother, right?"

"He'll figure it out eventually. He's not a total idiot, even if he acts like one." Evan slides a hand underneath Michael's flimsy shirt collar, caressing the back of his neck. "Mike, in this business secrets get you killed. I can't lose anyone else I love just to save myself from an awkward conversation."

The words tumble out before Evan can stop them, and he's left sort of

gaping at Michael. Michael's lips are uncoupled in surprise, his face redder than Evan's ever seen it.

Evan's 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 he shouldn't laugh it off with humor now, because it's only been mere months since he lost June, yet here he is calling Michael one of the people he loves.

Fuck. This is bad.

Jordan swings open the basement door, interrupting Evan's moment of terror. Michael and Evan break away from each other as a reflex, which is ridiculous because Jordan is very well aware that they're dating.

"Dad, I'm starving. Can we start eating now?"

Evan looks from Michael's stunned eyes to the neon numbers on the microwave above his head. "You can wait ten more minutes. Ray 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."

"Hey, I helped too!" Evan doesn't like being left out.

"You threw a body part at me," Jordan says, making a face as if the memory alone is distressing him. "That cancels out your help."

While Michael and Evan were preparing the turkey, Evan casually tossed the bishop's hat — a triangular piece of the bird crammed inside its stuffing cavity — over at Jordan while he was lying on the couch watching TV.

* * *

"I think we all unanimously decided that was hilarious," Evan tells him.

"You still lose helper points for that."

Michael pouts. "Don't take away his points."

Jordan's about to argue something about choosing sides and the unfairness of it all when the doorbell rings.

Ray has brought a plus-one this year, his girlfriend Nathalie. She works at the bar on the shifts Michael doesn't, so they've built a decent friendship. She seems to get along with him better than Ray does, which is a bonus for Michael. He'll need someone to have a pleasant conversation with today.

"Jordie, you still got your nose buried in those comic books?" Ray asks as they're stuffing their faces full of delicious sustenance.

Evan rolls his eyes and notices how Jordan holds back an eyeroll of his own, like he's worried he'll earn a scolding otherwise. "Yeah, I guess."

"Y'know, when your dad and I were your age, we were helping our dad pass notes." Evan wants to stab his brother in the arm with a fork. Counterfeiting is not appropriate dinner conversation.

"I got in trouble passing notes in class once," Jordan says with adorable obliviousness.

Ray chuckles to himself. "Not those kind'a notes."

"Ray, shut up, don't tell him that."

Ray 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, Evan has enough sense not to say. Michael's staring down at his plate and trying to look like he's not listening.

"Don't do it," Evan says to Ray.

"Do what?"

"Whatever this is. Don't do it."

"Michael, this is really good!" Nathalie pipes up way too casually, as if trying to save the table conversation from taking a tense nosedive. "Where'd you learn to cook?"

"I liked helping my mother and sisters out in the kitchen when I was growin' up," Michael says. "I have a big family, so it made more sense to cook stuff at home rather than go out."

"The dressing is really good," Nathalie says around a mouthful of it. "Did you make it from scratch?" Michael nods with a proud smile on his face. "Can you give me the recipe sometime?"

"Don't be seduced by his cooking, Nat," Ray warns her. "He ain't interested anyway." Maybe he's trying to be playful, but it's hard to tell with Ray. "Right, Michael?"

Michael looks over at him with pure terror in his eyes. He looks like a deer 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!" He gulps down a swig of beer and offers the bottle to Jordan. "Want a sip, Jord?" Jordan scrunches up his face in disgust and veers away from the scent wafting out of the top of the bottle.

Evan's really considering stabbing Ray with some kind of utensil.

“Don’t give my kid beer.”

Ray scoffs like Evan’s overreacting. “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 Evan 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 Evan that, yeah, they probably are.

Evan dips a piece of the bread cornucopia into the bowl of olive oil dip while Michael stores a foil-covered pan of potatoes in the fridge. Michael catches Evan stuffing the whole piece into his mouth.

“Pig,” Michael mutters under his breath with a laugh, swiping his thumb over the side of Evan’s mouth to scrub away a trickle of oil. He closes his lips around his thumb, gazing at Evan with half-hooded eyes. He’d probably go in for a kiss if Evan wasn’t chewing the obnoxiously large piece of bread he shoved in his mouth. “Didn’t your mother ever teach you table manners?”

Evan swallows and gives him a wide grin. “What’re you gonna do, spank me?”

Evan loves that he can make Michael blush so hot; it’s like a superpower. “You’d like that too much.” Michael sticks his tongue out.

“Put that tongue away unless you’re gonna use it.”

* * *

From the couch, Ray says to Jordan, "Aw, c'mon, your dad ain't lookin'!"

Evan doesn't even want to know. "But I *am* listening, Ray. Watch it."

"Ah, you're no fun," Ray grumbles.

Michael cleans the dishes and platters by hand that won't fit in the overstuffed dishwasher. Evan stands beside him, and while he waits for Michael to hand off a plate to dry, Evan slides a hand over the spot where Michael's shoulder meets his neck. A squeeze, all soft pressure and warmth, makes Michael tilt his head back ever so slightly and moan low in his throat.

Evan pulls away at the sound of the refrigerator door popping open, but it's just Jordan reaching inside for a can of soda. "I see enough of that around here lately," Jordan says to Ray as he walks back to the couch.

Michael wiggles a clean plate at Evan and flicks beads of water onto his shirt. Evan frowns and dries off the plate, trying to eavesdrop and listen to what Jordan and Ray might be talking about. They don't say anything else that piques his interest, so Evan turns his attention back to Michael and helps with the rest of the dishes.

When they're finished, Michael loads the dishes into the cupboards above the sink. Evan twirls the dishrag he's holding and snaps it, smacking Michael's ass. Michael yelps. "You are rude." He grins and lightly whacks a hand against Evan's stomach.

Later, Jordan loudly announces that he wants pie, which prompts Nathalie to agree and ask Michael what he made for dessert.

"I have apple pie, sweet potato pie, and pumpkin cheesecake cake," Michael 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. "And 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.

Evan's at his side like a magnet. "Why are you goin' down there?"

"I put the desserts in the basement fridge since we didn't have enough room up here."

"I can help you carry something."

Michael places a friendly hand on Evan's own for a second too long. "I'm carrying food, not anvils. I got this."

Evan lets him go into the basement, watching his vanishing form. Ray clears his throat, and Evan startles to attention. "What?"

Ray grabs Evan's sleeve, dragging him down the hallway to the laundry room. He pulls open the garage door and yanks Evan inside before shutting the door behind them.

That's when Ray unloads. "You twisted fuck! I can't believe you actually did it! You're fucking Michael, aren't you?"

Evan opens his mouth to deny it, but Ray plows forward: "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!"

"Alright, I won't. Michael and I are a thing, I guess."

Ray's entire pear-shaped body gets into the act of his outburst. "Are you crazy? What world do you live in? Are you on this planet? It can't be done!" He slaps Evan's bristly cheek. "People respect us, you scruffy

fuck, and it's bad enough you refuse to shave three days outta the week, but cavorting around with Tammy Faye Bakker out there like a couple of rainbow-brigade *faygelehs* will ruin the Family! Maybe our guys will look the other way, but if our enemies find out you're an old queen, you know what'll happen? Dad sure as shit didn't work this hard just to have his faggot son piss it all away!"

"You know an awful lot of homophobic terminology," Evan marvels.

"You and June were together over twenty years! And it took you, what, a couple'a months to move on?"

Evan feels the twist of the knife in his gut. "I haven't 'moved on,' okay? This thing I have with Michael — it's good. And I haven't had anything good since June — " Evan stops, still unable to say it. "Maybe it's a little weird, but goddamn it, I deserve something good! Do you really think June would want me to be miserable all the time?"

"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?"

"What about Jordie?"

Evan swings at him, full of disgusting rage at Ray's manipulation. Ray catches Evan's 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!" Evan yanks his hand away, his fists still trembling. "You think I wanted this to happen? You think I wanted to lose her?"

* * *

"You picked 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? How do you know he didn't kill June? Because he *told* you? You don't think Joseph set all this up to get a spy in the Family and destroy us from the inside?"

Evan doesn't, but he wishes he had a better answer than *I don't think Michael would do that*.

"Are you seriously fuckin' a guy?" Ray winces and shudders like just knowing about it means he has to picture it in vivid, pornographic detail. Maybe this is the part that upsets him the most.

"Not all relationships are about sex, you dumb shit."

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 having trouble with?"

"Whoa, whoa, are you tellin' me you're actually *in love* with this guy?"

Evan squirms, feeling trapped by the question and Ray's pointed stare. "Maybe a little."

Ray shakes his head and lets out a harsh laugh. "Unbelievable. *Unbelievable!* What would June think?"

* * *

"I know she hates me."

"Yeah, I sorta hate you too. What else don't I know about you, Evan?" Evan doesn't answer, but Ray just glares, trying to pull a response out of him. "You should be ashamed of yourself."

Ray swings the garage door open and storms out with angry strides. "Nat, we're leaving!" Ray hollers into the dining room. Evan hears the distant clacking of Nathalie's heels against the hardwood floor.

"But I wanted to stay for dessert," Nathalie protests.

"Not happening," Ray growls.

"Goodbye!" Nathalie calls as Ray practically drags her to the front door. "Thank you for the lovely dinner!"

Slam.

Well, that went just about as well as Evan thought it would. Better, actually. He expected a food fight or chairs being used as weapons.

Jordan watches Evan curiously when he emerges from the garage and into the living room.

Michael's standing in the kitchen wearing the saddest frown Evan's ever seen plastered on his face. "Evan, what did you do?"

"Dad, did you and Uncle Ray get into a fight?"

"N—no!"

"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," Evan jokes, hoping it might ease

Jordan's worries.

"Yeah, I guess..." Jordan shrugs and keeps eating his apple pie.

Michael is not so easily swayed. He folds his arms over his chest and frowns. "What did you say to upset him?"

"Ray knows."

"Knows what?"

"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?

Evan walks over to him and slaps a comforting hand on Michael's shoulder. "Don't worry about him. He's a dick."

"What part of it bothers him the most?" Michael asks, looking at Evan 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..." Evan trails off, hoping Michael gets the gist 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." Evan opens up the plastic dish encasing the cake. "C'mon, let's eat."

Michael gives Evan a smile that's worth every word of Ray's vitriol.

9: A Better Life

Michael catches Nathalie the next evening when she comes into the bar an hour early for a drink before her shift starts. After he serves her a blueberry margarita, he presents her with a generous slice of the pumpkin cheesecake cake he made.

"Sorry about yesterday. I brought you a peace offering."

Nathalie stares at the cake, then looks up at him. "Why are you apologizing? 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?" Michael sputters, shocked at the accusation but not entirely surprised. Of course Ray wouldn't trust him. "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. And he says you're banging his brother."

Michael makes a gasping-choking noise and feels his face heat up. "That's... not what's going on."

Nathalie smirks over the rim of her glass. "Maybe not *yet*. 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. Also he sort of looks at you like you're something to eat."

A tingle burns up Michael's spine at the thought of Evan's mouth, how his stubble might feel against Michael's thighs. "I guess there's no point in pretending. 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 Michael for a moment, but he figures it's Ray or one of Evan's shady crew members going into the back room. "I guess it's strange, considering the circumstances."

Michael's curiosity can no longer be contained. He sneaks a furtive glance at the back door. It's ajar just an inch or so, but he can see well-dressed shapes hiding in the dim lighting.

"It's not strange, it's just..." Nathalie searches for the proper word. "Alright, it's a little strange, but strange doesn't have to mean bad. I just never thought Evan was interested in guys, especially with the way Ray talks."

Michael cringes inwardly; he can only imagine what comes out of that man's mouth.

Nathalie finishes off the slice of cake. "This is great, by the way. Thanks for bringing it!"

"Not a problem." Michael opts to refill her margarita, but she politely declines.

The back door swings open, and Evan steps out, looking particularly handsome today. He flashes Michael an overconfident smile and a wink, greets the both of them.

* * *

Nathalie looks at him, and Michael wonders if she sees him differently now that she knows about their relationship. "Hi, Evan. Ray with you?"

"He doesn't seem to be speaking to me today." Evan focuses his attention on Michael. "Could you hand me the wine key before you head out?" It's late, and Michael is tired, so it takes him a few moments of searching to remember he's not looking for an actual key.

"To your left," Nathalie tells him, trying to be helpful. The shiny corkscrew edge glints in the light.

Michael grabs it and hands it to Evan. "Somethin' on your mind?" Michael asks.

"Just tired."

Evan doesn't argue with that, just takes the wine key and disappears into the back room again.

Michael says good night to Nathalie and pushes the front door open. He makes it about a block in the wintry weather before realizing he's forgotten his coat.

Nathalie laughs when Michael walks back inside. "Forget something?"

"I don't know where my brain is tonight." Michael grabs his coat from where he stashed it in a large compartment on the right-hand side behind the bar. He's made a habit of special-ordering his winter clothes from Janet's boutique. His coats and jackets are eye-catchingly unique, which makes him a little paranoid about someone stealing them, so he keeps them behind the counter.

A sound not unlike someone hitting a pillow makes Michael look in the direction it came from. The back door is ajar again, open just wide enough for him to see Evan standing inside the room.

* * *

Two men he doesn'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 Michael's throat, and he turns his head away. But he hears the sound of flesh splitting open. A glutton for punishment, Michael looks 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.

All I'm saying is it wouldn't surprise me in the least if Evan knocked her around, just enough to solve his little problem.

With nausea churning in his stomach, Michael pulls his coat on and hurries into the blistering cold. He struggles to keep himself together on the walk home without breaking down.

The tears begin to flow when his shaky fingers have trouble putting the key into the lock of the front door. He finally manages to get the door open. Michael surveys the living room and the kitchen. No sign of Jordan, which is good, because he doesn't think he can lie past the tears streaming down his face.

He finds Jordan in the basement playing video games. Michael swallows back the lump in his throat and finds his voice. "Jordie?" he calls down the stairs.

"Yeah, Mike?" Jordan pauses the game and turns his head to look at him, but it's dark and far enough away that he can't see the devastation on Michael's face.

"You won't be upset if I don't cook tonight, will you?"

"No, I got pizza rolls. I'm fine."

* * *

"You sure?"

"Yeah, it's cool. Don't worry about it." Jordan hesitates for a moment.
"You alright?"

"I'm fine. I think I'm coming down with something," Michael sniffs for emphasis, but the tears help sell it.

"Should I make something for Dad when he gets home?"

"That's not your responsibility. He'll be fine. We have plenty of leftovers."

Jordan agrees and says he hopes Michael feels better. Michael thanks him and shuts the door. He stumbles up the steps to his room and lets the tears flow freely while he turns on the shower. The water is hot on his skin, but he barely notices the temperature, too tightly gripped by a deeper, more personal pain.

How can he fight the gnawing realization clawing in his gut that Evan is very much a mirror of Joseph? To see him hurt someone like that, his face indicative of absolutely no remorse... What kind of future do they have if he's going to be entrenched in violence?

Is this the kind of life Evan will raise Jordan into? Jordan doesn't seem very interested in pursuing his father's line of work, but Michael knows better than anyone that doesn't mean the kid won't be pushed into it.

But Evan *can't* be like Joseph. Evan accepts Michael for who he is and doesn't try to change or mold Michael into the person he wants him to be. Evan knows Michael's position on violence yet he still wants them to be together. That has to mean something, right?

And Dave's cryptic comments don't ease Michael's worries. Michael simply can't believe Evan would beat June into a miscarriage; to believe a thing like that would open a deep, dark crack in Michael's

sanity where a whole irrational universe lives.

But Dave said other things that grabbed hold of Michael's imagination in the worst ways: *You know what it's like living with him. He's unstable, and you know the kind of Family he comes from. They kill anyone that even looks at 'em funny.*

Michael knows this to be true, and he also knows you don't get to be the head of a prestigious Mafia Family without blood on your hands.

He can't be like Joseph.

He just can't be.

The house is pitch black when Evan parks in the garage about two hours later. He checks the fridge first, eager to see tonight's incentive for a prompt shower. Nothing new. Of course Michael wouldn't cook tonight. There are plenty of leftovers.

Jordan's not in the basement, and when Evan climbs the stairs his bedroom light is out. Michael's door is closed, the lights switched off. Evan knocks quietly on the door, and Michael's 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." Evan hopes Michael hears the teasing tone.

"Sorry. I wasn't feeling good." Michael's voice sounds like his face is mashed against a pillow.

"Well, I can fix that." Michael can't see the wiggle of Evan's eyebrows when he says this, so his innuendo is wasted.

Evan turns the doorknob. When he steps inside, he sees Michael lying in his bed with the blankets pulled up to his chin.

* * *

Michael lets out a tired sigh. "Go to bed. It's late."

"Just wanted to make sure you're alright." Evan sits on the edge of the bed, and Michael curls himself tighter into the blankets. "You didn't seem sick when I saw you earlier."

"It's my stomach," Michael murmurs, his eyes closed.

Evan places the back of his hand against Michael's forehead and notices how Michael sort of pulls away from the touch. "I'll refrain from making a 'you're hot' joke, but your head's pretty warm." His mouth shows no signs of humoring Evan. "Oh man, not even a smile? You *must* be sick." Evan combs his fingers through Michael's hair, and he seems to relax. Then something stiffens his shoulders and makes his eyes glisten with wetness. "What's wrong? Need me to get a bucket?"

Michael licks his lips and furrows his brow. His eyes are focused on the hand in his hair. "There's blood on your sleeve..."

Evan turns his wrist to inspect the damage. A spatter of blood has stained the cuff of his shirt. "Oh well, I'll soak it."

Michael's brow furrows impossibly further.

"What, you think you're the only person around here who knows how to work a washing machine?"

"You sure don't act like it," Michael says with a small smile before his mouth turns down again. He doesn't offer anything else.

"Let me know if you need anything, okay?" Evan tells 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." Evan chuckles to himself and pulls open the door.

Michael speaks up before Evan leaves. "I know you didn't use that

wine key to open a bottle.”

Evan remembers how one of the first real conversations he had with Michael centered around his dislike of the Family and how he isn’t fond of violence.

Michael watches Evan with an expression he’s not sure how to read yet. “Are you always as hands-on as you were tonight?”

Evan returns to his spot on the bed and chooses his words carefully. “No, and I don’t enjoy it, if that’s what you’re thinking, but sometimes it’s the most prudent thing to do. I’m trying to put more responsibility on Ray’s shoulders so he can take over eventually.”

Most people in this business take pride in this life, revel in the power and prestige that comes with it. 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 Evan is right now.

“Anyway, this isn’t the life I would have chosen for myself,” Evan says, echoing Michael’s own words.

“What would you have chosen?”

Evan shrugs, tempted to blow the question off altogether. Michael’s asking about a life Evan stopped envisioning after it became painfully clear those dreams would always remain such. To allow himself to think of it now...

But Michael isn’t asking to be hurtful. Michael is warmth and love and compassion. If he knew Evan’s dreams, he’d probably work to make them come true. That’s just the kind of person he is.

“I’d probably be a screenwriter,” Evan says.

Michael smiles, and the worried tension in his face is gone.

* * *

"You aren't really sick, are you? I'm a father. I can spot a faked illness a mile away," Evan says.

Michael exhales a heavy breath. "How did you know?"

"You looked a lot healthier when I answered your questions."

Evan comes into the bar one incredibly slow afternoon while Michael's getting ready to leave. "Whoa, what happened here?"

"I decorated."

"Yeah, I can see that." Evan's wearing a black jacket over a charcoal grey shirt and dark denim jeans. His hair is gelled back and styled in a way that makes him look younger and somehow more sophisticated. It really should be illegal for him to look this attractive.

"Howdy, Slick," Michael teases, making his way behind the bar. "Lookin' good. You got a date tonight?"

Evan leans against the counter. "That depends. When do you get off?"

Michael hooks a finger in the v-neck of Evan's shirt. "That's up to you." Evan moves in for a kiss, and Michael lets him take it, curling his fingers in Evan's hair. The bar is empty at this hour, so Michael thinks nothing of the public display.

"Don't distract me," Evan says around the kiss. "Although this is a good way to do it." He breaks away and looks around the room, taking in the fruits of this morning's labor.

There are icicle lights hanging from the chandelier, a wreath garnishing the top of the cabinet behind Michael, a Christmas tree along the far wall adorned with countless ornaments and strings of clear lights. Multi-color lights twinkle along the top of the bar.

* * *

"So, you decorated, huh?" Evan observes.

"Is it too much?"

It's useless for Evan to lie, but he does anyway. "No, it's... It's festive."

"Sorry if I went overboard."

"No, it's fine, really. I just..." Evan breathes out a little sigh. "This will be our first Christmas without her." He settles into a seat at the bar. "Some days are harder than others, but June loved Christmas."

"Then we'll start a new tradition this year. How about Hanukkah?"

Evan chuckles. "You don't have to do that. We can have Christmas. It'll just be different."

"Different is good," Michael says.

Evan looks behind Michael at the decorations. "You really turned this place around. I don't know how you did it."

"It's just lights."

"No, I mean the whole thing. You came here and took over, and now we're actually turning a profit."

"It's always been a dream of mine to run a place like this. My sister Janet owns a fashion store. I'm so jealous she doesn't have to be involved with the family business at all." Michael leans over the counter and places a hand atop Evan's own. "Thank you for letting me do this. You and Jordie have both been so wonderful to me."

"Are you kidding? I was awful. I still am."

"Stop," Michael says tenderly. "You had a good reason, and you've

more than made up for it. 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."

Evan blushes, a rare sight Michael doesn't get to see very often. "You could have that if you want. I mean, that's what we got to offer, me and Jordie." He watches Michael with gentle, appraising eyes for about one second before he loses his nerve and his gaze drops to his hands.

"And you think you're awful? That's the sweetest thing anyone's ever said to me."

"How depressing."

Michael opens his mouth to reply, but the door chimes open. He pulls away from Evan, trying to make it seem as if they're not even friends, much less lovers. But it's Dave who walks in, so they don't have to try too hard. He gives each of them a furtive glance before sitting on the bar stool beside Evan. Michael hands him his usual.

"You guys can drop the act," Dave says firmly, looking at Evan. "Your brother's got a big mouth."

Worry breaks out at the edges of Evan's expression. "Yes, he does, but what the hell are you talking about?"

"I heard him talking to Nat about a couple of *faygelehs*. That wasn't you two?"

Evan glares at him. "How about you mind your own business for once?"

Dave huffs and sips his beer.

* * *

Evan might be too old to climb into someone else's bed after a bad dream, but that's apparently what he does now. "I need some company," he says on a chilly night, his voice tender and vulnerable. He's also mostly naked, his boxer briefs the only article of clothing on his body. Michael's too tired to be properly aroused by this, which is a shame because it's the most he's ever seen of Evan.

Michael's barely awake, the click of the bedroom door having jolted him awake just two seconds earlier. He imagines he must look a sight, his eyes bleary, and his skin patchy and uneven. Evan doesn't seem to notice — or if he does, he doesn't care.

"What's wrong?"

"Scoot over." Evan crawls into bed alongside Michael without another word. A cold foot brushes over Michael's calf and makes his skin jump.

"Your feet are icicles!" Michael tries to squirm away, but Evan burrows up tight so that he's the little spoon, despite being much too big for the role.

"You're warm," Evan mumbles, gathering Michael in his arms and pulling him close.

"You'd be warm too if you wore clothes, you caveman."

Evan wriggles against him, tucking into the curve of Michael's body, and Michael's dick gets the full brunt of Evan's ass rubbing against it. He was already half-hard at the sight of Evan's partial nudity, so the friction and imminent presence of Evan here isn't helping the boner situation.

"If you wanted to sleep with me, you could've just said so," Michael says.

"I didn't know you were easy."

* * *

"Well, when it comes to you..." Michael tucks up closer to Evan, trying to warm him up. "Why are you so cold? Weren't you in bed?"

"I took a walk downstairs."

Michael decides he's too tired to ask any more questions. Evan's quiet rhythm of breath helps lull Michael back to sleep, though he's already fading fast.

In the morning, Michael wakes up to find he's entangled his limbs with Evan's own during the night. Sleeping side by side, Evan has a hand nestled in Michael's hair, the other latched around his waist. Michael's face is burrowed in the space between Evan's chin and chest.

It feels natural to lie here with him this way. They're intimate in ways Michael has never been with anyone else. One of Michael's legs is hooked around Evan's hips, a heel pushing their crotches together, so things stand a chance of getting a lot more intimate.

Evan's hand comes to life in Michael's hair, his fingers gentle and cautious. Michael tilts his head to get a glimpse of his face. "Good morning."

"This is new," Evan says, amused.

"I definitely don't mind waking up next to you."

"You could sleep with me if you want." Evan realizes how that must sound. "In my bed, I mean. There's no reason we have to sleep in separate beds, right? I feel like there've been moments where we could have tried. We don't have to plan it or anything, but we can just let it happen, y'know?"

Michael almost tells him no, but what he's hearing is that Evan is ready to take this new step. He seems to have thought about it enough not to cringe away from the idea of being sexually intimate with

Michael. That's huge for him. And who is Michael to argue that it's too soon?

Michael nods and cuddles closer. "That sounds like a good idea."

10: Boiling Point

December 1992

Evan's suspicion meter pings when he walks through the front door of the house and smells something cooking. It's not unusual for Michael to cook in the early evening — in fact, it's just about their usual dinner time — but something feels *off*.

Being in the Mafia for a great deal of his life, Evan has a sixth sense of sorts for situations like this. June used to call it paranoia, but Evan's instincts have served him pretty well over the years.

His suspicions are reinforced when he sees steaming hot casseroles laid out on the table. He can't identify them on sight, but judging by some of the ingredients he recognizes (melted cheese, noodles, various forms of potatoes, ground beef), Michael might be trying to kill him via a cholesterol overload.

"This all looks impressive," Evan says, admiring how the table's been set. "Special occasion?"

"No," Michael says with a shrug, and Evan doesn't think he can refute that. Why should it be suspicious that Michael cooks a nice meal for the family? Isn't that one of his favorite things to do?

* * *

So Evan dismisses his worries and settles at the table for a warm meal. Michael and Jordan join him, and Evan almost laughs at himself for being so silly, until after dinner when Michael asks if he wants dessert.

"Dessert?"

"I made a cobbler."

"What kind?"

"Banana bread. But if you're full —"

"Bring that shit over here." Now Evan is definitely suspicious, and while a three-course meal isn't out of the ordinary for Michael, he still can't shake the feeling something's amiss.

"Is this all the work of a guilty conscience?" Evan asks after Michael brings over a plate of cobbler.

"Evan, no," Michael says with a sigh, but it's not a sigh of exasperation but rather resignation, as if he knows he'll have to confess.

"You can tell me. Hard for me to be too mad after you made such a great meal." Evan supposes that was the point, but he's done things far more manipulative in his lifetime.

"My father called today," Michael says, sitting beside him on the couch.

"You're going home?" The words shoot out of Evan's mouth before he can stop them.

Michael looks horrified at the suggestion. "No, no! Of course not, no! Jermaine and Randy are comin' back out here on business, and they wanna use the back room of the bar for a few hours."

* * *

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." Michael's shoulders untense in relief, but Evan can tell there's something else nagging at him. "Where's the other half of your bad news?"

"What makes you think there's more?"

"Why would your brothers coming here warrant a huge dinner like that?"

Michael's mouth twists into an angry frown. "You're right. There is 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 Joseph asked if I was still seeing her."

"And?"

Michael toys with a 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."

Evan groans. "Why?"

"I got nervous!" Michael huffs out a breath, his hands still fidgeting with the button. "And I think Joseph's happy to let me stay if I've found somebody out here."

"Yeah, you have," Evan says pointedly.

"We're talking about a man who threw a fit when he heard I wanted to move out at age thirty-four. You really think he's ready for that?"

"Yeah, yeah, point taken. But why didn't you 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 an awful liar."

* * *

Evan has heard Michael attempt to lie. It's shameful. "But talking to him over the phone 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. 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." Evan has eaten so much tonight he can barely move.

"That ain't gonna happen."

"It was worth a shot."

It takes Evan 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 could he possibly get out of being with Evan? It's not about sex, since they haven't had any. It's not about money either, because Michael's got quite enough of that. If Michael wants to run a business and start a family, 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 Evan sits at home stewing in bitter jealousy. He didn't start out the evening bitter, of course. He wished Michael good luck, but as each hour ticks by, Evan can't help but sink into the crippling fear that Michael's been stringing him along.

Michael's way too timid to ever instigate conflict, so these dates might be his subtle way of giving Evan the big kiss-off without actually having to say anything. 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 —

Evan pours another drink to replace the jealous burn in his 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, fine, just please, please tell me first.

Maybe this is Evan's fault. He's built up this fantasy in his head that Michael might actually want the same things Evan does. Michael has been so good, so grateful, never demanding anything more than Evan was willing to give, but maybe he should have given more. Maybe Michael's fucking her right now because Evan wouldn't, *couldn't* give that to him.

June was always forgiving to a fault for Evan's shitty behavior, but he can't expect Michael to cut him the same slack. Maybe this is all for the best. Michael drifts back to where he belongs, and Evan returns to the ruins of his own world, trying to salvage whatever he can. Maybe someday he'll feel grateful for the time Michael gave him instead of wishing for more.

Ten-thirty.

Another drink.

It's just one night, and I swear I'll make it up to you, okay? Michael said, which is a stupid and impossible promise to make. How much of Michael's kindness has been apologetic attempts to keep Evan placated?

* * *

In need of a distraction, Evan goes upstairs and checks on Jordan. Jordan's still asleep, just as he was when Evan looked in the room thirty minutes ago. Evan returns downstairs and pours another drink. He flips through the television channels. Nothing holds his interest. The paranoia is rooted too deep now.

Ten-forty.

God fucking damn it.

Michael has been on this "date" of his for almost three hours.

A few more minutes pass in a lull before Evan hears the familiar sound of the front door being unlocked. He meets Michael in the foyer as soon as the door opens. "Where the fuck have you been?" Michael stares at him like a frightened deer, and Evan's 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?"

Michael places a hand on Evan's chest; Evan wonders if Michael's hands touched her tonight. "Whoa, hey. It's not — it's not like that. I'm sorry I'm home so late. She wanted to see a movie — I can't even remember what it was, it was awful — then 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."

Evan wants to believe this, but there's a lurching feeling in his gut again, the kind that rears its head when something isn't quite right.

"She tried to kiss me, but I wouldn't let her."

"Let me guess: you stumbled your way into a third date?"

Michael looks angry to even be asked. "No. I made it very clear I just

want to be friends.” He heads upstairs, and Evan follows. “I need a shower.”

“You better not have fucked her. You’re mine, you understand?”

Michael sighs and turns to face him. “Evan, if I didn’t like you, why would I go through all this trouble just to stay here?” He waits for Evan to answer, but no words come, so Michael walks to his bedroom and starts the shower.

Evan lingers at Michael’s bedroom door for a while, trying to sort through his words tonight and find the lie. Why would Michael 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 could be in there right now scrubbing the scent of her off of his body — his naked body. His naked, *wet* body.

Well, shit.

Evan swings the bathroom door open with one hand while undressing with the other.

Michael sighs over the sound of the water. “I told you I didn’t do anything.” His murky silhouette moves away as Evan approaches the shower door handle. “We can talk when I get out, okay?”

“Yeah, I’m not too keen on waiting.”

There’s a hint of panic in Michael’s 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 Michael that way makes Evan nauseous.

“No! I just don’t want you to see me.”

Evan grabs the door handle. “I’m coming in.”

* * *

"No!" Michael's hands must be wrapped around the handle on the other side, because there's resistance when Evan tugs.

"Really not trusting you right now."

Michael exhales a shaky sound, as if he's on the verge of a panic attack. "Turn off the lights first, then you can get in."

"Oh, for fuck's sake."

"Please?" Michael's voice hitches in a way Evan's never heard before. If Michael isn't already crying, he soon will be.

It's impossible to deny Michael anything when he sounds so desperate. Evan switches off the light, and the bathroom becomes cloaked in darkness. "You picked a hell of a time to get self-conscious," he says.

"You picked a hell of a time to want me naked."

Maybe Evan's being a dick. Michael could demand Evan to leave, but instead he's trying to compromise, thinking Evan came in here to have a conversation.

"I'm not trying to hide any hickies or scratch marks or anything like that," Michael says. "It's just my stupid body." His voice goes tight, as if he's swallowing back a sob.

Evan takes a few moments to blink through the pitch-blackness and pick out shapes using the faint light from the bedroom. He shuffles his way over to a large blur that might be the shower stall. "Can I come in?"

Michael makes an affirmative sound, so Evan slides open the door and gingerly steps inside. The hot needles of water feel good on his skin.

* * *

Michael's hand finds Evan's stomach, and he starts a little, like he didn't expect to reach out and touch skin. "What's going on with you? Why are you so paranoid tonight?"

Evan pushes Michael against the tile. His knee slips between Michael's legs and forces them open. Michael gasps before Evan's hand around his cock makes him moan loud and needy against the air. His dick swells at the touch, and Michael grinds his hips into Evan's hand.

"Tell me you're mine," Evan says.

Michael twists his hips, either trying to free himself from Evan's grip or supply more friction. "What are you doing?"

Evan glares before realizing the gesture is wasted in the darkness. "What the fuck do you think I'm doing?" He squeezes Michael's cock in his hand. Michael groans. "Now tell me you're mine."

"I'm yours," Michael breathes out. Evan rewards him with another tender squeeze. "More..."

"Tell me you'll never leave."

"I'll never leave."

Evan's eyes have adjusted to the dark, so he watches Michael's face for signs of a lie. Is Michael saying these things because he wants to get off, or is there actual truth to them? Michael's gaze is so intense Evan almost looks away.

Michael reaches down and plucks the fingers from around his erection. "I won't leave you. I promise." He takes Evan's hand in his own. "These dates don't mean anything, okay? They're just something I have to do so I can stay with you. Joseph gave me six months, remember?"

Evan does the math in his head. Michael's burned through about four

of those months already. *Fuck.*

"But if he thinks I'm out here finding a wife," Michael continues, "maybe he won't be so keen on bringing me home."

Evan is silent for a moment. The shower spray hisses around them.

"Believe it or not, Evan, I really like you. Why would I want anyone else?"

Why? Take a good, hard look at the crazy bullshit I just pulled.

But there's too much truth in that, so Evan doesn't say it. He knows he hasn't given Michael everything he needs, and if things go on this way Michael will start looking elsewhere for it, if he hasn't already.

Evan crushes their mouths together, his hand grabbing Michael again and jerking and stroking in a way that has him moaning into Evan's mouth. Michael's hands slip over Evan's shoulders, around to the base of his neck. Michael digs his fingers in as his moans grow louder. His dick pulses and swells as he rolls his hips into Evan's fist. Evan grips the back of Michael's slippery thigh, and Michael pushes his hips forward. Evan's skin tightens when their bodies meet. They've never been this close before. He can feel *everything*.

With one hand gripping Michael's ass, Evan slips two fingers inside of him. Michael arches his back and lets out a cry of surprise and arousal. It's the hottest noise Evan has heard in a long time. His fingers push and press, and Michael inhales sharply, wiggling his hips until Evan's buried knuckle-deep. Evan's fingers curl and scissor inside him, and Michael's teeth dig into his shoulder, hands clawing down his back.

"I want you to come for me," Evan says against Michael's throat. His fingers work in a mix of quick jabs and slow circles.

Michael's head lolls back against the tile wall, his lips uncoupled as his

whole body tenses and he lets himself go. His hands dig into Evan's spine, his dick spurting wet stripes over his stomach. Evan is tempted to kiss him when he looks like this but lets Michael ride it out instead, watching him bite his lip and whine in the back of his throat as his hips jerk weakly.

When Evan withdraws his fingers, he wraps them around Michael's dick, thumbing over the head to pull a hard moan out of him. Michael bucks into the touch, still sensitive from his orgasm, and Evan touches him until the noises he makes grow softer. Michael smiles and sighs contentedly, reaching down to touch Evan. Evan feels a spike of heat surge in his belly. No one has touched Evan there in quite a while. His breath hitches, and he braces himself against the wall, letting Michael's hand play.

"Is this okay?" Michael asks. Evan nods, gritting his teeth when Michael squeezes hard enough to hurt. "Are you sure?"

"Yes, God, please..."

Michael swirls his thumb in the sticky beads of wetness at the tip. Then he sinks to his knees and takes Evan into his mouth in one smooth swallow.

Evan swears, the word subsumed in a gasp as his fingers curl against the tile. He can feel the head of his cock at the back of Michael's throat. Michael hums around him, and Evan's making tiny noises that he can't stop. He grabs a fistful of Michael's hair, squeezing his eyes shut.

Michael doesn't protest 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 Evan's swearing through his teeth and fucking into Michael's throat, and Michael doesn't care, doesn't stop. He smiles around Evan's dick, and his moan reverberates.

Evan breaks apart all at once, choking out a breath as he comes. Michael lingers there for a moment, then there's the slow slide of lips

as he leaves Evan's cock. Evan watches the way Michael's throat moves when he swallows.

"Jesus fucking Christ," Evan groans breathlessly, staring down at him. "That's—that was.. That was good."

"Just good?" There's a grin in Michael's voice.

"You siphoned all the words out of my brain with your mouth. Give me a minute." Evan sits on the tile floor, trying to collect his thoughts.

"You okay?"

Evan nods absently, still struggling to understand the strange twist in his 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. Evan knows all about guilt, and this isn't guilt.

It's like Michael stuck his hand in Evan's chest, his fingers accidentally brushing over delicate places. There is no pain, no throbbing of open wounds, but Evan's heart feels swollen and tender, as if the slightest touch could stab deep. Like something has filled up a long vacant space inside of him.

Well, that sounds a little bit filthy.

Michael sits beside him, leaning back against the shower wall while the hot spray beats down on them. "Do you wanna talk about it?"

"What's there to talk about?"

"Did I do something wrong?" Michael asks, like he's used to taking the brunt whenever Evan's moods fluctuate. "I thought you wanted me to..." He makes an awkward gesture to Evan's crotch.

"You didn't do anything wrong. I'm not angry." Evan shoves a hand through his hair, wringing the water out of it. "I don't know what I feel, really."

"Is it bad?"

"No. It doesn't feel good either, but maybe it's supposed to."

"Is it gay panic?"

Evan laughs. "What?"

"Gay panic. Some guys freak out after they, y'know, do things with another guy, like it challenges their masculinity or something."

This ain't Michael's first rodeo, that's for sure. "I think that would've shown up the first time I thought about putting my dick in you."

It's too dark to tell if he's blushing, but Evan's certain that's what Michael's face is doing right now. "Well, thinking about it and doing it are different."

"Trust me, that's not it." Evan's skin is getting vaguely prune under the water, so he stands up and slides the door open. He steps into the frigid air and dries off as quickly as he can, eager to crawl into a warm bed.

"So you're just gonna hit it and quit it?" Michael asks, teasing.

Evan pulls the shower door open again and dangles a fresh towel in front of him. "Only if you don't follow me."

11: Like a Virgin

Michael wakes up the following morning in Evan's bed, but unlike the last time, Evan looks happy to see him there.

"Good morning," Evan says with a lazy smirk.

Michael slips a hand underneath Evan's T-shirt and Evan lets Michael's fingers explore his skin and palm the flesh. Michael notices the peaks of Evan's hipbones are sensitive when he trails over them. Evan makes a soft sound and shifts beneath him, laughing when Michael's hand breaches the elastic of his boxer briefs.

"Whoa there." Evan grabs Michael's eager wrist. "Don't waste a perfectly good orgasm on a hand job. I can do that myself."

"Can I watch?"

Evan pulls Michael flat against his chest. "If that's what you like." Neither of them say anything for a while, content in sharing each other's warmth. Then Evan speaks up: "You don't have to answer this if you don't want to, but why don't you want me seeing you naked? I won't lie, that's at the top of my list of things I want."

After their mutual shower, Evan let Michael get dressed before joining him in the bedroom. He has been incredibly accommodating for

Michael's self-image issues, which leads Michael to believe Evan understands what it's like to look in the mirror and hate what you see.

"I have a skin disorder that destroys the pigmentation in my skin," Michael admits, because he feels like he owes Evan the truth. "It's why I don't look like my brothers."

Evan doesn't say anything for a second. It feels like the longest second of Michael's life. "And?"

"And what?"

"That's it? From the way you acted last night I thought you might be falling apart like Jeff Goldblum in *The Fly*."

"I use make-up to cover the spots, so that's why you've never noticed it." Michael was in a hurry to join Evan, so he didn't apply any make-up last night. If Evan notices any patchy discoloration on Michael's face, he isn't mentioning it.

"Are you trying to scare me off? 'Cause it's not working. I still wanna see you naked." Evan squeezes Michael's hip with the slightest pressure.

"Careful what you wish for."

"Y'know, the nudity clause generally means you get to see the other person naked. I don't know if that sweetens the pot for you, or..." Evan trails off, inviting Michael to infer his point.

"Oh, it definitely does."

Evan toys with Michael's shirt sleeve. "Well, we could make that happen. Just say the word and I'll strip."

Michael laughs, charmed by Evan's eagerness. It stands to reason that Evan will see Michael naked at some point in their relationship,

especially if sex is on the table. And it's not like Michael's vitiligo will improve over time or disappear entirely. Evan ought to see what he's signing up for.

"Alright, what's the word?"

Evan sits up and pulls his shirt over his head. Michael's heart sprints in his chest. "I guess you said four of 'em."

Michael doesn't bother pretending not to admire Evan. He reaches out to touch the naked warmth of Evan's stomach. Michael wants to slide those shorts off and see all of him, but he understands it's his own turn now. Evan grabs the hem of Michael's T-shirt, pausing for any signs of objection, but Michael grants permission with a nod.

"Tell me if you change your mind," Evan says, his voice low and breathy while his fingers hesitate.

Michael shakes his head, his mouth too dry for words, but that isn't enough. He licks his lips. "I want this. I want you. You have no idea." Michael rises up to his knees as Evan pulls off the shirt. Evan's curious fingers map out the planes of Michael's back before there's a warm, wet heat of mouth and tongue around a nipple. Michael's head tips back, a moan escaping his throat. Evan kisses a frenzied line down Michael's chest and stomach before their mouths meet again.

"Can I take these off?" Evan's wide hands slide into Michael's pajama pants.

"Someone's getting greedy."

"You can never have too much of a good thing."

"Flattery will get you everywhere." The pants come off, and Michael's skin prickles at the sudden chill of air. Evan palms Michael's ass, squeezing and pushing their bodies together. Michael clutches handfuls of Evan's hair, and Evan moans a throaty sound at the ridge

of Michael's collarbone and jerks his hips forward.

"Too much?" Michael asks, his touch falling away.

"Yeah. But it's okay. I want this too." Evan hauls him closer, his hands wide on Michael's back and ass to bring him nearer. Every sound out of Michael's mouth makes Evan respond in a different way; soft sighs make his fingers squeeze and his teeth nip, and louder moans earn hip thrusts and gasps.

They're lost in the slow exploration of each other, and Evan's mouth places kisses over Michael's lips while his hands wander. They've never touched like this before; sometimes Evan got grabby during a kiss or Michael slid his hands up Evan's shirt in the morning, but it never lasted this long, both of them worried they wouldn't be able to stop if it went too far. There are no such inhibitions now.

Evan's skin is hot to the touch. Michael follows the swell of Evan's chest, letting his fingernail graze over a nipple. Evan groans a low, needy sound, his back arching forward to push against Michael's steady hand. Then Michael run his hands over the low curve of Evan's stomach and the top of his boxers. Evan grinds his dick into the heel of Michael's hand, moaning at the friction.

Michael returns his touch above the waist, trailing over the dip at the base of Evan's spine. He follows the path of his vertebrae, admiring the composition of his body as Evan does the same with Michael, his hands sinking lower as Michael climbs higher. He palms the curve of Michael's ass, then his hand skims over a thigh before pressing into the hard muscle. Michael crawls closer and grinds their hips together.

Michael feels Evan's swollen cock press against him. Evan sighs into the curve of Michael's throat. His thighs are tense with want and restraint, and his knuckles drag over Michael's bare hip as he tugs his underwear down.

"Can I?" Evan asks in a low voice, his hands hesitating while he waits

for an answer.

Evan hasn't run away screaming yet, so Michael figures he's in this for the long haul. "Please."

Evan responds with eager hands and urgent lips. Michael tugs Evan's shorts over his hips, and he steps out of them and kicks the briefs aside. Evan doesn't falter when he looks down at Michael's nudity. His eyes are luminous with love and lust. The heat of his stare burns while his fingertips trace over Michael's imperfections. Michael would be embarrassed, humiliated under the scrutiny of his gaze if Evan wasn't looking at his body like it's the most wonderful thing he's ever seen.

"I still want you, Michael," Evan says, answering Michael's question before it's given voice. He lifts a hand to Michael's cheek, and Michael presses the heat of his palm closer. "I told you it wouldn't change anything."

This is all new and terrifying, but Evan's words empower Michael. He feels the wet slide of tongue in his mouth as Evan kisses him again. Michael places his hands on Evan's shoulders, nudging him down, down, until he's lying flat on the mattress. Maybe it will be easier for Evan if Michael takes the lead. If not, Evan seems like the kind of guy to speak his mind when he doesn't like something.

Evan hooks his thighs around Michael's hips and scoots forward. Michael straddles him, and Evan rolls his hips between Michael's legs, seeking the warm heat between them.

"This is okay, right?" Michael asks, wanting permission before he does anything more.

Evan smiles, running his hands over Michael's thighs and patting them reassuringly. "More than okay."

Evan reaches behind his head for something, and Michael sits up a

little to see what he's doing. Evan gropes around in the gaps of the bedframe before he withdraws a small bottle.

Michael lifts an eyebrow. "That's convenient."

"You never know when the nightstand will be too far away."

"You plan for everything, don't you?"

Evan clicks his tongue and flips the bottle into Michael's hand. Michael coats Evan's dick with the slippery gel. Evan moans at the stroke of Michael's hand, craving to be inside him.

"I'll go slow, okay? Just tell me if you want me to stop," Michael says.

"I'm no virgin, Mike," Evan says with a lazy smirk. "I think I can handle it."

His nerves settled, Michael takes him in carefully, savoring the slow, smooth slide. It's gentler than Michael's used to, though he's usually not the one in control during these situations. Michael's knees slide in the sheets, spreading his legs wider until he's filled up. A spike of sensation courses through him, and he gasps. Evan watches with worried eyes, biting his lip as if it's taking all he has not to thrust up and inside.

"You okay?"

Michael nods and settles into it, lets himself accommodate to the stretch before his hips begin to move. Evan makes a low, gravelly sound in his throat, and his cock hits a spot that makes Michael writhe and wince.

Michael chases his own orgasm, his hips bucking and grinding, rising and falling. Evan groans swears and praises occasionally cut through with Michael's name over and over, begging him not to stop. Michael feels the throb of Evan's pulse in his cock, as if he's taken in his heart.

Michael's quaking at the intensity of it all, and Evan feels it too, because his gasps are soft, tight sounds in his throat.

Evan slows and stills, content to just feel and let Michael finish, wanting to be broken apart piece by piece. They fit together in a way that's so good Michael's entire body shudders and bows over him. Now it's Michael's turn to gasp obscenities, and his hips move until he feels as if he'll split right open, then he's falling, falling right over the edge.

That's all Evan needs to come apart; he's still fucking up into Michael like he doesn't want to stop, and Michael lets him ride it out.

Michael's limbs give up, and he flops on top of Evan. His knees slip out from beneath him, and he stretches his legs. For the first time, he enjoys the warm trickle of lube and jizz over the inside of his thighs, inside of *him*. He's aware of the hot flare of breath and stubble scraping over his cheek. Evan sighs contentedly, his palms blazing-hot when he lays them over Michael's back.

Michael threads his fingers through the sweat-damp spikes of Evan's hair. "Was it too much?"

"Just a little," Evan breathes. "But I think we can handle it."

They lie there for a while, touching with languid hands and unhurried lips.

"So it was good?" Michael asks after some time has passed.

Evan laughs. "I got laid, and I got to see you naked. Today's shaping up to be awesome."

"You should have told me that's all I had to do to put you in a good mood."

The sound of a timid knock on the bedroom door has them scurrying

for decency. “Hey, Dad?” Jordan asks from the other side of the door.

“Hold on a sec.” Evan wraps the two of them in the blankets like post-coital burritos. He tells Jordan to come in, so Jordan inches the door open and pokes his head inside.

“It snowed last night. You wanna — Oh, gross!” Jordan whirls around in an adamant refusal to see the two of them in bed. “Were you guys doing it?”

Michael feels compelled to say that they weren’t, but the red-hot flush rising in his face isn’t doing him any favors.

Jordan frowns. “Dude, c’mon, your clothes are all over the floor, and you’re both naked in bed together. I’m not stupid.”

Evan looks at Michael. “He’s got you there.”

“I’ll be in the backyard throwing up about something else.” Jordan closes the door as he leaves.

Michael lies back against the pillows and pull the blankets tighter around himself. “I don’t wanna move. It’s nice and warm in here. My bed’s cold in the morning.”

“Then sleep with me,” Evan says, like it’s that easy.

Michael stares at him. “Really?”

“Why not? It wouldn’t be the first time.”

Michael recalls waking up in bed with Evan a few times before this morning, but he thinks it’s different when it takes place in Evan’s bed instead of Michael’s. Something about breaching the sanctity of the room Evan shared with June.

“Alright, then I’ll sleep with you every night,” Michael says, throwing

off the blankets and grabbing his clothes off the floor.

"Michael, you slut."

Michael laughs, stepping into his underwear and pajama bottoms. "You know I haven't seen snow since I was seven?"

"Now you have to go outside. No excuses."

Michael agrees and puts on the rest of his clothes. Evan makes himself decent; Michael feels a twinge of disappointment when Evan finds his shirt and pulls it over his head.

"It's freezing in here," Michael says, grabbing one of Evan's sweaters off a nearby chair and pulling it on. "I'm taking this." The sleeves are long and floppy. It's roomy and smells like Evan's cologne.

"Don't you own any winter clothes?"

"I do, but they're not yours." Michael flops a sleeve at him to illustrate the point.

Evan laughs; the sound is warm and absolutely perfect. "Well, you do look good in red." He reaches into the closet and grabs another sweatshirt before they leave the room. Evan gets to the door and asks, "Is it weird that I had my cock in your ass before breakfast?"

As December marches on, Michael learns that Evan sucks at gift-wrapping. They're in Evan's bedroom, wrapping presents for Jordan a few days before Christmas.

"Here, let me do it," Michael offers, reaching for the halfway-wrapped, rectangular package.

Evan pulls it away from Michael's grasp and does a poor job of taping

the paper down. "No, I got it." When he's finished, he plops it down between them, and the package bounces in the middle of the bed.

This is the saddest Christmas present Michael's ever seen, but he can't fault the guy for trying.

"Watch me." Michael refolds 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 Michael somehow. "See? You gotta take the slack out of it."

"It was fine the way it was," Evan grumbles while Michael digs through the bag of bows.

"Even mail-order pornographers wrap with more finesse," Michael says, earning a raised eyebrow from Evan. "My brothers are into some really weird stuff." He sticks a red bow to the front of the present.

"Yeah, sure," Evan says with a smirk, tossing the newly-wrapped gift into the growing pile of finished presents. He 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. And he only ever has about five games at once because he trades some in for new ones."

"Well, if he ever ends up in prison, at least he'll be great at bartering for cigarettes," Evan says. Michael frowns and tosses a bow at Evan's face. He barely flinches. "What?"

"Don't be ridiculous. Jordie's not gonna end up in prison. He's a good kid."

"Yeah, look at the great role models he's had in his formative years."

"You're a good dad. Don't be a grinch," Michael says, but Evan's not

even looking at him, instead examining another present in the pile. "Hey, pay attention. I'm trying to teach you a useful life skill."

Evan snorts a sound of amusement. "How are you this good at wrapping presents when you've never celebrated holidays before?"

Michael considers saying something like *how are you this bad when you have* but decides against it. Regardless if June commandeered the holidays or not, this is still Evan and Jordan's first Christmas without her.

"I guess I'm just a natural. So let me teach you, 'cause Jordie probably won't help you wrap my presents if he knows you're being uncooperative. He's got very strong principles."

"Most stores offer gift-wrapping," Evan says.

Michael considers tossing another gift bow at Evan's face. "You actually buy retail?"

"Would you prefer getting something hot for Christmas?"

The bedroom phone rings, and Michael supposes their time together is up for the night. Evan leans back and stretches 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 speak to Michael. "It's your old man. You wanna talk to him?"

What could Joseph possibly want now? A number of possibilities flood Michael's head, and none of them are pleasant.

Michael nods and opts to walk around to the other side of the bed instead of contorting his body to reach the phone. "Hello, Joseph."

"Michael, it's good to hear your voice. How've you been?"

"I'm great. Is something wrong?"

* * *

"No, everything's fine and dandy here. We were just wonderin' if you might be comin' home for the holidays. Y'know, celebrate with your family."

When Joseph drops that particular "f" word, Michael's gaze darts to Evan, who's wrapping presents with all the resentment of a teenager.

Over these past few months, Michael has gone from being alone in a strange city to having his own little family in their cozy suburb. His ideal life didn't involve dating a gangster, but Evan's job is almost inconsequential. Evan acts nothing like Joseph when he's with Michael and Jordan; he is kind, funny, affectionate, and involved in his son's life. Michael feels more at home with Evan and Jordan than he does with his blood family, and Evan probably wanted him dead the first few weeks he was here.

After a long silence, Joseph says, "Mike, you still there?"

"I'm here. But I think being with Evan and Jordie would mean a lot to them. It's their first Christmas since..." Michael trails off, hoping Evan isn't listening too closely.

"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? Mama won't celebrate Christmas."

Joseph sighs like Michael's being purposely obtuse. "We'll have a family dinner. I know how much you love cookin' for those."

"So maybe it's time for a change of scenery after thirty years." Michael tries to appeal to Joseph's fatherly instinct. "This means a lot to me. I'm sure Mama will understand."

Joseph's voice turns as cold as a motel ice-machine. "Michael Joseph

Jackson, if you think those people need you more than we do—”

“Just let it go, would you? This is probably my only chance to do this, since you’ll drag me right back home in a few months anyway.” From the corner of his eye, Michael notices Evan’s posture stiffen at the words.

Joseph grunts. “Fine, Michael. Have it your way. But I ain’t gettin’ any younger, and —”

“Don’t,” Michael interrupts. “Don’t you do that. Don’t you try to manipulate me. I’ve made my decision, and you’d best respect that.”

Before Joseph can reply, Michael slams the phone down. Yes, this is exactly why he doesn’t call home unless it’s absolutely necessary. The guilt, the manipulation, the refusal to listen, all of it is classic Joseph.

Evan’s finished wrapping another gift when Michael joins him on the bed. “Don’t feel like you have to stay for our sake.”

“No, I want to be here! I’m excited! See?” Michael gestures to both piles of presents, exhibits A and B that he truly wants to spend the holidays with Evan and Jordan.

“I know, but you gotta have options.” Evan rubs the back of his neck, looks away. “It feels real selfish of me to keep you away from your family.”

Michael takes Evan’s hands in his own. “You and Jordie are just as much a part of my family as they are.” That should make Evan smile or at least laugh and say something about cheesy lines, but he only looks shell-shocked, like those words have stirred anew some rusted-over part of himself.

Michael feels blood boiling beneath his skin. “Should I not have said that?”

* * *

"No, no, that's — you really meant it?" Evan squeezes Michael's fingers that have gone limp in his hands.

Michael nods.

"So... you're definitely staying, right?"

"I am."

"What's this about you going back in a few months?" Evan asks. His hands quiver as he folds the wrapping paper.

"It's called lying? I had to say something to give me an edge. He wouldn't stop guilting me."

The corner of Evan's mouth turns up a bit. "I know that old song and dance."

"Did your father" — Michael searches for a word that doesn't give away too much — "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, so who gives a fuck about mine? After a while I learned not to complain to anybody."

"You can complain to me," Michael offers, 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."

"I don't think you have time."

"How do you know?"

* * *

"There *isn't* enough time."

"Try me."

"You really wanna hear 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 a tutor at the house 'cause Joseph would take me and my brothers out on jobs. 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." Michael might be complaining too much even though Evan gave him permission to do so, so he steers the conversation away from that. "I'm so glad you're letting Jordie have a childhood."

Evan smiles, but there's a hint of sadness there, and Michael wants to smooth it away with his hands or mouth. "I'm just giving him the freedom I wish I had at his age."

The jiggling of the doorknob interrupts them, then Jordan's voice speaks up from the other side: "Dad, the door's locked. Don't tell me you guys are naked in there." He says this with disgust which, really, is the best reaction for a twelve-year-old to have in this situation.

"Okay, I won't," Evan jokes.

"Gross!"

Evan's laughing at Jordan's response and the way Michael's hiding any and all evidence that Christmas presents were ever in the room. "Give us a sec'." He grabs the last armful of boxes and stuffs them somewhere inside the closet, then he opens the bedroom door. "What do you need?"

"I need your help with something," Jordan says pointedly. "You know?"

Evan thinks for a moment. "Oh yeah! Yeah, of course!" He looks over

his shoulder at Michael. "See you in a bit."

"I'll warm up the bed for you," Michael says, peeling back the blankets and slipping into the warm cocoon.

Jordan makes a sound of repulsion, and Evan closes the door when he leaves.

In retrospect, it was probably a good idea for Michael to be so adamant about making Evan wrap presents earlier. Evan's in Jordan's room wrapping their presents for Michael, and this would definitely take a lot longer with only one person doing the work.

"You got good at this," Jordan says with a small frown, like he's hesitant to be impressed by Evan's skills in case they turn out to be some sort of parlor trick. "Who taught you?"

Evan feigns offense. "Maybe I learned on my own."

"Why would you ever do that?"

That's technically true. "Michael showed me how."

There's a hint of a smile on Jordan's mouth. It's almost microscopic, and Evan can only detect it by virtue of being the boy's father, but it's there.

"He's good for you," Jordan says, blushing.

"You just said we were gross twenty minutes ago." Evan might be antagonizing him on purpose.

"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."

"So have you."

* * *

Jordan shrugs. He flicks at a bow stuck onto the wrapped gift between them. "Does this have anything to do with Mom?"

"What do you mean?"

"I know Michael really wanted to have Christmas, but that was Mom's thing too." Jordan makes it sound sort of accusatory, but maybe that's Evan's guilty conscience twisting his words. Wouldn't be the first time.

"Yeah, it is, a little bit," Evan admits, because to say that he 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." He's delving deep into the realm of things they don't talk about, and he's still no better at it.

"You did your best," Jordan says softly, and it's the worst thing he's ever said. Because it means Evan's best wasn't enough and Jordan knows it. He knows that when Evan tried his hardest, it was all anger and demands and holding on too tight, and Jordan knows it so well it wasn't even surprising when Evan 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?" Evan owes it to June. If he can't be better for their son, then what good is he?

Jordan nods. "You already are."

12: A Christmas Story

Michael throws a subdued Christmas party at the bar on Christmas Eve. He can't really 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 Michael 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 Michael cleans up. Michael's trying to give off subtle hints that the bar is closing for the night: switching off the neon "open" sign out front, wiping down tables, stacking chairs. Dave has been here almost all day, and he seems to think since they trade stilted conversation during Michael's downtime that they're suddenly best pals. Michael doesn't hate the guy, but they don't have much in common save for their friendship with Evan, and even that is tenuous, considering how willing Dave was to shit-talk him out of earshot.

That's why, at three in the morning on Christmas Day, instead of being home with Evan and Jordan, Michael's stuck at the bar with Dave Schwartz.

"You must've made some good money tonight," Dave says.

* * *

"We make a lot when I bring food. I think we'll 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 worn off.

Dave gives him an incredulous look. "Don't *you* need the money?" Hasn't he figure out that Michael's mobbed up? "Is Evan giving you an allowance now?"

"I have my own money," Michael says. Dave sighs through his nose. "Don't be so glum, chum. It's Christmas. I know you don't celebrate, but the festivities ought to count for something." He flashes a smile, hoping it might inspire one on Dave's face, but Dave remains grumpy and despondent. "Do you have any plans?" If Dave's planning on coming back to the bar, he'll be in for a nasty surprise: they're closed for Christmas.

"No... I had much bigger plans that were supposed to have happened by now, but they fell through," Dave says in quiet frustration. Michael wonders what those plans might have been.

"Evan wouldn't mind if you came over for dinner tonight." Michael can only make this offer because he's certain Dave won't take him up on it. "It won't be just the three of us. Some of Evan's friends will be there. I'm sure you've seen some of them here. And his brother Ray—"

"Thanks but no thanks, Mike." Dave hops off the barstool. "I think I'll just enjoy a quiet day at home."

Well, that certainly got him moving. Though Michael hates to think that someone will be alone on Christmas, that Dave doesn't have the comfort of friends or family to surround him during the holidays. But maybe it's for the best he doesn't come over; seeing Evan's prosperity might make Dave feel worse, and if there's alcohol involved, Dave's tongue might loosen up and let go of the resentments he holds deep.

* * *

Michael bids him goodnight and makes it home by four a.m. Evan is kicked back on the couch, his feet propped on the coffee table while he sips a beer. The fireplace glows with a soft, golden warmth.

"'Bout time you showed up," Evan says, the line of his mouth curving into a smile. Michael sits beside him, and Evan holds him close in a way that lets Michael breathe against his neck. One of Evan's hands slides up Michael's shirt and fans out over his back. When Michael tries to reciprocate, Evan jerks away. "Shit, your hands are freezing!"

"I just came from outside," Michael says. "You'd be cold too."

"Go take a hot shower. Warm up. I'll be here when you come back." Evan's wink promises great things. Michael doesn't need to be told twice.

As promised, Evan is waiting for Michael when he comes downstairs smelling of soap and lavender. Evan guides him towards the fireplace, and they sit on the floor.

"I wanna ask you something," Michael starts.

"Ask away."

Michael glances at the Christmas tree, its multi-colored lights twinkling and shining. "Since it's technically Christmas morning, we should each open something early."

Evan grins. "You can't wait a few more hours? You've already waited this long."

"Why should we wait? It's Christmas. There isn't a rulebook, is there?"

"What about Jordie? He'll be crushed he didn't get to open anything early."

* * *

"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?" Evan gestures to an enormous wrapped package propped up against the wall. Seriously, it's huge.

Michael's smile is sweet and innocent. "No, I *know* you'll like that one."

"Is it a seductive, naked picture of you?"

"No, and stop trying to guess." Michael swats at Evan's chest. "That's not the one I want you to open."

"You're not opening anything early."

"Fine, we'll call it even if you open yours."

"Jeez, you're worse about this than Jordie," Evan teases. "If this is your first Christmas, we should do it right." If Michael pouts any harder, his face might actually stay that way. "Why don't I give you something to tide you over?"

Evan loves the look on Michael's face when he's kissed; at first, he looks surprised that Evan would do such a thing, then his eyes close and his mouth softens, and there's the soft curl of a smile. Evan scoots closer, and Michael fists his T-shirt in a demanding pull, hauling Evan nearer and greedily mashing their mouths together. Evan's hand roams over Michael's chest, underneath the fabric of his shirt to play with a nipple.

"You like that?" Evan breaks away for a moment to look at him. Michael's 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. Evan's hormones crackle and burst like fireworks. He's taking that as a yes.

* * *

Evan drags Michael's T-shirt over his head and takes a bruised red nub into his mouth. Michael gasps an encouraging noise, burying his fingers in Evan's hair. Evan's teeth graze over the tender skin, and Michael makes a soft sound in his throat when attention is paid to the other nipple.

"You know what else I'd like?" Michael tries to tease, but with the way Evan's suckling one nipple and tweaking the other, Michael sounds like he's begging for release.

"I know you want me to put my cock in you, but you're just gonna have to wait." The thought of sliding into that warm, wet heat conjures up a pretty pleasant mental image that slams straight through Evan. He kisses the curve of Michael's ribs, mouth trailing over his skin as he eases Michael onto his back. Evan moves slowly, purposefully, and Michael sighs happily at the smooth texture of lips and tongue contrasted with the sandpaper scrape of stubble.

Evan drags Michael's pajama pants over his hips, pulling his underwear down with them. He's seen Michael naked a few times, but never in this light with his eyes shut and his mouth open and wanting. Evan's teeth graze over the jutting peak of Michael's hipbone, and Michael wiggles his hips, letting him know exactly where he wants to be touched

The next sound he makes is a heavenly gasp when Evan wraps his fingers around Michael's already-hard dick.. Evan is careful, even as his thumb plays with the head while he plants kisses along Michael's inner thigh and sucks bruises into the skin.

Michael's leg jerks, and Evan's barely able to dodge. "Hey, hey, watch it!" Evan raises his head to give Michael a *what the fuck* look. "No head injuries, please."

"Is that a double entendre?"

Evan chuckles and drops back down to nuzzle Michael's thighs. His

mouth is everywhere except Michael's cock, but it ought to be, since Michael's on the verge of letting go. Evan has never done this before, and he hopes Michael won't be disappointed over any lack of experience in this area.

Evan runs his hands up Michael's thighs before taking the head of his cock into his mouth. Michael cries out in bliss, rolling his hips in desperate need. It's not enough to make Evan pull away, but he tightens his grip to remind Michael he's a novice at this. His tongue drags along the aching length of Michael's dick. Michael squirms and arches his back and cries out. Evan's mouth and tongue work to make Michael moan against the air and make his fingers dig quick into Evan's scalp.

Michael slings his heels over Evan's shoulders, forcing himself too deep. Evan pulls away, and Michael props himself up on his elbows to look at him curiously. "Sorry," he says in a breathless whisper.

"No harm, no foul. But I'm not as good at this as you are, remember?" Michael smiles, and Evan kisses his inner thigh. "Am I doing this right?"

Michael 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. Evan takes him in as far as he can, his hands sliding along Michael's slim hips up to his waist. Michael meets Evan there, his fingers curling around Evan's forearms and digging in when he's about to fall 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.

Evan thought he was ready for it, but he miscalculated. When Michael comes, it hits Evan's throat in a hot and thick burst and makes him gag. Some of it ends up on Michael's stomach while Evan's gasping and choking. There's a warm trickle in the wrong place in his

throat.

Michael's laughing at him, which really doesn't make this better.

"I could have died!" Evan manages around a hacking cough.

"Did it surprise you?" Michael asks, panting and shaky. "What did you think was gonna happen?"

"Do you always criticize your presents?"

"This is the first time I've ever gotten one."

"A present or a blow job?" Evan says.

"Well, both. Sort of."

Evan needs to hear the details on what makes that a "sort of" answer, but he keeps coughing.

Michael traces his fingertips over Evan's arms. "Practice makes perfect." He pushes himself up and stares down at Evan. "I guess I gotta show you how it's done, huh?"

"I guess you do."

The actual gift-giving experience goes over rather well, all things considered. Michael gives Evan an enormous television set for the living room, a chaise recliner — the giant box he'd eyed all week — a custom leather jacket (courtesy of Michael's sister Janet), almost a whole new wardrobe of clothes, a Cartier timepiece, and an electronic typewriter to replace the archaic thing he'd been using for his screenplays. But Evan protests that Michael lavishing him with gifts only makes them more imbalanced.

* * *

“Evan, you’ve given me you,” Michael says. “You’ve given me the chance to have the life I’ve always wanted. I think that makes us even.”

Jordan’s thrilled to receive all the new toys and video games from the both of them, and that’s what really matters. Christmas is, after all, more for kids than adults (500 pages of the Sears Wishbook make a solid case for that).

But Evan keeps coming back to that damn imbalance. He doesn’t think his gifts to Michael — new cookware, a stand mixer, novels on Michael’s to-read list, a storage cabinet for his growing collection of CDs — or what he was able to give Jordan validate Evan’s place in the family. Every gift given to him feels like a weight he has to carry, something he has to work toward deserving.

Michael hosts the Christmas party that evening at the house. He’s wearing a red shirt with tight black jeans, and he flits about the kitchen and living room, making sure everyone’s having a good time. He’s prepared a great deal of snacks and finger foods, and Evan thinks the free food is why most of the guests showed up.

Larry, J.D., Ray and Nathalie are here, as well as Dominic Cascio, the head of one of New York’s most prestigious and powerful Families. His presence comes as a shock to Evan, since he doesn’t remember extending an invitation. But J.D. has a big mouth, and he’s a frequent customer at Aldo’s, Dominic’s small Italian restaurant located down the block from the bar. It doesn’t take a genius to figure out how he must have heard about this shindig.

Jordan’s more than happy to stay in the basement and give his new video games a test drive. Occasionally he comes upstairs for a snack and soda, but the conversation of adults holds no allure for him. He’s getting off pretty easy, if Evan’s honest. This party blows, but it’s not Michael’s fault. Evan has never been a party guy. June had been the socialite in their marriage, dragging him to social events like a trophy or, perhaps, a bodyguard.

* * *

The kitchen counter is covered with half-empty bottles of wine, vodka, tequila, and whisky. Evan's been nursing the Jim Beam since Ray brought it over two hours ago. He pours himself another glass, watching Michael and Nathalie across the room. Michael's the only partygoer without a drink in his hand. What a chore it must be, Evan thinks, to be the only sober person at the party.

Larry comes over to the makeshift bar and pours himself another glass of wine. "Don't you think you've had enough?" Evan asks, only half-joking.

"Yeah, well, it's been a long fuckin' week. I'm de-stressing." Larry takes a long drink and sits at the dining table.

Evan joins him in an empty seat. "Tell me about it. We had so many presents laid out here this morning. It was a pain in the ass wrapping them all, and Michael's been busy with cooking for the party."

Larry shoots him a scornful look. "You are so far out of the loop it's not even funny."

"What are you talking about?"

Larry leans in and lowers his voice. "Some of our associates are jumping ship and climbing on board with the other Families. The Cascios caught most of the stragglers. Word is they run New York now, not us."

"How the hell did I miss this?"

"Gee, I wonder." Larry turns his head in Michael's direction, like he's trying to make a point to Evan. Michael's talking with Dominic Cascio now — speak of the devil — while the latter devours meatballs. Evan wonders what Dominic might be telling Michael about him, or if perhaps Michael is letting secrets slip.

"But we can turn this around," Larry says. "If we get back into

pushing drugs, we'll edge the Cascios out again."

After Evan came into power, he abolished the drug trade from the Family's business deals. His father may have built a fortune on pushing poison to the public, but Evan wanted no part of that as long as he was in control of things.

"Alright, look, Larry, we have a rule in this house; no talking shop at the table." Evan hears the passiveness in his voice, as if he's trying to dodge this conversational brick by dropping the subject altogether.

"You're unbelievable. No wonder this Family's goin' to shit. Robert would never let this happen." Robert Charmatz, the previous head of the Family, was Evan's father.

"Why don't you go fuck yourself?" Evan doesn't realize how loudly he's spoken until he sees the heads of the other guests turn in his direction. "You come into my house on Christmas fucking day and talk shit?" Today being Christmas probably doesn't matter to Larry, what with him being Jewish, but it's the principle of the thing, really.

"You're the one talking shit," Larry says, unfazed by Evan's outburst. "I come up with a simple solution, and you don't even wanna hear about it. That's on you."

"Sit down, Ev," Ray says from the couch. "You're drunk."

"And you wanna act like Mr. Integrity?" Larry chimes in, reinvigorated now. "Robert made his money in the drug biz. Every fucking dollar you've ever touched came from drugs. Pharmaceutical, recreational, whatever. That shit in your glass just happens to be sold in a store, is all, but it didn't used to be. Regardless of how you want to moralize, Evan, people aren't gonna stop smoking crack or shooting tar just 'cause you got a problem with it. They'll get their hands on this stuff anyway. We might as well make some money off it. Your father understood that. Why can't you?"

* * *

The callousness in that statement makes Evan see red, but he's woefully unequipped to respond to it. His mind races, and he can't gather his thoughts in a coherent argument. *You're wrong, you're wrong*, he thinks, *but I can't explain why*.

"Maybe right now isn't the best time for this discussion," Michael speaks up in a small voice.

"Listen to your girlfriend," Ray tells Evan. This earns him a dirty look from Nathalie. J.D. chuckles, and Larry's smirk gains an edge of cruelty.

"If you don't like the way I run things, you're free to leave. Good fucking riddance." Evan makes a fist, crushing the glass of whisky in his hand with a brittle snap. The jagged glass cuts through his skin. There's a rip of pain, then the hot wet rush of blood.

Michael gasps, going impossibly pale.

J.D., Ray, Nathalie, Dominic, and Larry are all looking at Evan with wide, frightened eyes.

Just another party at Evan's place. Good ol' fun-loving, self-destructive Evan. Merry fucking Christmas.

"I think the party's over," Michael says, his voice a little stronger this time. He crosses the living room and cradles Evan's bleeding hand. There's a chunk of glass stuck in Evan's palm.

"Are you kidding?" Larry says. "It's just gettin' started!"

Evan shoots him a sour look. "You don't have to go home, but you can't stay here."

Larry scoffs and downs the remaining wine in his glass. "Fine, but I'm taking my wine with me." He enters the kitchen and snatches the bottle of pinot noir off the counter. The guests grumble and mill about,

gathering their coats and jackets, grabbing a few snacks for the road. Michael leads Evan to the sink and plucks out the shards of glass before running Evan's bloodied hand under warm water.

Nathalie approaches Michael and thanks him for the party. "It was lovely," she says, Evan's outburst notwithstanding, of course.

Michael gives her a sympathetic smile, thanks her for the compliment.

"Yeah, great party, Mike," Ray says with none of Nathalie's enthusiasm.

Nathalie makes a face, as if to say *sorry about him*.

Like Evan's blood trickling down the sink, the guests trickle out too. Nathalie leaves with Ray. J.D. slaps Evan on the back and says, "Between you and me, he was outta line," before he grabs his coat and exits.

You would say that, Evan thinks, because when push comes to shove you're a suck-up. Where were you when I needed a voice in my corner? But Evan just nods in understanding.

Dominic thanks Michael and Evan for the hospitality, wishes them happy holidays before he departs.

After all the guests have filed out, Michael asks, "Is it bad?"

Evan huffs. "I've had worse."

"I don't doubt that," Michael says sadly. He examines the wound with tenderness and care. "It's shallow. No stitches."

"It's a Christmas miracle," Evan grumbles.

A cramp of distress passes over Michael's face. "Evan, I'm not upset with you, if that's what you're worried about."

* * *

"You don't think I ruined your party?"

"Of course not." Michael smiles. "They were wearing out their welcome anyway. Did you see how Dom hogged all those meatballs?"

Evan manages a weak chuckle. Michael goes upstairs to retrieve the bandages. Evan drops into a seat at the table and stares at the mess he made. The tablecloth is stained with a mix of blood and booze.

Evan's no stranger to scenes like this. His marriage to June was rife with arguments that ended in shattered glass. But there's something about having an argument in front of an audience that makes Evan feel exposed and ashamed.

Michael returns a minute later with the first-aid supplies. He sits beside Evan and squirts peroxide onto the red gash in his palm.

Evan hisses through his teeth. "Goddamn it. I hate parties."

Michael raises his head. "Why didn't you tell me?"

"I didn't want to ruin your fun. When you suggested it, you seemed so excited, and I wanted to make you happy."

"You already make me happy by being with me," Michael says, like it's obvious. "Everything else is just gravy."

"I didn't want you to think I'm some old stick-in-the-mud who doesn't know how to have fun."

Michael laughs a soft, gentle sound. "Oh jeez. See, I didn't want *you* to think I'm no fun. I'd really rather spend my time somewhere quiet with a book and a cup of tea. But I thought you—"

"God, no. I'm getting old and embracing the grandpa lifestyle."

* * *

"I should've gotten you a rocking chair instead of a recliner, huh?" Michael teases.

"Ha-ha," Evan says. Michael dabs a bead of ointment onto the wound before carefully wrapping it with gauze. "Is first-aid another *service* you provided for your family?"

"In a manner of speaking. Jermaine has a habit of running his mouth."

"So he's your Ray."

Michael's laugh is brash this time, as if the joke has taken him by surprise. "I guess you're right." He finishes bandaging Evan up and pats his hand. "Why don't you go upstairs and get ready for bed? I'll clean up."

"I cut my hand, Mike, I didn't cut it *off*. I can help."

Michael shakes his head. "Don't worry about it. I'll be up in twenty minutes."

Evan considers arguing but decides against it. As he's climbing the stairs, Michael says, "For what it's worth, I'm glad you aren't a part of the drug trade."

Evan pauses his ascent, turns to look at Michael. "June said I was a hypocrite."

They had frequent arguments about the subject. June often chewed him out for turning a blind eye to gambling, bid-rigging, and prostitution yet drawing the line at facilitating the sale and distribution of illegal drugs. She raised the point that Prohibition, an era in which the Mafia cut its teeth, was all about peddling illegal (at the time) substances. "And you've got no problem guzzling booze," she would say with a sneer, sometimes gesturing to one of Evan's whisky or scotch bottles to drive home the point.

* * *

Michael shrugs. "Maybe, maybe not. But I admire that you have scruples."

It's easy for Evan to keep his integrity when dear old Dad did all the dirty work beforehand. But he nods and thanks Michael for his support all the same.

January 1993

For Jordan's thirteenth birthday in early January, Michael will be the first to admit he went a little far with the festivities. "I don't want a big fancy party," Jordan said, and Michael had to wonder if the boy was afraid Evan might make a scene if they did host a party.

But Jordan proposed that since he was "probably, most definitely" getting a Sega CD for his birthday, he didn't want to go somewhere and play arcade games he's already bored with. And since Michael knows how to cook, he could theoretically make any food Jordan might want. Michael found it a bit strange that Jordan would rather stay home with his parents (*already thinking of yourself as his parent*, Michael noted) than go to Chuck E. Cheese or the mall, but he didn't argue.

Michael combined two of Jordan's favorite foods in a macaroni and cheese pizza. For the cake, he made an ice cream fudge pie with colorful chocolate candies and sprinkles on top; Evan and Jordan don't complain that "it's not really cake," because their love of sugar trumps semantics.

But Evan got a little testy when Michael asked him to help wrap presents the night before. Michael wasn't sure if this was another emotional milestone — Jordan's first birthday without his mother — or if Evan was actually upset with him. Then Evan made it crystal clear.

* * *

"I wanted to do more," Michael said, "but I didn't want to go overboard."

Evan scoffed. "Sure, one more video game would have tipped it right over the fucking edge. I've already lost him to you entirely. Pile it on. Who gives a shit?"

Michael stared in awe that Evan could ever think such a thing. "Did Jordie tell you he plays favorites?"

"He doesn't need to. Any idiot can see what's going on here. You waltz in and throw your money around, impressing Jordie and basically ensuring that his 'Favorite Dad' sticker sits firmly in your corner instead of mine."

Michael reached for Evan's hands, but Evan pulled them away and folded his arms over his chest. "No, no, you're his father. He loves you no matter what."

Evan didn't have the energy to argue after that, but he did stay sullen and scowly, albeit realigning his expression into something more pleasant when Jordan was around.

A few days afterwards, Michael asks Jordan when Evan's birthday is, if he'd already missed it, and if they should do something special for him.

"If he thought your birthday was a sugar overload," Michael says, practically brimming with enthusiasm, "then what I'm gonna pull out for his birthday will really knock his socks off!"

Jordan listens with a pained half-smile. "That's probably a really bad idea, dude. Dad hates his birthday. We haven't done anything for it since..." He trails off, thinking this over. "It's so long ago I don't even remember."

The excited grin on Michael's face falls, and his mouth settles into a

pouty frown. "And the not-celebrating was your Dad's idea?"

Jordan nods. "Mom tried; she'd usually just sneak a new pair of socks or underwear into his drawer." He makes a face. "Why do grown-ups like getting that stuff?" Then he shakes his head, powers ahead. "And Uncle Ray buys him a drink sometimes, but that's as exciting as Dad's birthdays get."

"That is tragic. So we just do nothing? No cake, no cards, not even a 'happy birthday'?"

"I mean, do what you want," Jordan says with a shrug. "But he's not gonna like it."

Michael can at least do *something* for Evan's birthday, even if it's not as grandiose and extravagant as Jordan's was. Michael understands why Evan doesn't want presents — all his talk of "imbalance" said enough about that — but an acknowledgement of Evan's special day shouldn't be so objectionable. So Michael spends the afternoon of Evan's birthday preparing a special dinner and a cake.

Jordan comes up from the basement and sees the platters of food on the table. "I told you this was a bad idea."

"It's just dinner," Michael says, petulant.

"Try telling Dad that."

"How was I supposed to know he thinks his birthday is this bleak event?"

"Because you had to find out the date from somebody, right? And anyone who knows when Dad's birthday is knows he hates it."

Michael hears the distant slam of a car door from inside the garage. Jordan quickly hops onto the couch and pretends to have no part in this celebratory dinner. Michael's about to call the kid a traitor when

the door leading to the garage opens, and Evan steps inside.

"Something smells good," Evan says, his eyes brilliant with excitement.

"I hope you're wearing your stretchy pants," Michael says.

"Ooh, let me go upstairs and get dressed for dinner." Evan chuckles and slides past Michael on the way to the staircase. His hand brushes Michael's stomach as he passes by, and Evan gives a lust-filled glance over his shoulder before he disappears on the stairs. Michael considers following and letting Evan maul him against the shower wall but figures he can wait a couple hours.

Dinner goes off without a hitch. Evan raves about the meatball and gnocchi bake, about the mushroom julienne, about Michael's cooking in general. Michael blushes and *aw shucks* his way through the compliments. It's only when he brings out the cake — a caramel banana nut cake — does Evan grow suspicious.

"You made dessert too? What's the occasion?" There's a healthy dose of accusation in Evan's voice.

"Since when do I need an occasion to do something nice?" Michael says.

Jordan's wearing his guilty face. Evan looks over at him and raises an eyebrow at Michael. "You tryin' to bribe me again?"

"No!" Michael says, and he isn't, so maybe Evan doesn't think he's lying. Evan doesn't push, just accepts the cake in pointed, doubtful silence.

When they get upstairs later that night, Michael's hands barely make it up the front of Evan's shirt before Evan grabs his wrists and sits the two of them on the bed. "Dinner, dessert, *and* sex? What have you done?"

* * *

Michael pretends to be bewildered by the accusation, but Evan can read him too well. He sighs. "I thought I'd do something nice for you because it's your birthday, you big lug."

Evan's lovely face turns to impassive stone. His dark eyebrows form an angry line over his eyes. "Jordan told you?"

"I begged it out of him," Michael says, taking Evan's hands in his own, but Evan's expression is still unreasonably livid. "What's the big deal? Are you that self-conscious about getting older?"

"Why shouldn't I be?" Evan asks, watching Michael trace small circles over the backs of his hands. "Another year closer to when you'll get sick of being with such an old man."

"I'm sure you're not that much older than me."

"What are you, like, thirty?"

"Give or take a couple years," Michael says coyly.

Evan winces. "Christ."

"I know you want me to ask what the difference is so you can wallow, but it doesn't matter to me."

"Michael, you have options. You're not stuck with me 'cause you'll never find anyone better. I'll probably die ten or twenty years before you do. What kind of life is that for you?"

Michael huffs an exasperated breath, puffing a loose curl out of his face. "A little melodramatic, don't you think? Being older than me doesn't guarantee anything." He wants to mention that June died before Evan, but he keeps that one locked inside.

"I still wouldn't bet against those odds."

* * *

Michael leans his head on Evan's shoulder, hand toying with the hem of his shirt. "Well, if you're old, you certainly don't act your age. An old man couldn't *satisfy* me like you do."

"Enjoy it while it lasts," Evan 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."

Michael grinds the heel of his palm into the swell of Evan's dick through his sweatpants. Evan grunts a breathy sound and pushes his hips into Michael's touch. "And an old man wouldn't be this hard already."

"Then maybe I'm not so old yet," Evan says, his words subsumed in a gasp when Michael curls a hand around him.

13: Enemies Closer

The bar is nearly empty when Dominic Cascio stops by at the end of the month. He beckons Evan over to a table near the back of the room. Commanding him to move instead of deferring to Evan's power and sitting across from him. Interesting.

When Evan sits down, Dominic says, "So I got this job I need to do, but my boys are too busy 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."

"And what's the cut?"

"About fifty grand total."

* * *

Fifteen percent of that divided amongst the other crew members Evan would send on the job. He's almost insulted. "I'm gonna have to think about this one, Dom. Talk to the guys, maybe renegotiate."

Dominic 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." So what Larry said at the Christmas party wasn't just a load of shit, then.

"Be that as it may," Evan says, "I still don't take orders from you. I'll talk to my guys, see if they want a part in it, and you'll get my answer tomorrow."

Dominic stares him down for a long moment before silently stalking out of the bar.

Evan meets with Larry and Ray in the back room to discuss the deal. Larry just listens with a stiff, scary expression on his face.

"Oh, fuck that guy!" Ray barks, before reconsidering with a disgusted look. "No, wait, never mind. You actually might."

Larry snorts a quiet laugh under his breath. Evan is 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."

"Somethin' you wanna say to me?" Evan glares at him.

Ray puts his hands up as if warding off an imaginary attacker. "I didn't say nothin'."

Larry puts them back on track. "Maybe you should go, Evan. Bring a couple of J.D's guys, but having you there might deter anyone from making an unwise move against the Family. Eliminating a boss is still very much frowned upon."

* * *

Something on Evan's face must communicate that he's not too crazy about this idea.

"A boss won't 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 Evan got acquainted with Victor Gutierrez. The following night, the job went off without a hitch, and they took the celebration to the bar, their pockets stuffed with paltry sums of cash.

Evan, Victor, and Ray sit around the table dealing hands of blackjack and ordering drinks. The bar is practically empty, but Michael is busy enough tending to them.

Michael sets down another round of drinks at their table, sliding Evan's gin and tonic over to him. "You sure are in a good mood tonight."

Evan's mouth dries up when he takes in the flirty tilt of Michael's hips. The alcohol rakes his throat with fire. "It's all thanks to this guy." Evan points to Victor with a thumb.

Victor 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."

Ray rolls his eyes so hard they might roll right out of his skull.

"Yeah, he sells me short. It's the curse of being so devastatingly handsome," Evan tells Victor.

Michael laughs. "And don't forget modest."

* * *

"Now *you're* sellin' me short." Evan gives Michael a quick, pointed look that he feels in his bones.

"Let me know if you need anything else," Michael says before returning to tend bar.

When Michael's out of earshot, Victor leans in and whispers, "So, he yours?"

The extent of Evan's relationship with Michael isn't public knowledge, though their closest friends and most trusted associates know about their involvement. "We gonna have a problem here?"

Victor gives a big, hearty laugh at that. "No, no way! I was just curious, is all." He takes a casual sip of his Scotch. "You two got a thing goin', huh?"

The look on Ray's face says he's wishing very hard to be an only child.

"Ain't nobody's business if we are, Victor."

Victor 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."

"Why are you so obsessed with my dick and where I put it? Somethin' you wanna tell me?"

Ray blows a gust of air out of his nose Evan assumes is supposed to be a *fuck you*. "I'm just sayin', Ev. I got a weird vibe off'a that guy. He might be 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 Evan is right but doesn't want to admit it. "Just be careful, alright?"

February 1993

"Hey, Michael, you gonna be busy this Saturday?" Evan asks the following 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." Evan rubs the back of his neck. "Like, for a date?"

They've been together for about five months now and have yet to go on an official date. That might be due in part to Michael's reluctance to let Evan be seen in public with him "that way."

Michael isn't embarrassed of Evan, but Evan's reputation is important. People need to respect him, and if word gets out that he and Michael are a thing, well, respect for other people's life choices isn't exactly a characteristic of this business.

But just going to dinner doesn't necessarily signal to everyone in a five mile radius that they're together. So Michael nods agreeably and asks him to elaborate. "What did you have in mind?"

Evan's hopeful smile falls apart as he speaks, like he realizes this will be more difficult than he planned. "Well, uh, you remember Mark, right?"

"That doctor guy your dad was friends with?"

* * *

"Yeah, yeah, 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 Michael's tone makes Evan decide to abort the mission. "If you don't want to it's fine. I mean, you really don't even know the guy, let alone his sister. I just — I just figured I'd ask — it's no big deal or anything."

Michael places a hand on Evan's arm to quell his flood of words. "I'd love to go with you, but it's probably not a good idea. It might get back to my father."

"So?"

"So Joseph deludes himself into thinking I'm only interested in women."

"What's he gonna do, ground you?"

"He could force me to come home," Michael reminds him. "Our six months are almost up." Evan looks like he's been punched. "I don't want to cause problems for you here if Joseph's just gonna drag me right back."

"What problems? I don't care what anyone thinks. They won't talk to me about it 'cause they're too scared of me to say anything in the first place."

Michael shakes his head. Evan seems to have forgotten the incident at

the Christmas party. "No, they're not. 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.

Michael says, "You're supposed to be this feared, macho, tough guy. Imagine how many people are going to blame what happened to June as the trigger for you 'going gay.'"

Evan's entire face winces like he's been stabbed.

"I know that's not what happened, but that's how it's gonna look."

Evan 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."

"I just don't think it's a good idea right now."

"Well, when will it be?"

"Isn't it enough that we're happy together? Why is it so important to you that other people validate our relationship?"

Evan's 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 you don't want to be seen in public with me!" He storms off before Michael can say anything in response.

Evan goes to the bar after the argument with Michael, needing to get out of the house before insulting him or saying more things that are wrong and heated. Victor is there, sipping a mojito and reading a newspaper. He waves Evan over to his table when he sees him.

* * *

"Sheesh, man, you look like you could use a drink."

"If you're buyin', sure. But none of that fruity shit."

After Evan's first shot of whisky, Victor asks, "How'd you get into all this anyway?"

"All what?"

"This." Victor makes a gesture to the room that Evan doesn't understand.

"The bar?"

"No, the business."

"Well, I didn't have much of a choice. My father was very convincing."

"Did you want a choice?"

This conversation is becoming an uncomfortable mirror of the ones Evan's had with Michael about the same topic. "Would'a been nice, y'know? I had delusions of grandeur just like everybody else."

"What kind of delusions?"

"I got a box of old screenplays I wrote somewhere, buried in the closet. I've been rewriting some of them in my spare time. Michael and Jordie like to entertain the notion that I might be able to sell one."

Victor raises an eyebrow. "Screenplays? Ain't that what J.D. does?"

"He's sold a couple, yeah."

"Then why the fuck's he hang around you guys? No offense."

* * *

"He couldn't resist the easy money. And between you and me, I think he's a hack who got lucky once or twice. He probably knew a studio couldn't keep getting golden eggs out of that tired old goose."

Victor tilts his head in thought. "Why don't you sell your screenplays? Follow your dreams, and all that shit."

Evan scoffs a laugh. "I don't think that's gonna be possible for me." His habit of self-sabotage is much too strong.

"What's eatin' you, anyway?"

Evan doesn't know why he answers honestly. Maybe he wants the opinion of someone who doesn't seem like they'd be disgusted by his relationship with Michael. "Michael doesn't wanna be seen with me because he's worried about my reputation."

Victor snorts derisively. "I was wonderin' why you two weren't loud and proud."

Evan groans internally at the stereotype. "He doesn't want his father finding out. You know how it is."

Victor chuckles in a way that says he absolutely does. "You don't find that odd?"

"You ever meet his father? Not the kind of guy you want to be enemies with."

Victor shrugs. "If you trust Michael, 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?"

* * *

"He's only hiding it from his father, I think. And I get that, 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."

"You think he's projecting? Y'know, taking his own fears of being found out and putting them on you. Maybe he's the one who's worried about his reputation."

Evan lets that bounce around in his brain over another shot of whisky.

"Have you two ever gone out before?" Victor asks.

"As a couple? No. People see us here, but that's 'cause he works here. We don't go out on dates. We stay at home and watch movies or TV." As Evan speaks, he feels himself traveling toward some murky place in his head he's not sure he wants to go.

Victor nods like he's been expecting this. "Maybe he's got a secret reputation you don't know about."

"Meaning what?"

"If I had to get close enough to learn my enemy's secrets, a little sex here and there wouldn't be nothin'— so long as the whole world didn't know about it."

Evan feels a curl of nausea in the pit of his stomach and tries to drown it with another shot.

Could Michael really be a spy sent by Joseph to take over the Family from the inside? It's what Evan suspected from the start, but it's a hell of a gamble that sex would play a part in it.

When Evan met Michael, his wounds from losing June were raw and

bleeding; engaging in any sort of intimacy hurt like a blade stabbing in deep and then splintering off. Even now, he still feels the sharp edges of guilt when he touches Michael a certain way or says 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 if he thinks it might cause a problem. This is the first time he's ever really argued or insisted contrarily to Evan. And the issue at hand was that of bringing their relationship out into the open. Evan wonders if that means something.

When he returns home, still feeling the warm buzz from the whisky, it's about midnight. Michael's in his own room, having fitful sleep in his bed. Evan slinks into the bedroom and stands over him. "Michael," he whispers.

Michael rolls over onto his back to face Evan, makes a sleepy, confused noise.

"How come you're sleeping in here all of a sudden?" Evan asks.

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 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."

"I don't like upsetting you."

Evan feels a prickle of suspicion at his words and tries to shake it off. "We'll get better at this. It's still new." He offers a hand. "Come back to bed."

Michael takes Evan's hand and allows himself to be led into their bedroom at the end of the hall. "You're not still mad, are you?" Michael asks when they're inside.

* * *

"I guess not. I didn't change my mind, but I'm not angry." Evan nudges him onto the bed. "We'll talk about it later."

Michael nods, reaches up so his fingers curl in Evan's shirt. "Does that mean I can kiss you?"

"You can always kiss me."

Thrilled by the permission, Michael tugs Evan closer to bring their mouths together. One of Michael's hands works the buttons of Evan's shirt from their clasps before sliding over his chest. His other hand drifts to Evan's belt to unlatch it.

Evan rises up to his knees to make this task easier, and Michael does the same, his eyes dark with lust. He digs his hand into Evan's underwear, pulling out his cock. Michael's fingers grip around the shaft a little too tightly, but his thumb drags along the underside of Evan's dick in a way that brings him much too close to the edge.

Evan makes a low sound of approval, and Michael gently shoves him onto his back and goes down on him. Evan grits his teeth to silence any embarrassing noises he might make, but he's still moaning sounds that make Michael smile around his cock. Michael's mouth sucks and his tongue swipes, then he lets Evan's dick glide past his lips and bump against the back of his throat. He's a goddamn natural; everything about his technique is too practiced, too theatrical to be genuine.

Evan shoves Michael away — carefully, because he still wants his dick attached to his body — and watches him.

"You don't like it?" Michael asks, timid.

"Where'd you learn how to do this?"

Michael looks bewildered by the question. He sits up in the space

between Evan's legs. "Do you really want to talk about that now?"

Evan pushes back the loose tendrils of hair dangling over Michael's face and wonders if the man he loves is a lie. Has it all been an act of fantasy to extract secrets or information from Evan, or does Michael really care for him?

"There's something I want to try. Do you mind?"

Michael shakes his head. "No."

"You don't even know what it is."

"I trust you."

You shouldn't.

Evan pushes Michael's back against the mattress and climbs over him, his knees on either side of Michael's ribs. He sits in Michael's lap like a king on a throne, and he can feel Michael's cock, swollen with need, against his ass.

Michael bites his lip and watches the slow slide of Evan's hand play along the length of his own dick. Michael's hips roll in a needy rhythm, and his hands grip around Evan's thighs, forcing their hips to grind together in a way that makes Evan moan a strangled, helpless cry.

When he's close, Evan rises up to his knees again, staring down at Michael. "You want me to come?" Michael's hips answer with an affirmative yes. Evan grabs Michael's hair and fucks his throat until he's finished. There are way too many things he wants to pay attention to here, and he soaks them all in: Michael's tongue darting out to capture the sticky wetness, the stripes of cum dripping from his mouth.

Evan smears a thumb in the wet, white splatter streaked across

Michael's cheek. Michael takes the digit into his mouth, then he swallows and bites his lip, looking way too pleased with himself. He's in no position to look so smug, not when he's licking jizz off his face. A normal person would be pissed Evan didn't warn them first; Michael 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 Evan's benefit, putting on an act and never raising opposition in the bedroom. Because that's the one place where no one knows about it.

Defeated by his climax and worries, Evan sits back Michael's lap and let his hips roll until he falls over the edge. Michael grips the sheets in his hands, his teeth digging into his bottom lip when he crumbles.

Evan grunts and crawls off of Michael, unbuttoning his remaining shirt buttons and tossing the garment to the floor. He slips into bed once his clothes are off. He can feel Michael watching him curiously.

"You okay?" Michael asks. It isn't like Evan to go so quiet after sex.

"Yeah, just tired," Evan mumbles, his face pressed into the pillow. Michael cuddles close and wraps his arms around Evan; Evan tries to ignore the way that makes him feel. Michael's breath is a warm flare on the back of Evan's neck. He tries to ignore that, too. Because it can't be real.

Evan was with June for over twenty years, and if he pinned her down, face-fucked her, and came on her face she'd probably have mortally wounded him — or at least had a few words to say about it. But Michael practically fucking orgasms from it. It's great he's into that, but his enthusiasm feels manufactured, like he's putting on an act for Evan's sake. Coupled with what Victor said about Michael have some secret reputation he doesn't want known...

Evan lies awake for some time, internally debating both sides of the

issue and getting absolutely nowhere. He doesn't know what to believe now. It isn't until Michael sort of squeezes Evan in his sleep that he has a moment of clarity. Michael's hold around Evan's waist tightens, and he cuddles closer, wiggling into the infinitesimal space between them.

Maybe Evan is wrong. Of course Michael cares for him. The sex might be for show, but little subconscious things like this can't be lies. The way he laughs at Evan's stupid jokes, the way he's drawn to Evan like a magnet when they're near each other, the way Michael holds him like he never wants to lose Evan...

It has to be real... right?

When Saturday night rolls around, the crew is down at the harbor again on another job when Victor asks Evan, "How are things with you and Michael? You get to go on your date?"

Why does this guy give a shit, Evan wonders. Could Victor be interested in Michael? Or maybe he's interested in Evan.

"No, but we talked it over and decided to 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 they're loading boxes into the back of Ray's Ford Explorer.

"Not really. He's sort of like a kid himself. They have common interests, y'know, comic books and video games. I think it's good for Jordie to have someone he can talk to and hang out with. It's not like Michael's gonna peer-pressure him into drinking or smoking or

anything like that.”

“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 could Michael be using his age and his experience and his money to get an advantage over Jordan?”

Evan sits beside a box in the back of the car. “What kind of advantage?” Evan thinks about the imbalance between him and Michael in regards to Jordan’s affection, and he wonders...

“Well, what’s he been like with you since Michael showed up?”

“He was really gung-ho about hanging out with Michael at first. When he found out we were dating he sort of pulled away from us, but after a bit he was right back to hanging on Michael. He does gravitate to Michael a little more than he does to me or his friends, but I don’t think that’s a bad thing. If Michael’s gonna be a part of my life, I want him and Jordie to get along.”

Ray finds the two of them lollygagging. “Hey, c’mon, quit sittin’ around with your thumbs up your asses.”

Evan doesn’t get to talk to Victor again that night, which he’s absolutely okay with, because every conversation he has with Victor spirals his mind into a different, more confusing direction than the last.

Is Victor trying to pull them apart in order to make a move on Michael? Victor hasn’t exactly been shit-talking Michael, but his questions are poking at sensitive areas Evan isn’t comfortable with yet. But even if Evan stops talking to Victor, this Pandora’s box of doubts and confusion has already been opened.

Evan comes home late that night and stumbles 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. Evan tiptoes to the couch and lifts up the blanket that's draped over them. Thank God, neither of them are missing any articles of clothing.

Would Evan think twice about this scenario if it were June instead of Michael? Of course not. But June was Jordan's mother, and June didn't randomly volunteer to live with them and have things that gave her an advantage over Jordan. Michael does. And if Michael has ulterior motives to being with Evan...

Evan's lungs stop when he remembers some of Michael's first questions to him were about Jordan. Michael asked if Evan had a son and how old Jordan was.

Evan swallows back the bile in his throat and locks himself in his bedroom. He does not sleep well that night.

Michael's back aches in the morning from sleeping on the couch all night. Evan comes downstairs for breakfast, his face frowny and distressed. Something in his eyes seems to have changed, but Michael can't read it. Evan is quiet in a way that forebodes rage brewing beneath the surface. His heated energy makes Michael uneasy. Michael wants to ask what's upsetting him, but with questions like that comes the risk of 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. Uh, Michael was supposed to take me to the mall today," Jordan answers. "Maybe some other time, Dad."

"I could take you," Evan offers.

"You hate shopping," Michael says with a chuckle, hoping to infuse

him with some sort of levity, because Evan's strung way too tightly this morning. "Don't stress yourself out. I'll go with him."

Evan glares, and Michael almost forgot how terrifying it is to be on the receiving end of one of Evan's glares. He hasn't been this sulky and despondent since Michael first moved in.

After a while, Jordan goes upstairs to get dressed for their mall outing.

Michael takes this opportunity to break the silence between himself and Evan, because otherwise it seems like they'll never speak to each other again. "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."

Evan's still scowling, like that was an accusation he wanted a real answer to.

"Are you still upset about keeping you and me on the down-low?"

Evan just grunts, turning his back on Michael 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. Michael tries 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 is unresponsive, rejecting Michael's advances in lieu of rolling over on his side and going to sleep. Maybe he's decided that he hates feelings and prefers not to have them.

Michael's hours at the bar are spent performing surveillance on Evan

and his new buddy Victor. Those two have been spending a lot of time together lately. Michael wonders if that has anything to do with Evan's sudden withdrawal. Of course, Michael could be wrong. It could be strictly business. But it makes him wonder all the same.

Dave interrupts this reconnaissance one evening, waving his empty beer bottle in Michael's face. "Can I get another drink, or you gonna keep staring at your boyfriend?"

"Sorry," Michael mumbles, opening a new bottle and sliding it over to him.

"You two having trouble in paradise?" Dave sneers, like their relationship is a joke to him.

"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."

"How's that?"

"He's always going 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."

"I wish he would tell me what I did wrong so I could fix it."

Dave looks at him, oddly sympathetic. "Maybe it's not your fault. You ever think of that? Evan doesn't have a great track record with relationships."

Michael watches Evan while he's not looking. Evan says something to Victor, and then Victor approaches the bar and orders a drink. When Michael hands it off, Victor brings the drink to the table and sets it down in front of Evan.

* * *

So my own boyfriend won't even speak to me long enough to order a damn Scotch.

Evan continues his silence with Michael throughout the evening. Michael feels like he might go crazy, wracking his brain with what he could possibly have done wrong to make Evan this upset. Dave left about an hour ago, so Michael can't even distract himself by making small talk with him.

Michael watches Evan and Victor exchange words before Victor comes over and takes a seat at the bar.

"Does Evan need another Scotch?" Michael asks dryly, not bothering to hide the disdain in his voice.

"Nah, Mike, how 'bout you and me have a drink instead?"

Out of the corner of his eye, Michael sees Evan get up and leave. Michael could really use a drink now.

14: *Shelved*

Michael's visibly shaking when he comes home that night, fumbling with his keys as he gets through the door.

Evan rushes to Michael's side, reflexively twisting the lock and putting the chain on the door. "You okay? Somebody give you trouble? Were you followed?"

Michael's still trying to command his trembling fingers to return his keys to his pocket. Evan clasps Michael's warm hands in his own. Michael takes a deep breath and rasps out, "Where's Jordie?"

"In his room, asleep. Why? What's wrong?"

Michael looks at Evan with frightened, red-rimmed eyes. "Evan, you can't let Victor near Jordie *ever*, okay?" His hands grab Evan's T-shirt and haul him closer. Evan winces as the grip pulls out a few chest hairs. "Please, you can't! Promise me, Evan—"

"I promise, I promise. Just slow down and tell me what's going on."

Evan guides Michael to the couch, and they sit down. Michael rakes a hand through his hair, willing himself to breathe normally. He speaks through gasping sobs which should make him hard to understand, but Evan hears him loud and clear. "Victor was — Victor was at — at

the bar tonight... After you left, he came over to me and — and asked all these weird questions about me and Jordie.” Michael swallows hard. “Then he — he — ” He shakes his head, like it’s too horrible to say out loud.

“He what?”

“He asked me if I was having sex with Jordie!” Michael says suddenly. His entire face flinches in disgust, shuddering around the words. “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 sniffles, wipes his watery eyes with the back of his hand. “He said there’s a place where ‘people like us’ are accepted and welcomed, and how I should come with him to meetings and — ”

Evan feels like a boxer who’s just taken the final blow, his mind and body lingering in that short space of seconds before he hits the canvas for a long nap. A strong, sudden surge of fury peaks in his blood. “Where is he now?”

“Still at the bar, I guess. I just — I just left when Nat came. I had to get out of there. I had to warn you, ‘cause you guys spend a lot of time together, I thought...”

Evan is shaking now, his muscles tensed to the point where it feels like they might snap beneath the pressure of his anger. It all makes sense now why Victor assumed Michael was fucking Jordan — because Victor fucks kids. Of course he would see any adult male in a close relationship with a child as a perverted brother in arms.

But this knowledge gives Evan no relief. He’s been duped, led astray by a master manipulator. How could he ever think for a moment that Michael could be capable of something like that? A growl rumbles through Evan’s chest as he stands there numb with rage.

“So that’s what he was talkin’ about,” Evan grumbles. “Don’t worry. I’ll take care of this.”

* * *

"Did you know?"

"Do you think he'd still be out there walkin' around if I knew?"

Michael doesn't answer, still frozen with repulsion. Evan makes a quick phone call to Ray, says to meet at Victor's apartment while the slimeball is still at the bar.

By the time he's finished with the call, Michael's expression has changed into horrified anger.

"I'm not gonna kill him, Michael," Evan says, assuming that's the source of Michael's outrage. "Although he certainly deserves it. All I want right now is to put a bullet between the sick fuck's eyes, but —"

"Is that why you've been treating me like shit the last few days? Because that pervert told you I was — *like him*?"

Evan is left gaping at the air, unable to form a response. Michael has caught him off-guard, and Evan doesn't trust himself to lie without getting caught.

Michael's mouth drops open. "You did. You actually believed him."

"N — no, I didn't, I just thought maybe —"

Apparently that was the worst thing to say.

Michael's hand lashes out and connects with Evan's cheek. Evan sees stars for a moment. "Fuck you! Just — *fuck you*! How could you do this?" Michael stares at Evan, his face a mask of fury. He looks as if he wants to say more, but the words don't come. Instead, he stalks up the stairs and disappears into the guest room before Evan can protest.

* * *

Between Evan, Ray, and the five other guys Evan called to help, they manage to turn Victor's place over pretty well. It isn't often Evan gets to destroy things. That's a task typically reserved for J.D's underlings, and very few people refuse to pay often enough that Evan needs to get involved in persuading them (Dave is an outlier).

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 Evan make a quick stop back at the bar once they've finished trashing Victor's place. Luckily for Evan, Victor's still there, and there's only a smattering of witnesses — all of whom are wiseguys who know to keep their mouths shut.

Evan forces up a wide grin when he sees Victor sitting at the bar and moves toward him. "Ah, Victor, just the man I wanted to see!"

"Ev, hey, how's it —"

Evan doesn't give him time to finish. He wraps around the back of Victor's skull, slamming his face straight into the countertop. There's a sharp crack, then the blood begins to flow. No one looks the least bit disturbed by this. Evan yanks Victor's head back by his hair. Nathalie recoils when she realizes there's blood spatter on the front of her shirt.

Victor looks at the crimson stain on the counter. "Why did you do that?" His voice is muddy, as if his mouth is filled with blood.

Evan whips a hand to the scruff of Victor's shirt collar and tosses him onto the hardwood floor like he's a bag of peat moss. Victor lands on his back. The air leaves his lungs in a *pluu* sound.

Evan drops down and plants a knee on Victor's chest to keep him

pinned. Victor's cradling his broken nose like a wounded animal. "Why don't you ask Michael?" Evan growls, bending down until his face is inches from Victor's own. Evan grips Victor's nose between two fingers.

J.D. lets out a tired sigh like he's seen it all before. "Evan..."

"You shut the fuck up," Evan snaps at him. "This ain't your business." He turns his 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. "I didn't do nothin'! Is this 'cause I talked to your boy?"

Evan squeezes Victor's broken nose. Victor howls in pain. The sound is not unlike nails on a chalkboard.

With his free hand, Evan reaches back and grabs his thirty-eight from the waistband of his jeans. He shoves the barrel into Victor's open mouth, and Victor stops screaming. "Ooh, wrong answer. You're supposed to say, 'Yes, sir, I understand.' And which 'boy' of mine are you referring to? Either way, it's not going to go well for you, but I'd like to know exactly how many bullets to pop into you before you're tossed into the compactor."

"Look, man, I ain't even interested in Michael—"

Evan forces the barrel back into Victor's mouth to shut him up. "Oh, right, of course not. You like 'em younger, don't you? Much younger." Bile rises in Evan's throat at the thought of this man even *thinking* about Jordan. "You ever look at my son, and I will fucking *kill you*."

Victor's face turns a shade of sickened green Evan 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 Victor's out the door, Evan stands up and looks at the blood on the counter. Nathalie's already wiping it up with heavy-duty cleaner.

"Sorry about that," Evan says, gesturing to the spatter on her shirt.

She shrugs. "It's an off-day when I don't end up with blood on me."

Evan nudges Ray. "She's a keeper."

Evan sits at the table with J.D. and Ray, trying to ebb the surges of adrenaline flowing through him.

"Never a dull moment with Evan, huh?" Ray says.

"Mind telling us what the hell that was about?" Larry asks.

Most of Evan's anger centers around how Victor deceived him and led him astray with false compliments and ego-boosting. But Evan goes with the obvious: "He fucks kids."

"You should have shot him," J.D. says.

"Yeah, I'm a real angel of mercy," Evan says.

Ray's wearing his favorite *I told you so* face.

Evan points a finger at him. "Don't even start."

Ray 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. "Fine, I won't say nothin'. Just remember to pick up the phone when you get home."

"Why?"

"'Cause I fuckin' called it!" Ray leaps up and does some sort of victory dance. Evan tries to pretend this isn't happening. "Didn't I tell you that guy was a sleazebag?"

"Yes, Ray. Yes, you did."

"But you didn't listen—"

"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 leaking smug superiority all over the place. "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."

"Victor may have been on loan to you, but he still works for Dominic. Dom might have 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's in the guest bedroom packing up his clothes when Evan gets home. Evan's heart lurches at the sight of Michael grabbing handfuls of socks and sweatpants and stuffing them into a suitcase. "You're leaving?"

Michael clenches his jaw and doesn't answer, though Evan supposes this angry silence is an answer in itself. Michael grabs one of those short-sleeved tees he looks so good in but rarely wears on account of the blemishes on his arms. Into the suitcase it goes. Then a pair of light blue pajama bottoms Evan remembers sliding off Michael's hips one night.

"Mike, please," Evan begs. "Will you please just talk to me? I fucked up, and I'll never be sorry enough for it."

Michael pauses, bracing himself on the edges of the open drawer. He's staring into it like it holds great secrets. "How could you ever believe something so horrible about me?" His voice quivers as he speaks. "How could you even think I would hurt Jordie? I would slit my own wrists before I ever hurt him. Did you even ask Jordie if anything like that was going on?"

Evan finds his mouth impossibly dry when he tries to speak. He'd take Ray's earlier gloating dance a thousand times over and be grateful for it. "I..."

"No, of course you didn't. If you had asked him, you'd have your answer."

"Please, don't leave," Evan says, hearing the crack in his voice but not caring. "I need you."

"You should've thought of that before you decided to treat me like shit because some perverted stranger whispered in your ear."

* * *

Evan shuts the door behind him so their conversation doesn't wake Jordan. "Tell me what to do, Mike, and I'll do it."

Michael pauses as if in thought, like there might actually be something Evan can do to reverse this colossal mistake.

When Michael doesn't answer, Evan asks, "Where will you go?"

Michael shrugs. "I'll find someplace. I have connections. Or maybe I'll stay at a hotel."

"You think I won't comb through every single one from here to Newark to find you?"

"That's a little possessive."

"What, you're surprised?" Evan recalls their original shower hook-up, how he'd gripped Michael's chin and made him promise not to leave. "I'm so 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."

"Then why did you even listen to him?"

"Because was nice to me." Evan realizes how pathetic that sounds, but he soldiers on anyway. "When we talked, he'd tell me all this stuff about how I could be a great screenwriter, how I should follow my dreams and get out of the biz, all that shit."

"I told you that, too," Michael reminds him.

Evan feels heat rise in his cheeks. "I know. But it was nice hearing it from someone else. Sometimes it's tough having only one person who believes in you. I know he was just sucking up and trying to stroke my ego so I'd open the books for him. I see that now, but at the time I couldn't. Maybe I didn't want to, because if Victor was lying about you, then maybe he was lying about me too."

* * *

Michael snuffles, wiping his eyes with the back of his hand. "You're such an idiot," he mutters and looks at Evan with wounded eyes. "Do you really think that little of yourself?"

Evan tries a half-smile, but it almost hurts his face. "It's like you don't know me at all."

Michael watches him for a long moment. "Have you been taking your medication?"

That throws Evan for a loop. "Well, you're not s'posed to mix them with alcohol..."

"So that's a no?" Michael sighs as if Evan is the stupidest man alive. To his credit, Evan certainly feels like he is. "Then this is your mulligan: the one stupid, brainless, horrible thing I'm willing to forgive and forget. But you need to start taking your meds."

"I will. I promise." That might be a little hasty; Evan's memory has become progressively shittier over time, but he's willing to make the promise if doing so gets him back in Michael's good graces.

Michael stares at him as if searching Evan's face for a lie. Whatever he sees there seems to satisfy him, because he shuts the dresser drawers and stops packing. "Alright then. You're forgiven."

Michael switches off the nearby lamp and climbs into bed, already wearing his pajamas. Evan lingers near the door, unsure if his presence is requested or not. He's not the type to slide into bed next to his partner after an argument, especially after he's proven himself to be a complete and total jackass.

"Can I stay?" Evan asks, feeling like a doofus.

Michael sighs again. "Yes, come on in. But don't think you're gonna get lucky. You've gotten lucky enough with me tonight."

* * *

Evan thinks that's fair and crawls into bed alongside Michael. He smells the sweet aroma of Michael's soap and shampoo; Michael smells of lavender and baby powder, sometimes coconut. June was fond of vanilla, caramel, and warm, sultry scents.

"My anniversary is coming up," Evan says after a moment, reminded by the memory of her. Michael doesn't respond. "I'm not asking for any favors, just... try to understand if I'm a total dick."

"I'll try."

Dominic Cascio is not happy the next afternoon. He storms into the bar, and when he sees Evan he practically teleports over to him. "You wanna tell me why Victor's face is all busted up and his apartment's wrecked?" Dominic asks.

"You wanna tell me why you employ a child molester?"

That throws Dominic off for a second. But his emotional balance is restored within the moment, and he's right back to vein-pulsing anger. Evan feels a storm brewing, and he knows he'll be tossed around in the winds.

"No reason why everybody's gotta know our business," Evan tells him, trying to diffuse his anger and take the confrontation where there are no prying eyes. "Why don't we talk in private?"

Dominic follows Evan into the vacant back room. "You had no right to shake down one of my guys," Dominic scolds. "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'm sure he's a real humanitarian."

* * *

Dominic scowls. "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 Evan an appraising look. "Which seems to be your M.O."

"You knew what you were getting into."

Dominic sighs, and the anger leaves him like air out of a balloon. He takes a step forward and claps a hand on Evan's 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 said.

15: Plus que ma propre vie

Evan has dreaded this day for months.

Even throughout a strict adherence to his medication schedule, he knew it wouldn't be enough to combat the whirlwind of emotions set to erupt on this bleak day.

It's worse than he thought it would be, because nothing within him has changed since June passed. He's still making the same mistakes and godawful fuck-ups with Michael that he made with June. Jordan is arguably better, but only because of Michael's influence on him. June's death has reinforced that Evan is nothing without her.

Evan stayed for a few hours after Michael left the bar that night, adamant about festering in misery. Dave knew the significance of today's date, so he didn't bother Evan, content to drink beside him without a word. Nathalie knew enough not to hover, opting to sit near the back of the room with her beer.

Evan closes his eyes and lets another gulp of whisky roll past his tongue, his fourth or fifth drink of the night. Dad was always a big fan of Jack Daniel's. So is Ray.

I guess the apple doesn't fall too far from the tree.

* * *

Feeling his control beginning to slip, Evan lets the walls down and takes his punishment in silence on his wedding anniversary: reliving their last argument.

Go fuck yourself, Evan! You're too selfish to understand.

Yes, she had been right. Evan's relationship with Michael proves that in stunning, painful clarity. Why else would he latch on so quickly to someone that makes him happy? Maybe he started feeling things for Michael when he realized how much Jordan liked this new ray of optimism in the household, but wanting Michael was selfish all the same. Evan should have been mourning June. It wasn't fair, and nothing he does will make it right.

It's always about what you want! What about what I want?

He should have done more for her instead of trying to impress her with fancy jewelry and expensive gifts. It was wrong, even he knew it at the time, but it seemed to satisfy her, so he wasn't sure what other course to take. He would have given her anything she asked.

Jordie needs you, but you're pushing him away!

An odd certainty comes to him here. No, June had been wrong on this one. She was the one pushing Jordan into the mob life, a life Evan never wanted for him. *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.

Evan rakes a hand through his hair. Dave places a supportive hand on Evan's shoulder. Evan feels tears leak from his 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."

"You wanna blame somebody? Blame the guy who shot her," Dave says quietly.

That was an accident. The bullet didn't have her name on it. It could have just as easily been Evan. "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 be better that way."

"You don't know that, Ev."

Evan shrugs and takes 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 and avoids Evan's gaze. "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."

"You said his name like it's poison in your mouth. I thought you and Michael were friends."

"Oh, I think he's a great guy. He's very intelligent."

* * *

"I hear a 'but.'"

"But nothing. I just — when I think family, I think blood relations, or adopted kids, or spouses, y'know?"

Evan cocks an eyebrow. "You still see him as hired help, don't you?"

"No, Ev, c'mon, that's — that's not..." Dave shakes his head. "Forget it."

"No, speak up. What's eatin' you?" Evan finishes his glass of whisky and pours another. Dave watches him, 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." Dave leans in close. Evan can smell the alcohol on his breath. "I'm not sayin' you planned it or anything — it might've just evolved that way — but, I don't know, it just seems awful fast."

"Fuck you. You don't have the right to judge me or my relationship with Michael."

"What about Jordie? 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?"

Evan glares at him. "Did Jordie say somethin' to you?"

* * *

"Look, I love that kid like a son. But 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," Dave says. Evan growls 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?"

"Resolve what? You think Jordie's being harmed because of my relationship with Michael, and I think you're full of shit. There's nothing to talk about here."

Dave 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 didn't concern you," Evan says through grit teeth, dropping the words like lead weights. Dave is well aware that this subject is 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, "I know more than you know."

"What the fuck is that supposed to mean? What did she tell you?"

A distant slamming sound makes Evan's head turn in its direction. Nathalie is gone. When he looks back at Dave, he's off of his barstool,

staggering a few steps away to put distance between them. Evan gets the gnawing feeling Dave'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 —"

Evan slams his glass down against the bar. "Tell me! How long?"

It feels like an eternity before Dave finally responds, but he still won't look at Evan. "I don't know. Five years, maybe?"

Evan's sluggish brain finally connects the dots. The realization hits him like a slow-motion car crash, inevitable and unstoppable. "Were you fucking her?"

Dave doesn't say anything, just stands there unmoving, but his silence tells Evan all he needs to know. Time stops, and the breath leaves Evan's lungs in a shaky exhale. He feels like he's been punched five times too many. Of course June would be no different than the rest. Of course Dave would betray him.

"You were, weren't you? You were fucking her!"

"C'mon, that's not — She was the one who started it —"

Dave's excuses become the scorch of a match on Evan's skin, igniting the powder keg of his wrath. He swings a fist at Dave's face. There's a satisfying crunching sound when his knuckles connect with Dave's chin.

Dave falls over, and when he stands up he looks at Evan expectantly, waiting for another punch. But Evan's already storming out the door to the car. No sense in wasting another punch on him. A bullet would be a much more fitting end for the piece of shit who fucked June for five years and masqueraded as Evan's friend.

* * *

Michael is sprawled out on the couch, absently flipping channels for something to watch. He isn't sure where Evan is right now, but he probably doesn't want to know. Judging by Evan's line of work and the ways he spends his time late at night, he's either drinking at the bar or participating in unscrupulous activities.

About a week ago, Evan mentioned that his anniversary was coming up — so he's definitely drinking. He came into the bar a little while before Michael left for the night, but he's been gone for hours now. That can't mean anything good.

Michael's pretty invested in an infomercial for a super juicer when Evan slams the door open and storms inside, fury practically emanating off of him as he stomps up the stairs. Michael's insides turn to ice, but he's on his feet instantly, hurrying to catch up with Evan. "Are you alright? Where have you been?"

"I'm gonna fucking kill him!"

"Kill who? What's going on?" Michael grabs Evan's arm and tries to pull him back, but Evan wrenches out of his grip.

"Son of a bitch! I fucking trusted that piece of shit!"

Michael follows him up the stairs and into his bedroom. "Evan, will you please tell me what's going on?"

Evan starts throwing open dresser drawers and rifling through them, like he's searching for something.

"Are we in danger? Did something happen?"

Evan's putting together a handgun with clumsy hands. "Nobody in this world was allowed to come between this family of June, me, and

Jordie.”

Michael takes Evan’s 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.” Evan gives him a disgusted look before tearing out of his grasp. “The world doesn’t revolve around you.”

Michael sniffs the air, suddenly suspicious. Evan’s leaking a pretty potent stench of booze. “Are you drunk?”

“I’m fine.” Evan loads the chamber of the gun and stalks toward the door. “Just leave me alone. I’ve got shit to handle.”

“You’re not leaving here with a gun unless you tell me why!” Michael blocks the doorway, hoping Evan might reconsider this decision.

Instead, Evan shoves him out of the way and smashes a forearm into Michael’s chest. Michael grabs Evan’s arm and twists it behind his back, putting him in an elbow lock. It doesn’t stop him.

Evan propels backwards and knocks Michael into the doorframe. The air leaves Michael’s lungs in a whoosh. Pain surges through him. He lets go of Evan, and Evan rushes down the stairs.

Words alone will not get through to Evan here. Michael digs through the drawer Evan left open, searching for a spare gun. It doesn’t matter if it’s loaded or not; it’s only for show.

Michael finds a handgun and meets Evan halfway on the staircase. “Don’t make me use this!”

Evan laughs bitterly. “I bet you don’t even know how to shoot one of those things.”

“You wanna find out?”

* * *

Evan's jaw tenses, his mouth a hard line.

"Please, just talk to me. 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?"

Michael lowers the gun. "Is this about Ray? You're gonna kill Ray?"

Evan gives him a puzzled, angry look. "No! Jesus, Michael, can you not be a fucking moron for two seconds? I'm talking about Dave!"

"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, Evan's being so aggressive and terrifying that Michael doesn't feel guilty for it. This will be Evan's first lesson on talking things out instead of resorting to violence.

Evan does that jaw clenching thing again and exhales an angry breath. When he speaks, his voice is raw and wounded. "Dave was having an affair with June."

His words are like a landslide, crashing down on top of them, burying them in the implications. The silence drags on for what seems like an eternity.

Evan's just staring at Michael in a world of total hurt, as if he hadn't meant to just blurt it out like that.

"How long?" Michael winces at how loud and awful his voice sounds in the empty space.

"About five years," Evan says, like he's regretting everything in his

entire life.

Michael's still trying to find words when Evan turns his back and storms down the stairs. Michael scrambles after him. "Where are you going?"

"Haven't you been fucking listening? I'm gonna kill the son of a bitch!"

"Evan, no. You're not killing anybody —"

Evan whirls to face Michael. The bitter rage on his face freezes Michael where he stands. "Why? Are you fucking him too? If you are, I swear to God I'll burn this fucking house down with you in it."

Michael wants to believe Evan's guilt and grief and anger just exploded, that he's only spewing venom out of frustration. He's accused Michael of some vile things, but Evan has never threatened him. Never.

"You — you don't mean that."

Something about Michael's expression or the wounded tone of his voice brings Evan back. He looks horrified, like his awful words have pierced his own heart too. He stares at his hands, still cradling the gun.

Slowly, Michael plucks Evan's fingers off the grip one by one. Evan lets Michael take the gun, his eyes unfocused and lost.

"You're better than this," Michael tells him softly. "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. What Dave did is wrong. But killing him isn't gonna take away your pain or bring June back. Try to set a good example for Jordie. What would he think if he knew you killed Dave?"

Evan sighs, but there's no heat to it, just desperation and sadness. He

walks 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 the two of them inside.

Michael hesitates before voicing his concern. "You didn't send him off to go kill Dave, did you?"

"No. He gets to live. He gets away with it." Evan's hands fall away from the doorknob like he doesn't know what to do with them anymore.

"I'll go upstairs and fix up the bed," Michael says. "You can join me whenever you're ready."

Evan still looks lost and shell-shocked, so Michael doubts he'll get a reply. Michael goes upstairs and dismantles the guns. As he places all the pieces back into the drawer, he notices his hands are shaking from the adrenaline.

Would Evan really have killed Michael, or was he tossing out hyperbole in a heated moment? He's never laid a hand on Michael or Jordan, never so much as threatened either of them until tonight — which probably wouldn't have happened if he'd been sober. And he learned his wife had been cheating on him for five years. That's the kind of thing that could make anybody a little crazy, drunk or not.

Michael makes the bed while waiting for Evan to come into the room. It takes about ten minutes before his heavy footsteps sound on the stairs. He stops in the doorway, and even in the dark Michael sees the haunted look in Evan's eyes, as if he doesn't think he belongs here anymore.

"Come here." Michael pats the empty space on the bed, hoping Evan might warm it. "You don't have to talk."

Evan shakes his head but moves for the bed. He pulls his shirt over his head, strips off his jeans. Michael admires the view as Evan climbs

into bed.

"I'm sorry," Evan says. "That was — I shouldn't have — Fuck..." He breathes out a tired sigh, lying on his side so he can see Michael. "I'm so sorry. I don't know what the hell I was thinking, barging in here like a fucking raving lunatic."

Michael places a hand on the rough plane of Evan's cheek. Evan closes his eyes, comforted by the touch. "You were upset."

"I threatened you." Evan doesn't open his eyes, too ashamed to make eye contact.

"You were drinking, and you were upset."

Evan's mouth twists into something angry. "I'm not trying to make excuses for the shit I said to you tonight, but you gotta understand. Every single girl — and I am not kidding you — every single girl I have ever gone out with has cheated on me. And I have not cheated on anybody."

Michael slips his arms around Evan's neck and brings him closer.

"I would never," Evan 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."

"It won't happen," Michael promises. "Not with me."

"I trusted him..."

"You still have me and Jordie."

Evan tries a smile, but it's weak, and Michael sees the ghosts in his

eyes. They lie there for a while, the hum of an uncomfortable silence buzzing around them. Evan's skin is warm under Michael's fingers. He seems to be relaxing from Michael's touch, as the small, fine lines of pain on his brow slowly begin to fade.

Michael risks inching closer to press his mouth to Evan's own. Evan softens immediately at the kiss, responding to the warm pressure by pushing a feverish hand underneath Michael's shirt and skimming his fingers over Michael's 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. He breaks away slowly, watching Michael's face for any signs of discontent. His eyes tighten, then he takes a deep breath and turns over.

How much is one man expected to take before it's all too much? Why is heartbreak the only thing Evan seems to get from his relationships?

Evan needs comfort now more than ever. Michael cuddles close to him, his body pressed against Evan's back, and curls an arm around his chest. When Michael presses a kiss to the back of his neck, he feels the tension in Evan's muscles fade.

It takes Evan a while to fall asleep, and Michael stays awake for all of it, feeling the anger and hurt ripple out of him. Michael kisses Evan's skin, letting him know that nothing that happened tonight changed anything between them. When Evan trembles, Michael presses his hands flat on Evan's chest, as if he can absorb some of this agony and bear it for him.

"It's okay," Michael says, unsure if words will hurt or heal but desperate enough to try them regardless. "Some tears need to be cried."

"My father always said men weren't supposed to cry."

"He was wrong. And why take his advice? I thought you hated him."

Evan chuckles, then the sounds devolve into sobs. Michael holds him

and lets him cry. When Evan finally falls asleep, exhausted by grief, it's Michael's turn to let a few tears escape.

Evan's gone from the bedroom when Michael wakes up. There's a flail of panic in his chest when Jordan sticks his head into the bedroom. "Michael?"

Michael sits up in a hurry. "What's wrong? Are you okay?"

"I'm fine." Jordan sits on the end of the bed, looking apprehensive. "What were you guys fighting about last night?"

"You heard that?"

"Hard not to."

"It's not important anymore."

"You might wanna tell Dad."

Michael's immediate reaction is panic. "Why? What did he do?"

"Well, for starters, he threw out all his beer. And he made breakfast, which, y'know, he never does."

"Is it edible?"

"Yeah." Jordan seems to have no idea why Michael's surprised by this. "Dad can make stuff without burning the house down or anything, he just... doesn't." Michael is still processing this when Jordan asks, "So what were you guys fighting about? 'Cause whatever it was, you must've won."

Michael jumps out of bed and takes the stairs two at a time until he's in the kitchen. Just as Jordan said, Evan's working over the stove, and

there's a pile of empty whisky bottles in the trash can.

The kitchen, surprisingly, is not a disaster area. It's actually pretty clean, as if Evan didn't have a hilariously messy fight with breakfast.

"Well, good morning." Michael embraces Evan's waist and rests his chin on his shoulder. Evan's hair is damp and smells of sweet shampoo and cologne. "You made breakfast *and* took a shower? I guess you're feeling pretty good, huh?" On the stove is a skillet of scrambled eggs. Michael feels like he's awakened in an alternate universe.

"I couldn't have done it without you, Mike. And the pills help, of course," Evan says. "I never want to be that crazy motherfucker you saw last night again. I know I need to be better, and I—" He pauses, reconsiders his words. "Well, thanks for not giving up on me."

"Of course. I love you."

At this, Evan turns around to face Michael. His brow is creased in bewilderment, his eyes wide in disbelief. "You — you do?"

"Yes," Michael says with a gentle laugh, then he understands. This is the first time he's ever said those words aloud to Evan. No wonder the guy looks like he's been suckerpunched. "I do."

Evan grins, looking flustered and sheepish. "Yeah, me too."

16: *La Cosa Nostra*

Dave comes into the bar a few days later 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.

Michael can't say he's surprised. He would be more shocked if Evan *hadn't* sent someone to beat up Dave. But most shocking is that the violence doesn't really faze Michael. In fact, a beating doesn't seem like enough considering what Dave did to Evan.

This callous disregard for another man's welfare ought to bother Michael (and it does, even if only just a little bit), but he's of the opinion that Dave brought it upon himself. You don't screw around with another man's wife and expect to come out of the wash clean.

Dave doesn't speak to Michael all evening beyond ordering drinks. He sits at the bar and slowly sips his beers. Michael suspects Dave's silence might have something to do with Evan's presence here. Evan is 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 Michael away too. Eventually Evan leaves, perhaps sensing that Michael will not stray.

Michael's talking to J.D. while opening a case of Guinness the next afternoon when the front door swings open and an attractive woman

struts inside. She has dark skin and hair, with a lithe body packed into leather pants and a black tank top. J.D. turns to ogle at her. Michael follows his line of sight and realizes in stark horror that J.D. is mentally undressing Janet.

“Well, well, well, look at you! Someone’s doin’ well for himself!” Janet says to Michael. She approaches the bar with long strides and embraces Michael in a one-armed hug. “You’re not gettin’ into too much trouble, are you?”

“Me? I’m a perfect angel.”

“Mike, you didn’t tell me you knew any smokin’ hot babes!” J.D. says.

“J.D., this is my sister Janet.”

J.D. nearly spits out his drink.

“For the longest time, people thought we were the same person ‘cause they rarely ever saw us in the same place,” Janet tells him.

J.D. gazes at her in wonder. “I don’t see how that’s possible.”

“This guy,” Michael chuckles, looking at Janet. “He’s such a kidder. We have fun.”

“I’ll bet. This your boss?”

“No, he’s” — Michael gives the room a quick scan for Evan — “he’s not here.”

“Evan’s at a meeting,” J.D. offers helpfully.

Michael ignores him. “So what brings you to our neck of the woods?” he asks Janet. “Is this a social visit? Did you miss me that much?”

“I did, but more importantly Neiman Marcus just picked up True

You,” Janet says with a wide grin. Her newest clothing line is, in Michael’s opinion, somewhat mediocre, but that might explain why Neiman Marcus is interested. “I figured as long as I was in town, I’d drop by and see my favorite brother.”

“You have a favorite? I’m honored. And congratulations!” Michael wonders how Janet found out where he works but figures Jermaine or Randy must have told her. “How long are you staying?”

“I fly back home tomorrow night.”

“If you’re not busy tonight...” Michael flounders for words. “Maybe you’d like to have dinner with me and Evan and Jordie? They’d love to meet you.”

“He’s okay with that? From what I’ve heard, he’s a real hard-ass.”

Michael stops himself from saying something lewd involving the words “hard” and “ass”; Janet’s no stranger to raunchy humor, but he isn’t sure if he should tell her he’s dating Evan just yet. “All exaggeration. He’s a big creampuff.”

“You got that right,” J.D. snickers; Michael considers throwing a drink in his face.

“I gotta run for a bit,” Janet says. “I’ll call you later, and we can work out the whole dinner thing, okay?”

Michael agrees. They hug again, and he lets her go.

J.D. watches her walk away with a bit too much interest. He turns back to Michael, trying way too hard to look casual. “So, uh, she single?”

“All due respect, she would eat you alive.”

* * *

"Where the fuck are all my good clothes?" Evan grumbles, shoving hangers aside in his search of the closet.

Michael's sitting on the bed, watching Evan attempt to find a dinner guest-appropriate shirt for tonight. "As much as I love your filthy mouth, you might not wanna use it around my sister."

Evan pokes his head out from the closet to fix Michael with a glare. "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." Michael sticks out his tongue.

Evan rolls his eyes and continues his search for presentable clothes. "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."

"Corrupting you with my dick."

Michael squirms in the bed. "Don't talk about your dick either."

"No sarcasm, no swearing, no dick jokes. You're taking away all my methods of communication."

"Why don't you just hush and get dressed?" Michael slides out of bed to assist Evan with the task of finding a shirt. "Maybe if you're good I'll let you have a little fun tonight." Michael winks, as if the subtlety in his comment was lost.

Evan snakes his arms around Michael's waist and squeezes his ass. Michael chirps a small surprised sound.

"Does your sister know I'm bangin' you?" Evan asks.

* * *

"Not yet, but she's probably the most open-minded of my family. Her reaction will be better than Ray's."

"Settin' the bar real low, aren't you?"

The doorbell rings, and Michael hears Jordan yell "Door!" from downstairs.

"I'll get it," Michael says. "And put a shirt on. I don't want Janet to think she took a wrong turn and ended up on the forest moon of Endor." Evan laughs harder at that than Michael's ever made him laugh before, despite the joke coming at his expense. Apparently the way to Evan Chandler's heart is through *Star Wars* jokes.

When Michael opens the door, Janet's standing there with an impish grin on her face. "Nice place you got here," she jokes. They share a hug, and he lets 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 any minute now."

While they wait for Evan, Michael fills Janet in on life in New York — leaving out the more scandalous bits, of course.

"Sounds like you've been busy," she says when he's finished.

This is the point where Evan would say something like "busy with my dick!" Michael is glad Evan's not here to add that to the conversation. "Busy as a bee."

Evan finally comes downstairs. "Well, you must be Janet. Michael's told me a lot about you."

Janet arches an eyebrow and tosses a quick look at Michael; it's her *there's a snack* look, and Michael flushes red. "Oh, has he?"

"I bet you've got tons of embarrassing stories about him, huh?" Evan

asks her, winking at Michael.

"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?" Evan shakes his head. Janet says, "I run my own clothing store back home, and my newest line just got picked up by Neiman Marcus. Since I'm in town anyway, I might as well check up on my pain-in-the-ass big brother." She shoots Michael a smirk.

"So you're the one who makes all those fancy jackets Michael wears?"

"That would be me," Janet says with pride. "He had one special ordered around Christmas, in fact."

Evan smiles in realization. "I think I'm familiar with that one." Janet's referring to the leather jacket Michael gave Evan for Christmas; Michael appreciates that Evan's not blowing the lid off that one, lest Janet begin to suspect they're more than just friends. Friends don't give friends \$500 jackets.

Janet looks at Michael. "I never would've guessed that you'd be a bartender. Evan's not working you too hard, is he?"

Hot blood roils beneath Michael's cheeks. He kicks Evan in the shin from beneath the table as a silent reminder of tonight's "no dick jokes" policy. "No, I'm really enjoying myself!" Michael realizes as soon as the words come out of his mouth that was probably the worst 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.

"It's almost like you're a natural," Evan says with an impossibly straight face.

* * *

Janet seems to pick up on their doublespeak, but she doesn't know what exactly Evan's insinuating. "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 at the end of the month."

Michael glances at Evan just in time to see his whole face flinch like her words are a cattle prod against his skin.

"What? You're leaving?" Jordan whines.

"I don't think I'm going home," Michael tells Janet, his hands fidgeting with a fork. "I like it here. I'm happy."

Evan looks reassured, if only a little bit.

Janet nods concedingly. "I can see that, but you know how Joseph is. You really think he's gonna take no for an answer?"

"He's gonna have to. Tell him I'm not coming home."

Janet looks like she wants to say more; her expression says she thinks Michael's gone completely crazy.

The rest of the meal is spent with Janet telling Evan almost every embarrassing anecdote Michael's ever starred in. He wouldn't put it past her to drag out albums of baby pictures if they were at Hayvenhurst. But he can't be too upset about it, since her stories make Evan laugh.

After dinner, they're clearing dishes and cleaning up, and Michael is so close to Evan it's almost a crime that they can't touch each other now. Every now and then he feels the hovering warmth of Evan's hand over his back, but Evan never actually touches Michael, just lets his hand linger too long when reaching for something. But the temptation is there, and Michael can't imagine how he's keeping it at bay. He's one lustful glance away from tearing Evan's clothes off.

* * *

"Mike, can I borrow you for a sec?" Janet asks Michael when he's finished with the dishes.

"Yeah, sure." He waits for her to say something.

"In private," she says purposely.

He leads her into the laundry room at the end of the hallway for some privacy. "Something wrong? Didn't you like the food? Or were you bummed that I nixed the wine?" When Janet called earlier in the evening, she asked what kind of wine to bring, but Michael told her to hold off on the alcohol since Evan's gone cold turkey.

"No, the food was great. And I could take or leave the wine. I have to ask: are you and Evan a thing? 'Cause I'm feeling a vibe between you two."

Michael grins. "Wow, you really think I could land a guy like him?" His cheeks burn. "And, well, yeah, we've been dating a while."

"A real power couple. How come you never told me?"

"I don't want this getting back to Joseph unless it'll help me stay here," Michael says. He realizes that Janet's visit is advantageous. "But by coming here and leaving unharmed, you're living proof that Evan isn't holding me captive or whatever nonsense Joseph's telling himself. He might let me stay if someone other than me puts in a good word."

Janet nods, understanding. "You really like this guy, huh?"

Michael feels himself going red again. His shoes squeak against the tile floor. "I can't explain it. It's just... it's cosmic. He's absolutely wonderful. I have a real family, the life I've always wanted. You have no idea how happy I am here."

"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 they return to the living room, Janet proudly announces, "Mike tells me you two are an item?" Evan looks at her with something approaching shock. "He could do a lot worse."

Evan's expression softens into a smirk. "That's what I keep telling him."

"Do people know about you?" Janet asks.

"On a need-to-know basis," Evan says. "You're not reporting this to the man in charge, are you?"

"What Joseph doesn't know won't hurt him," Janet says.

If only Michael could be so lucky.

17: Shakedown

March 1993

Three days later, Michael closes up the bar around three in the morning. The air is balmy, absent of the frigid cold of winter and the unbearable heat of summer. He strolls down the block, passing by a restaurant with its windows tinted so dark it's impossible to see inside. The neon OPEN sign flickers, the "n" burned out. The Cascio family owns the place as a cover business, in much the same way that Evan maintains the bar.

Michael hears the restaurant doors swing open after he crosses the street. Normally the sound wouldn't put him on alert, but the timing is too precise to be coincidental. It's almost as if someone was waiting. The Cascios are Jackson allies, but any conversations held at night in a place with little to no traffic are probably not pleasant ones.

Michael hurries past the alleyway in between the restaurant and the neighboring condominium.

A gravelly voice punctures the quiet night: "Where ya goin'?"

Another voice says, "Hey, c'mon inside and have a drink."

Michael always keeps his multi-tool on him for occasions like this, and

he knows exactly where it is — front pocket, right-hand side. But getting to it in the midst 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.

Michael turns around to see two men a few feet behind him. One is huge; he's got about two inches on Michael and looks like he might wrestle bears in his free time. The other man 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.

Big Guy takes a puff of his cigar and flicks it into the street.

"Can I help you gentlemen?" Michael asks in his 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. Clearly they have no idea who Michael is. Any wiseguy hoping to speak 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. Hired help, or really stupid cronies.

"Who are you working for?" Michael asks.

The two men lumber toward him, and without thinking Michael steps back to put distance between himself and the strangers. They've herded him 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—" Michael begins to protest, and that's when the big man's palm hits him right below the sternum.

* * *

Michael drops to his knees, the air whooshing out of his lungs. A meaty paw grabs Michael's hair and wraps around his skull. Then Michael is slammed against the concrete wall so hard he fears he's gone through it. His head throbs from the impact as a momentary orange glow lights up his sight.

Time seems to slow down now. Michael swings his leg wildly, and his foot connects with Big Guy's chin. There's a hollow clicking sound of his teeth colliding. The man, still holding Michael's head in his massive paw, raises a knee up. Panic churns in Michael's gut as the knee zooms toward him.

Michael's nose snaps like a dried-out bird's nest. He feels the warm trickle of blood as a fist bashes into his side, then the whole world is pain and panic and more pain. Big Guy lets go of him, and Michael stumbles back, coughing and sputtering and sneezing in a furious spray of tiny droplets.

My father means to kill me, he thinks. He sent these thugs to do the job for him.

"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 back of Michael's throat is slick with the metallic taste of blood.

Big Guy reaches out and grabs Michael's shirt, lifting him up and shoving Michael into the wall again. Stars burst into Michael's vision as the world spins dizzily. "I'm gonna smash your fuckin' face in, see how you like it!"

It's hard to breathe through the blood gushing from Michael's nose. He struggles 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 Michael. *Perfect!*

Michael strikes him in the throat, his hand shooting out like a cobra. Ralph chokes out a gurgling sound, his hands instinctively flying up to his wounded windpipe. This time Michael’s ready when he hits the ground. He springs up and smashes his knee into the big man’s groin. Ralph drops like a sack of hammers.

“Enough!” Ernie shouts, stepping between them with his gun drawn and pointed at Michael.

“You said Joe Jackson sent you,” Michael asks, drawing short, jagged breaths.

“Yeah, that’s right.”

“For what?”

“He wants you to stay away from his son,” Ernie sneers.

Michael’s veins turn to ice. “*What?*”

Ernie suddenly looks worried, like he wasn’t expecting Michael to be clueless. “You’re brainwashin’ his kid, keepin’ him locked in that mansion of yours like a fucked-up wicked step-mother.”

Ralph cackles. “Good one, Ernie.”

“Shut up, Ralph, I work alone.”

“Just who the hell do you think I am?” Michael asks, spitting out a mouthful of blood.

Ernie and Ralph exchange looks. “Evan Chandler, right? You own that bar down the street —”

* * *

"I'm one of Joe's sons, you stupid assholes!" If someone put a grenade in Michael's hand in this moment, he would have pulled the pin and let it fly.

They look at each other again, then back to Michael. "Yeah, right. I'm gonna need some I.D., bub," Ernie says.

"Fine. I'll give you some right now. Don't shoot." Ernie lowers his gun a little as Michael slowly reaches into his pocket and takes out his driver's license. "Here. See for yourself." He shows Ernie the card and watches the color drain from both their faces when they realize they've got the wrong guy.

"Michael... Jackson?" Ernie sputters out. "You don't look nothin' like —"

"Skin disease," Michael says with a tired sigh, pushing up sleeve his to show them proof. At this point, he's past the point of caring if they think he's a freak. All he wants is to go home and try to make his body stop hurting. "What else you want, a blood sample?"

Ernie frowns like he doesn't appreciate the sarcasm, but considering that he and Ralph just attacked the wrong man, Michael figures they're due for some snark. Ernie hands back the driver's license in shamed silence.

Michael says, "Now do you believe me?"

Ernie swallows thickly and starts backing away. "Look, man, Ralph was just doin' his job —"

"Maybe he should consider a career change," Michael says. Ralph nods as if he might do just that. "And tell my father I said he can go to hell!"

They back away until they're out of the alley, then they scurry away

into the night, with Ralph sort of stumbling behind Ernie.

It's a short walk back to the bar, so Michael uses the tail end of adrenaline to get him there. He lets himself inside and dials Joseph's office number with the phone in the back room. He waits through the rings and slumps onto the floor. He can't remember the last time he hurt like this.

Joseph's voice booms on the other end. "Michael, I've been expecting your call—"

"What do you think you're doing?"

"I take it Mr. Chandler received my message?"

"No, Joseph, *he* didn't. It came to me instead. Your stupid goons attacked me thinking I was Evan!"

Joseph sighs as if this is some minor inconvenience. "Oh man, I gotta fire those dummies. 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 —"

"So if it happened to Evan, would it still be an 'unfortunate accident' or would you call it 'just business' and wash your hands of the whole thing? Why do you think I'll want to come home if you hurt the people I love?"

"You know I didn't want you goin' there in the first place! If your mother hadn't twisted my arm, I never would'a let you go," Joseph argues. "You promised you'd come home in six months —"

"I still have a few weeks left!"

* * *

Joseph laughs a bitter sound. "If I give you these last couple'a weeks, you'll say you wanna stay longer 'cause you don't want them goin' through the anniversary of June's 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."

"I'm in love and I want to stay! How's that for an excuse? 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," Joseph 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?"

"He stole you away from us!"

"Did Carol steal Marlon from us? Did Nathaniel steal Rebbie? Evan isn't *stealing* me!"

Joseph grunts. "That's different."

"No, it's really not. I love him, and he loves me too."

"So you're takin' care of him?" Joseph asks in a way that makes the hair on the back of Michael's neck prickle. "I thought you didn't wanna do that no more."

"It's not like that. It's called a relationship, just like you and Mama have."

Michael can almost see the angry slant of Joseph's mouth. "Don't you put this nonsense on the same level as what I have with your mother."

* * *

Of course that's what it boils down to: dear old Dad doesn't want to face that one of his sons — the son he's chosen to take up the family business, nonetheless — is a big queer.

Blood drips from Michael's nose. He wipes it away with the sleeve of his shirt. It stains the white fabric a horrific red.

"But I don't believe for a second that you and Chandler have some sort of gay thing going on," Joseph says. "He had a wife, and he struck me as a normal, red-blooded American male." Michael scowls at the word. "Maybe you've got a thing for him, but my money's on you makin' all this up 'cause you want to run away —"

"Maybe if you weren't such a hard-ass, I wouldn't think about running 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."

Michael's entire body jumps at the prickle of realization. *Jackie killed June.*

"Why would you tell me something like that?"

"You better toughen up if you're gonna be in this business, Michael —"

Michael slams the phone down, furious with Joseph and his idiotic code of morals. *Why doesn't he marry the family business if he loves it so fucking much?*

Shaking, Michael gets to his feet and stumbles to the counter. He pours himself a few fingers' worth of whisky to dull the throbbing in his face and body. His middle is sore, the back of his skull throbs, but his nose

is the crux of his agony. Pain from each of those spots ripples outward like radiation from a nuclear blast. Michael knows he won't be able to walk the short distance home in this sorry state.

He swallows the whisky and goes into the men's room to clean himself up a bit. He definitely looks like he's been in a brawl. A reddish-purple bruise has begun to spread across the bridge of his nose. The back of his head is tender to the touch, and his fingers come away bloody.

The front of his shirt is a gory mess. Michael pours club soda down his front, which turns the stain from red to light pink, as though he spilled strawberry Kool-Aid instead of blood. A minor improvement that will have to suffice until he gets home and attacks it with Clorox.

Gently, as not to aggravate the swelling, Michael dabs his face clean with damp paper towels. He tries to get the blood off the back of his head, but without a shaving mirror he's pretty much flying blind.

After he's cleaned up the best he can, he calls a cab and locks up the bar. Since this is New York, the cab driver doesn't even bat an eye at the maybe-bloodstains on Michael's shirt or the gruesome bruise spreading over his face.

It's a little after four in the morning when Michael gets home. All the lights are off. The couch is vacant, so Evan must be in bed. Michael goes upstairs and into the guest room, shutting the door behind him.

The cold air of the bathroom prickles his skin. He strips off his bloodied clothes in a hurry and turns on the shower. He lets the water pour over him while he gets control of his frantic breathing. If Evan sees the bruises, he won't be angry with Michael. But Evan's over-protective rage will blossom and bloom in his chest, and the chain of violence will ripple outward.

After a few minutes, the bathroom door clicks open; Michael curses himself for forgetting to lock it. Evan's voice is low and flirty when he says, "Sorry, Mike, I couldn't help myself. Just knowing you're in here,

all wet and—" He stops suddenly, and dread sinks in Michael's stomach. Evan must have seen the bloodstained shirts discarded on the bathroom floor. "What happened?"

"Nothing, just a nosebleed. This air is so dry."

There's a short, hollow silence, filled only by the sound of the shower. "You're home awful late. You get into any trouble?"

"No, don't worry about me. Did you want something?"

Evan's voice is warm again with the curl of arousal. "You."

There's no way Evan can join him here and not notice the new and terrible colors splashed across Michael's face. And Michael can't ask him to switch off the lights, not after Evan's seen him naked numerous times.

Michael's facing the wall when the shower door opens. Evan's hand is oddly cold on Michael's shoulder blade, and then he feels the press of Evan's naked body against his back. Evan's other hand drifts to Michael's hip, bringing him closer. His mouth kisses a line up to Michael's neck, behind his ear. Abruptly, he stops, and his touch turns to steel.

"What happened?" Evan's hands force Michael to face him, and Evan flinches at the sight. Michael has to remember it's the bruise that makes Evan recoil, not the sight of Michael himself. "Who did this to you?"

"Evan, it's nothing, I don't—"

"The hell it is!"

Michael reaches for his face in a futile effort to hide the bruise, but Evan gently takes his wrist and pulls the hand away, wanting to see the full extent of the damage. "Don't touch it! Don't touch it!"

* * *

"I won't." Evan's gaze rakes over Michael's body, searching for more bruises. He finds one near the tail end of Michael's breastbone. "Tell me who did this. They'll never touch you again." He lifts a tender hand to Michael's cheek, cradling it as though Michael is made of glass.

"It was an accident. They thought I was someone else. But I'm fine."

"The fuck you talking about, 'fine'? Look what they did to you! Was it some of my guys?"

Michael shakes his head, feeling a sharp pain when he does so. "It was just a big misunderstanding. Mistaken identity. Don't worry."

"You come home with bruises and blood everywhere, you can't ask me not to worry." Evan rests his forehead against Michael's own. "Just say the word, Mike, and I'll destroy them."

Michael gently presses his fingers to Evan's mouth. "No. No violence."

"Can I get someone else to do it?"

"No. It doesn't fix anything."

Evan exhales a rough, heavy sigh. "Alright, fine."

"Joseph sent some people to rough you up, but they screwed up and hurt me instead. They came from Dom's place, which checks out. Joseph said he got them from Dom, and they were supposed to be for you."

"Maybe not. He's not gonna admit he sent guys to fuck up his own kid." Evan's thumbs find Michael's cheeks, brushing away the salty streams of tears. Michael's face spasms in a wince at the pressure.

"He didn't send them for me. They thought I was you since I came out of the bar. And I don't look like my brothers... It's an easy mistake to

make.”

“For an idiot, maybe. Didn’t Joseph think to give them a picture or a basic description before he took them off their leashes?” Evan stands there with one arm braced against the tile, his fingers curled into a fist. His anger travels over Michael’s skin like a tangible thing.

“Do you think it would be best if I went home?” Michael asks.

Evan’s fist slams into the tile near Michael’s head. Michael’s heart does a nervous jump in his chest. “No. That’s not even an option,” Evan growls. “If you wanna stay, there’s no way in hell I’m letting you go.”

“He could send someone to kill you.”

“I know. I’m not afraid of him. Whatever he does to me, I can take it.” Evan’s expression softens a little when he looks at Michael. He tilts Michael’s chin with the slightest pressure before brushing a thumb over Michael’s bottom lip. “God, what did they do to you?”

Michael wraps a hand around his wrist. “Evan, I’m okay. We’re okay.”

18: And Then There Were None

It's not okay. Not one goddamn bit.

Evan helped Michael shower and managed to get him into bed with minimal fuss. Michael isn't some fragile, easily broken doll, but the bruising on his face makes quite a case for the contrary. Michael protested that he's fine, but Evan laid beside him while Michael talked about what happened in greater detail.

When Michael mentioned that he hit his head exceptionally hard, Evan insisted someone check on him every few hours to make sure he doesn't have a concussion. Michael protested the idea, hating the thought of being doted on, but Evan brought him some heavy-duty painkillers that knocked him out like a light. Evan would have kissed him good night if Michael hadn't pushed him away, his face too tender for intimacy. Evan will have to find a new hobby for the next couple of weeks.

When he's absolutely certain that Michael is asleep — his body sprawled out on the bed with one foot trailing the floor — Evan goes downstairs to make a few phone calls.

His first call is to Dr. Mark Torbiner, an anesthesiologist who worked for Evan's father. Mark agrees to come over to the house and watch Michael, making sure he doesn't die while Evan's out on errands. He

also agrees to bring some Toradol for the pain.

Evan's 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!" Evan feels himself losing control.

Pull it back. No sense in losing your cool here. Joseph is Michael's father, after all, and fathers have blind spots where their children are concerned.

"Look, what can we do? How can we work this out? No one else needs to get hurt."

"Then send my son home."

"He doesn't want to go. You know you can't get kids to do what you want 'em to. Telling them not to do something is pretty much a sure-fire way to get 'em to do just that."

"Michael is 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 take pleasure in it, 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’a gone there. He’s done with all of that. If he tells you he wants to stay, it’s ‘cause he feels trapped.”

Evan has no idea what the fuck Joseph’s talking about. “That’s not what’s going on. Did he tell you 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 something hadn’t changed in him while he’s been livin’ with you.”

“So he picks up a few choice words? Big deal.”

“Michael would’ve never considered betrayin’ his Family if he hadn’t met you. I think you brainwashed him, or got into his head somehow so he wouldn’t think about leavin’.”

Evan sees red. Fuck being civil. “That’s a real tall fucking accusation coming from you. You ever think *you’re* the one he’s scared of? ‘Cause from where I’m standing, that’s exactly how it looks. Why else would Michael volunteer to live with some stranger all the way across the country? Because he *felt bad* for me? That’s what gift baskets are for. No, Michael’s sick of your control-freak bullshit, and he grabbed a

way out with both hands.”

Something dark creeps into Joseph’s voice. “I’ve never given your family any trouble before this unfortunate accident. I respected you. But if you insist on bein’ bull-headed about this, I’m not afraid to make enemies.”

“And lose the support of 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.”

Evan opens his mouth to challenge that before realizing that Joseph is 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. He ought to call them before Joseph does.

Joseph has already hung up during Evan’s brief moment of contemplation. So Evan makes his third phone call of the morning.

Ray’s voice is full of 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 Evan assumes is a yes and hangs up.

Next, Evan calls Dominic Cascio. It’s probably too early to call him, but the Cascios will be the first family Joseph turns against the Chandlers.

* * *

Dominic answers with a gruff, "Yeah?"

"Dom, it's Evan. Listen, two of your guys — Ralph and Ernie — beat up Michael outside your place a few hours ago. You know anything about that?"

Dominic sighs. "Those morons? I fired them last week. Always causin' trouble."

"So it seems." Makes sense why they would be on Joseph's payroll now, and maybe this speaks to Joseph's intentions — if he knew they were fuck-ups, he may have assumed Michael could take them in a fight. "Know where I can find 'em?"

Ray isn't thrilled to be leaving the house at six in the morning, judging by his expression while he and Evan head to Ralph Chacon's Brooklyn apartment. Dominic Cascio gave Evan the names and addresses of the two low-lives who beat and battered Michael. Why not pay them a visit? Michael doesn't have to know.

"Oh, don't give me that look," Evan says. "You're the one who agreed to come along."

Ray 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?"

Evan isn't in the mood to hear how he should have been more diplomatic with Joseph, so he edits his 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're on the Jacksons' payroll now. They jumped Michael a few hours ago. Busted his nose, fucked him up bad."

The look on Ray's face says he's turning those 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 chalking that up to Evan's terrible rage. Wouldn't be the first time. "Shit, let's get 'em."

Evan raises an eyebrow. "Wow, really? No 'you got me up at five a.m. for this crap' speech? I'm impressed."

"Yeah, well, if the little guy 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 the mob world. But Evan can't really blame him for that. That's how their father raised them.

"You're gettin' soft on me, aren't you?"

"Shut up," Ray grumbles. After a few moments of comfortable silence, he starts up again. "I've been thinking about asking Nat to marry me."

"No shit? Who would'a guessed you'd think about settling down?"

"You gave up your 'I'm-shocked-by-your-life-choices' card the minute you stuck your dick in Michael."

Evan shrugs, because Ray's not exactly wrong about that. "Seriously though, are you really?"

* * *

"I was thinking about it." Ray rubs the back of his neck, a familiar nervous gesture. "I wanted to look at rings for her, but, I dunno, I need a second opinion. I can't take any of her friends, 'cause you know none of them can keep their fuckin' mouths shut. Makes me wish June was still here, y'know?"

Evan feels a twinge of pain. "She would have loved that. They were good friends."

"You think Michael'd be interested?" Ray asks after a moment.

"Go fuck yourself," Evan says with a laugh. "Would you think I'm less of a man if I offered to go with you?"

"I already think you're less of a man."

Ralph Chacon lives in a building that looks like it's decaying. This gives Evan a glimmer of hope that he can break in without too much resistance. The lock on the front door buckles underneath the force of his kick. He takes out his thirty-eight. The weight feels good and comforting in his hand.

Ray shuts the door behind them as they venture 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?" Evan calls. He hears rustling noises down the hall to the left. His head snaps toward the noise. Amidst the darkness, he sees a huge silhouette. This must be the 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.

When Ray and Evan get into the bedroom, they see Ralph packing a suitcase. There's plenty of floor space, only a bed in the middle and a

couple weight racks against the walls.

“Goin’ somewhere?” Evan presses the barrel of the gun to the back of Ralph’s skull. Ralph freezes. “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 hear you fucked up my friend.”

Evan snaps a leg out and kicks the back of both Ralph’s legs. Ralph 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. I’m the guy you were supposed to go after — Evan Chandler.”

Ralph gulps in a loud, froglike way Evan thought people only did in cartoons. “Let’s talk, okay? It was all one big misunderstanding. Just ask Ernie!”

Evan’s not surprised Ralph sold out his colleague so quickly. 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.” Evan’s finger twitches around the trigger. He wants to kill him, but Michael’s battered, bloodied face appears in Evan’s mind’s eye, and Evan decides — it seems quite reasonable in the moment — that Ralph deserves more than a simple bullet to the head.

Evan motions for Ray to take over holding Ralph at gunpoint while he strolls to the weight rack along the far wall. “Say, Ralph, you look like you know your way around these things.” Evans grabs a weight off the rack and hefts it into his hands. It’s solid, sturdy, and it could crush a man’s 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?"

Evan swings the weight at Ralph's skull. There's a crunching sound like beetles being stepped on. Ralph howls in agony as his body hits the floor. The back of his skull is a ruin, a broken wall with gray matter bulging between the cracks. Blood soaks the dirty taupe carpet.

"Jesus, Evan!" Ray cries.

Ralph struggles, thrashing for the door, but he doesn't get very far. Evan plants a heel into Ralph's back and gears up for another swing. The weight cracks Ralph's skull like an egg. Blood splatters across the room. Ralph trembles and twitches and eventually stops moving.

"Is he dead?" Ray asks.

Evan examines the bits of brain matter pasted on the end of the weight. He feels the weak rise and fall of Ralph's back beneath his boot. "He's getting there."

"Alright, you made your point. Let's go."

"Did you see what he did to Michael?"

"No, but at least Michael's still alive. Hell, he's in tip-top shape compared to this poor bastard."

"You're not seriously suggesting we let him go, are you?" Evan asks, but Ray's wearing his pacifist face which means that's exactly what he's suggesting. "Shit like this is why Dad didn't want you in charge."

A small, silent part of Evan knows that Ray is right, but the red haze of anger is too strong. He pictures Michael's battered face again and brings the weight down onto Ralph's shattered skull one last time. His head explodes under the force.

Evan wipes a few stray drops of blood off his cheek. "But,

unfortunately, I don't have much choice."

Ray looks scowly and put out on the drive to Ernie Rizzo's place. "You didn't have to kill him, Ev."

"Spare me the altruistic moralizing bullshit, alright? The guy was scum, and the world continues to spin on without him."

"I don't disagree with that, but then what does that make us? What makes him so different than you or me?"

"We dress better?" Evan jokes, but in his head he's mulling over Ray's words. He went too far tonight, that much is certain. He's gone too far more than once, and that's how he knows it's time to stop doing this. Stepping over the lines, busting heads to earn and keep respect — it hollows you out.

"You scoff at my moral outrage, but when Michael says the same things you actually kind of listen," Ray says.

"There's a lot Michael doesn't know." But Evan imagines it wouldn't be too hard for Michael to figure it out. Michael has seen Evan controlled by rage, compelled to kill, and he wonders if it haunts Michael's sleep.

June loved the power Evan wields, treated it like a fire to stoke; Michael has the same power but chooses not to use it for evil. Evan's love for the two of them is indefensible if he's not willing to make himself worthy of them.

"But tell me this: would you trade a common thug's life for Nathalie's?"

"That's different," Ray says.

* * *

"A million guys like him aren't worth the life of even one person like Nathalie, or June, or Jordan, or Michael."

They drive in silence for a while before Ray speaks up again. "You serious about handing me the keys to the kingdom?"

"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 they reach Ernie Rizzo's apartment. He lives in a marginally better neighborhood than Ralph Chacon, though that isn't saying much. Evan's about to kick open the door when he notices it's slightly ajar.

He takes his gun out and looks at Ray, searching for a signal. Ray nods in a silent promise to cover him. Evan thinks about his options and doesn't like any of them. The creeping feeling of dread in his gut should paralyze him, make him walk away, but fear does funny things sometimes.

So Evan goes inside. Evan and Ray walk into the living room and freeze. "Well, shit."

Ernie lies dead on the floor, a fresh puddle of blood 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 Evan. His heart thumps manically in his chest.

"Looks like Joe got to him first," Ray quips.

Evan backs away. "We need to get out of here."

A familiar voice sounds behind him: "Whoa, not so fast, you guys."

Evan whirls in the direction of the voice, his gun at the ready. His heart lurches into his throat when he sees the man's face. "What the

fuck are you doing here?"

Victor Gutierrez points a gun at Evan's head. "You first."

They're in middle of the living room, too far away from the front door to attempt an escape without taking a bullet. Evan and Ray outnumber him, but Evan doesn't want to take that risk. It's a long shot, but maybe he can reason with Victor. "Ray and I had business with Ernie."

"So did I. As you can see, our business was concluded." Victor points to Ernie's corpse with his gun. In that moment, Evan could have fired two bullets into Victor's chest. But Evan froze, and the moment is wasted.

Evan asks, "Who are you working for? Or was this personal?"

"Nobody told you? I'm on Joe's payroll now."

"Joseph Jackson?"

"The one and only." A proud smile grows on Victor's face like a vine. "Joe was more than happy to take me 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 manipulated me!" Evan cries, and he thinks that's the heart of it. A proud man doesn't stand for that sort of thing, not the humiliation that comes with being deceived.

"That's giving me too much credit," Victor says, taking a step closer.

Evan tries to stay focused through the haze of pure panic. No sense in

getting side-tracked by a petty argument. "So Joseph sent you to whack Ernie? Good work. Your job's done here. We can move on."

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 Dom."

Evan swallows back the bile rising in his throat. Victor is another consequence of Evan's fierce anger. Had Evan been more diplomatic with him, Victor wouldn't have a motive to enlist with Evan's greatest enemy.

Fear knots in Evan's gut. "Let's talk about this, Victor. Put the gun down."

Evan remembers how Ralph 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. And yet Evan knows men like him don't talk their way out of situations like this.

"No one has to get hurt. We can work this out."

"How 'bout a show of good faith?" Victor suggests. "You two put your guns away, then we'll talk."

That sounds like a hot load of bullshit. What guarantee is there that Victor will play nice once his adversaries are disarmed? If Victor means to kill Evan — and at this point it's safe to assume he does — it would be embarrassingly easy to shoot him (and Ray too, because why not?) when he doesn't have two guns pointed at him.

Evan sees Ray in the mirror on the far wall behind Victor. Ray notices that Evan is looking at him. He gives Evan a subtle nod. *It's okay, I have a plan*, this nod seems to say.

Evan sticks his gun into its holster. He puts his hands up and tries to

look as non-threatening as possible. "Alright, I'm unarmed. Now let's talk—"

Ray raises his weapon, meaning to shoot Victor, but he's not quick enough. Victor squeezes the trigger, and gouts of blood burst from Ray's face. Ray drops to the floor like a target in a shooting gallery. His gun clatters onto the carpet. He does not scream.

Instinct, rage, and pure hatred take over. Taking advantage of Victor's moment of distraction, Evan draws his own gun and fires twice into Victor's knees. Victor goes down, but not before firing off another shot.

The bullet rips through the meat of Evan's upper arm. He feels the sting, aware this severance of tissue and gristle must hurt, but with the murderous need for revenge swirling in his head he's beyond feeling pain.

Kill the bastard.

Evan kicks the gun out of Victor's hand and sends the weapon scattering. Victor drags himself across the floor, clawing away with his hands. Time seems to slow down now, and Evan feels as if he's trudging through molasses. Maybe two or three seconds have passed since Ray was shot.

Evan crushes the bones of Victor's hand underneath his boot. Victor screams a wet, gurgly sound, and his face loses color. Evan bends down and clamps a hand around Victor's throat to cut off his screams. His eyes bulge. Evan's wounded arm throbs from the strain of muscles, but Victor's lost too much air (and blood) to put up much of a fight, even against a man with a bullet in his arm.

Evan could choke him here and now, but that seems too merciful compared to what this scumbag's done to Evan and Ray and even Michael.

When Victor's face becomes a horrid shade of purple, Evan's grip

slackens, and he stands up. He has no fear that Victor might try to kick out, not with a bullet in each knee.

Victor gurgles and gasps for breath. Evan kicks him in the face. He feels Victor's lower jaw knock out of place. Victor's head lolls to the side, and Evan smashes the toe of his boot into his face again. And again. And again.

Victor's face looks like a bruised pomegranate now, but it's not enough. "Please," Victor moans, coughing and sputtering as his hands blindly swipe at Evan's feet. *That sounds like begging to me, yes indeed.*

Evan takes the thirty-eight and pushes the barrel into Victor's blood-filled, swollen mouth. "I told you I'd kill you."

The gunshot rings out like bang of thunder.

19: Forget About It

Someone's jostling Michael's shoulder, shaking him awake and speaking his name. Michael opens his eyes, squinting at the 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 Evan 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 Michael taught him, so the latter option seems unlikely.

Michael aches as if his entire body has been crushed beneath a semi truck. "Evan, go back to sleep." He forces an eye open and sees a man sitting at his bedside that is absolutely not Evan.

The man chuckles. "Memory loss?"

The guy looks somewhat familiar, but Michael can't put a name to the face. "Who are you?"

"I'm Mark. I'm a doctor. Evan sent me to check on you every two hours," he says. "Do you have a headache? Nausea?"

"All of the above, to varying degrees." Michael's still looking at him with one eye open like a goofy pirate missing an eyepatch.

"Do you remember your name?"

* * *

Michael sighs. "I'm fine. I didn't even pass out or anything. Evan over-exaggerates."

"I guess you don't want any of the Toradol I brought then," Mark says with a shrug. He's using reverse psychology, and Michael hates him for it.

Keeping upright and his eyes open proves too difficult for Michael. He curls back into the blankets. "Did he tell you my nose is broken?"

"He may have mentioned that, but it's not exactly hard to miss."

Michael must look a sight, if his reflection earlier this morning was anything to go by. "Everything hurts." He reaches out weakly. Mark digs around at his feet in what Michael presumes is his doctor's bag. Do doctors still carry those to housecalls, Michael wonders dreamily.

He closes his eyes, tired and fading fast even without pain medicine. The last thing he registers is a distant, unpleasant pinch before he falls into the dark abyss of sleep.

He wakes up again two hours later, the neon numbers on the clock near the bed informing him that it's seven a.m. Michael feels like he might throw up. Everything is worse somehow. Mark's still sitting at the bedside, a book in his lap with large letters on the cover Michael can't read through his blurry eyes.

Mark gives him water, which is wonderful for Michael's dry, dessicated mouth, but it doesn't help the pain situation.

"It still hurts?" Mark asks.

Michael nods, swallowing the rest of the water. It seems to calm his stomach. "Are you gonna quiz me again?"

"Evan would be very upset with me if I let you die."

* * *

"Where is he?"

"He had some errands to run."

"What about Jordie? He should be leaving for school soon. He needs a good breakfast."

Mark smiles. "He came around and peeked in at you. Don't worry. He didn't see your face. I told him you weren't feeling well."

Michael remembers how self-sufficient Jordan can be, how he'd been the one taking care of Evan. Jordan should be able to pour himself a bowl of cereal and get ready for school on his own, but that doesn't help Michael feel any less guilty for shirking his duties.

Mark gives Michael the other half of the dose. Michael dozes off for another two hours before Mark wakes him up again at nine. The sunlight is irritatingly bright, but it doesn't hurt his eyes like it did before.

"Where's Evan?" Michael mumbles from underneath the blankets.

"I don't think he's home yet," Mark says. "How's your head?"

Michael makes a noise that he hopes communicates pain.

Mark gives him another thirty milligrams, and Michael's out until eleven. He wakes up to see Mark gathering his things. "You're leaving?"

"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?" Michael asks around a yawn.

* * *

"I didn't hear him come in. I guess he didn't expect to be gone this long, but you should be alright. You survived the night."

Michael wonders where Evan is that's kept him away for so long. "Thanks. Evan will be glad I didn't die."

Mark laughs. "I'm sure he will. See you around, Michael."

Michael stays in bed for about twenty minutes before finally getting up. He gulps down one of the pills Mark left him, then Michael sees the note addressed to him 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 Michael's nose, as they discussed last night before Michael fell asleep. He brought it up to Evan, trying to seem casual, but he wanted to make sure he could get the bone reset and keep the swelling down before Evan saw him again. Michael's had his nose broken a couple times in the past, so he's almost accustomed to the pain and the different way he needs to breathe before it's fixed.

He walks down the hall into his room and finds the bathroom. What he sees in the mirror horrifies him. His nose, eyes, and mouth are grotesquely bruised, as if stained by purple-black ink. He does a quick make-up job to conceal the discoloration. He calls Nathalie and ask her to cover his shift at the bar, stretching the truth a bit by claiming he broke his nose through his own clumsiness. She seemed to buy the story and wished him well.

Then he calls the doctor at the number Evan left and makes an appointment an hour from now. This guy must be in debt with Evan something awful to fit Michael in on such short notice.

Michael leaves the doctor's office with his nose reset around three in the afternoon. Jordan is home alone when Michael gets back. Both of them look equally surprised to see the other, but Jordan looks at

Michael like he's a zombie who walked through the door.

"Holy shit, what happened?"

On the drive home, Michael noticed the make-up he applied this morning had smudged away after his doctor's visit. "I... I fell off a ladder at the bar last night. It looks bad, but I'm okay."

Jordan grimaces, still studying Michael's bruised face. "Dad usually says something like, 'you should see the other guy.'"

That sounds exactly like something Evan would say.

"Speaking of your dad, have you seen or heard from him today?"

Jordan shakes his head.

"He didn't call?"

Another head shake. "He didn't tell you where he was going?"

"No," Michael says. There's a nervous, gnawing feeling in his gut, but he knows he's probably overreacting. Mama always says Michael's a worrier.

Evan isn't home when dinnertime rolls around. Michael tries calling Ray's home phone, but there's no answer. He calls the bar, hoping Nathalie might have heard from either of them. She says no.

Dread wraps around Michael's chest in tight bands, but he tries to keep his anxiety hidden. Jordan is troubled enough, and if he sees that Michael is worried too — an adult who's supposed to make everything okay again — his fears will multiply.

The endless what-ifs plague Michael while he's cleaning up the kitchen. What if Joseph sent someone more competent than Ernie or Ralph to go after Evan? What if Evan and Ray were in an accident?

What if they're tied up in someone's basement, being tortured for God knows what? Michael might be a worrier, but he's got a damn good reason to be worried now.

The phone on the kitchen wall rings. Jordan and Michael both freeze before they look at each other and scramble for it. Michael gets there first, pulling the *I'm-the-adult* card and answering the phone. Jordan waits at his side, bouncing nervously from one foot to the other.

"Michael?" It's Evan, and the sound of his voice is a great relief.

"Evan? Are you okay? Where are you?"

"I should have listened to you," Evan moans around a sob.

"Are you hurt? I'll come get you."

More sobbing. "Why didn't I listen to you?"

Michael swallows hard, feeling the icy prickle of dread again. "Please, tell me where you are and I'll come get you."

"Ray's dead," Evan says, sounding impossibly feeble.

Michael shakes his head numbly. He should collapse, fall to the ground and cry, but he does nothing, too stunned to really process it. "Oh — oh God, are you okay? Where are you? Do you want me and Jordie to come to you?"

"No, Michael, listen to me, do *not* bring Jordan here!"

"Are you crazy? He's been worried about you all day —"

"He can't be here," Evan says stiffly. "I got hurt too..."

Horror seizes Michael's chest. His mind floods with paralyzing, unhelpful reasons as to how Evan might have gotten hurt, how

serious the injuries might be. "Are you alright? Please tell me you're alright, Evan."

"I'm fine. It's nothing."

Relief, again. Almost instantly, Michael's cognition returns, and he begins to process what Evan said when he 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 with Ray dead?

Unless he went after Ernie and Ralph after Michael told him not to. Yes, that would be the only thing that makes sense in such a short timeframe. Michael holds back any bitter accusations. Evan sounds hollowed out, and he's suffered enough.

So instead Michael asks, "What do you need from me?"

"Just — just take care of Jordie 'til I get back," Evan says. "Whatever happens, you promise me you'll do that."

"Of course. Will you be home tonight?"

Evan sighs a tired sound. "I don't know. I gotta make a few more phone calls."

"Call me if anything changes. Be safe."

Jordan stares at Michael expectantly when he hangs up. "What's going on? Is my dad okay?"

"He's fine. At least he ought to be, if he was able to call."

"What happened?"

"He didn't say." It's not a lie, not really, but Jordan seems to sense there is worse news being withheld from him. Michael doesn't want to disclose this awful truth, but maybe it's best to rip the band-aid off

quickly. Maybe the knowledge that his father is okay will cushion the blow for Jordan. "But... your uncle Ray... He didn't make it."

"What?" Jordan blinks, and Michael sees the devastation fill his eyes as comprehension washes over him. "He's dead? Just — just like that?"

Michael nods. Jordan's eyes are wide and shining with tears.

This must remind him of his mother's death all over again.

"Was he with my dad? What happened?"

"I — I don't know. Your dad didn't tell me the details. He just told me to take care of you until he gets home."

Jordan nods slowly as if that explains everything. Michael pulls him in for a hug, but even as Jordan embraces him he feels far away.

Larry drives Evan home that night. Evan stares out the window, vacant and frighteningly even.

"I'll take care of everything," Larry says reassuringly. Evan trusts that he will; Larry did the same for the family when June died.

When Evan shuffles inside the house, Michael and Jordan are waiting for him in the living room, both of them looking like they've been punched in the gut. Jordan rushes at Evan and throws his arms around his waist, infusing Evan's tired and worn limbs with much-needed warmth.

Michael hangs back for a moment. *He knows.* He knows Ray is gone because of Evan, because of his blind, explosive rage. But Michael is too kind to stab him with guilt now. That will come later.

Michael comes over to Evan and wraps him in a hug. Evan's wounded

arm flinches in a yelp of pain, but Michael holds him tightly, as if he fears that letting go means losing him.

“Go be with Jordie,” Michael whispers.

Evan nods brokenly, wishing he could ask Michael to come along with him. How does Michael expect Evan to comfort Jordan when he needs comfort of his own, too? But instead he stays silent and lets Michael go.

Jordan, maybe sensing Evan’s emotional weakness, doesn’t ask for much, just wants Evan to stay in the room while he tries to fall asleep. Jordan lies in his bed, curled in the blankets while Evan sits on the floor and leans against the frame of the bed as if it’s the only thing keeping him upright.

Jordan puts a hand on the hot bandage wrapped around Evan’s bicep. “Are you okay?”

“This? Yeah, it’s nothin’. Looks worse than it really is.”

“Michael said that too. How come everybody’s getting hurt all of a sudden?”

Evan doesn’t know how to explain it. Jordan is thirteen and doesn’t understand the complexities of the Mafia world. Would it be better if he did? Evan doesn’t know the answer to that one either.

“I screwed up. I made a mistake, and if I had just let it go, we wouldn’t be in this fucking mess. I’m sorry, Jordie.”

“It’s not your fault,” Jordan says with such childlike simplicity that it makes Evan blink back a fresh wave of tears. “As long as you and Mike are okay, I’ll be okay.” Evan suspects Jordan’s putting on a brave face for his sake, like Jordan knows intuitively that Evan is dealing with so much it would be cruel to hoist more grief upon him.

* * *

Within ten minutes, Jordan is fast asleep. Exhaustion and grief took him deep, and Evan's grateful. He looks at Jordan and thinks about how much he loves his son, how Evan would be willing to destroy his own life to protect him. He thinks about how he almost left Jordan an orphan today.

Evan leaves Jordan's bedroom a little while later. The lights are switched off in the hallway, and he fumbles his way in the dark to the bedroom. Michael waits there for him, wearing one of Evan's old, threadbare T-shirts. It hangs on him in a way that makes him look small and delicate. Michael's frailty makes Evan want to be strong for him, but he's too drained and weary to try now.

Michael's gaze slides toward him when Evan sits on the bed. He opens his mouth to say something, but Evan cuts him off. "Don't. Just don't. I already know it's my fucking fault."

Michael looks as if he's been slapped. "I wasn't gonna —"

"Yeah, you were."

Michael's mouth presses into a hard line, but he doesn't argue. "Will you tell me what happened?"

"You can probably figure it out."

"I want to hear it from you."

Evan stares at the bed, following the swirls on the comforter with his eyes, too ashamed to look at Michael and see the disappointment there. He explains the best he can, recalling everything he remembers. "I think Ray did it on purpose," Evan says afterward. "I think he was trying to give me an opening. Maybe he saw Victor wasn't gonna let us walk out of there. Or maybe he knew Victor would kill me, so he took my place. I don't know. It's all sort of a blur."

Michael blinks rapidly, and fresh tears spill down his cheeks. "Is he —"

Is Victor still out there?"

"No."

Michael understands what this means.

"I can't talk about this anymore." Evan hates how feeble and weak that sounds, but remembering the day's events has drained him, and he senses an emotional tsunami waiting in the wings.

Michael squeezes Evan's fingers and nods. His sympathy actually hurts; Evan wants him to twist the knife and scold him for disobeying. But Michael doesn't do any of that, just holds Evan's hands in his own.

"How's your nose?" Evan asks him.

"Fine. It's a clean break, so it should heal up easy."

"That's good." Evan wants to reach up and touch Michael's face, but he's too tender to risk hurting him.

Michael lets Evan get undressed and helps him with his shirt, not even raising a fuss over the thick, white bandage on Evan's left arm. Evan lies on his right side, and Michael cuddles up close with arms around him. Evan feels a hot flare of his breath against his neck while Michael's fingers trail over his arm, focusing on the bandage.

"It's fine," Evan murmurs into the pillow. "I'm stitched up. Don't worry."

"He shot you."

"I shot him worse."

Michael only holds him tighter. The heat from his palms feels good.

"Michael, I'm so sorry. I should have listened to you. I wish I was

stronger than this.”

“You’re the strongest man I’ve ever known.”

Evan wonders about that.

Evan still won’t leave the bedroom one week after Ray’s funeral. He stays there lost in his grief, his eyes vacant. Michael and Jordan bring meals up to Evan so he’ll eat, and they’re met with mixed success. When he refuses, he doesn’t lash out, just swallows a bite or two and leaves the rest on the plate. He is eerily placid, and in many ways it’s worse than seeing him throw tantrums or cry hysterically.

“What should we do about Dad?” Jordan asks one afternoon while he and Michael play video games in the basement. He ought to have some insight into Evan’s grief, since he’s seen the direct aftershocks before. “He doesn’t really listen to me, but maybe he’ll listen to you.”

Evan hasn’t exactly been listening to Michael either. Of course Michael’s tried talking to him, but Evan won’t even argue and give Michael something he can use. “Was he like this before?”

Jordan knows what he means. “Not really. He was more emotional. He cried. He got mad. It was almost better ‘cause he seemed like he was alive. Now he’s just... not moving.”

Michael’s imagination wanders down plenty of tumultuous paths, but he can’t afford the distractions now, so he tucks those away for later when he’s alone with his thoughts and regrets to keep him company.

“He probably stopped taking his medication,” Jordan says.

“Should we try to sneak it in his food?”

“That only works if he actually eats it. Have you tried, like, making

him mad? Or just, y'know, making him feel *something*?" Jordan looks over at Michael. "I don't mean sex, but if you think that will work..." He shakes his head, disgust on his face. "Ugh, never mind."

"I can definitely try making him mad. I was pretty good at it when I first came here."

That night, Evan's sitting in his chair by the bedroom window when Michael comes in and shuts the curtains. "Are you coming to bed?"

Evan shakes his head slowly and makes a sound Michael presumes is a no.

Michael sits beside him in a nearby chair. This one has a few of Evan's shirts draped over the back of it. "Evan, honey, I know you're upset — God knows what I'd be like if I lost one of my brothers — but you need to *come back* to us. Jordie's worried sick about you, and so am I. He says you were different when June passed, that you got angry and cried. And you can do those things now. You can yell and get mad and break something if you think that will help."

Evan shakes his head again. "This isn't the first time I've been to a funeral and stared at the coffin thinking, 'I did this to you.' And the worst part is nobody had the guts to tell me that. I kept expecting Ray to pop out of the coffin just to say, 'Of course it's his fucking fault!' He was always the first person to call me on my bullshit. But everyone acted like Ray getting shot was bound to happen. It wasn't. He was gonna ask Nat to marry him. I was ready to hand the business over to him. When it comes right down to it, he was better at all of that shit."

Michael squeezes Evan's hand in silent support.

"My father was out on a job when he got killed, too," Evan says. "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. My father died a few days later in the hospital. You know what the last thing he said to me was? 'Take care of your

brother.”

Michael balks at the tragedy of it all, that Evan thinks so little of himself he feels he destroys everything he touches.

“Do you blame me?” Evan asks. “In that secret place you keep locked away, do you blame me for this because I went after those guys?”

“You think your brother died as some kind of punishment for not listening to me?”

The wounded look on Evan’s face says that he does.

“The world doesn’t work like that. Most things happen for no reason at all. What happened to Ray and June and your father isn’t on you. You didn’t know Victor was going after those guys too, and you didn’t know” — Michael almost slips and says the name — “one of my brothers would fire a stray bullet. Awful things happen, but they aren’t your fault just because they happen to someone close to you.”

Michael sits with Evan in comforting silence for a few minutes before Evan stands up. “I think I want to take a shower,” he says. 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.”

Evan gives Michael 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 Michael in some time. “Maybe some other time.”

It takes him a while, but eventually Evan comes to bed, his hair damp from the shower. Neither of them say a word, lying together in a comfortable quiet. Evan’s left arm has healed a bit, the bandage removed to expose the stitching below his shoulder. Michael traces his fingers over it, a tangible reminder that he could have easily lost Evan that day too.

"How's it feel?" Michael murmurs, curled against Evan's chest.

"I'll manage." Evan tucks the blankets tighter around them and lets his arm rest over Michael's waist. The warm fog of his breath is more soothing than Michael thought it would be.

"Your father paid for half of the funeral," Evan says after a moment.

"He told you that?"

"Larry did."

"I guess he feels guilty about it."

"Imagine that," Evan says bitterly. Michael has no idea what Joseph is planning, if covering half of the funeral is a power play or a gesture of atonement for an honest accident. He sent Victor to clean up the mess he made; Evan and Ray were simply in the wrong place at the wrong time.

Michael holds Evan closer. "Do you think you might be hungry in the morning? I'll make you something special for breakfast if you want."

"Surprise me." Evan brings Michael's head to his chest and rests his chin in his hair. "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.

20: The Fall of Evan Chandler

March 1993

Evan meets with Joseph a week later at Aldo's. He has no fear Joseph will simply shoot him here, because the Jacksons and Cascios are tight-knit allies; Dominic Cascio wouldn't want that kind of trouble in his own establishment.

Even in broad daylight, the windows are impossible to see through. Evan steps inside and quickly surveys the area. Other than Joseph, there are two people inside, and the odds are good that they're plants. Surely Joseph didn't assume Evan would just show up all by his little self. Joseph would want protection on the off-chance Evan came in with no intentions to have a pleasant conversation.

Joseph sees him and raises a hand in a casual wave. Evan does not oblige him, instead sitting across from him at his booth. "I was just about to come pay you a visit," Joseph says, sipping at a dark red wine. "Care for a glass?"

"I don't drink."

Joseph lifts an eyebrow in surprise. "That's not what I heard."

"Yeah, well, people change."

* * *

"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 Evan 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 worked miracles with the bar, and Joseph probably knew 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."

Evan bristles at that. "I don't see Michael as an *asset*. He's a part of my family — a family whose numbers are shrinking much too rapidly, thanks to you and yours."

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," Evan says with a shrug. Joseph gives him flat eyes. "Come on, you have five other sons. None of them want to follow in dear old Dad's footsteps?"

"Michael's best suited for it."

"Well, you ought'a think about bringing in a pinch hitter."

Joseph leans in a little. "What you're telling me, Mr. Chandler, is that I can't operate my business. You're imposing your will on me. I'm not a man who takes too kindly to that."

* * *

"Maybe we share the same scruples."

"But you don't need Michael for any business matters. Your interest in him is purely" — Joseph searches for the word — "*physical*."

Evan's about to argue when he hears Michael's voice behind him.

"Joseph, word is you're in town," Michael says, and he doesn't sound pleased in the least.

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 Evan. "What are you doing here?" he asks, ignoring Evan's presence.

"Me and Evan were just finishing up our discussion about you comin' home."

"What's to discuss? I'm not going anywhere."

Joseph doesn't look all that surprised by Michael's response; maybe he thinks Evan's presence here is the reason for Michael's vehement denial. Joseph might prefer to get Michael alone and see if his answer changes when Evan isn't 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 about Evan refusing to send me back. He'd let me go in a heartbeat if I wanted to leave. But I don't. I want to stay."

Joseph looks at him with fatherly pity. "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. "I will visit when I can, but I live here with Evan now." He storms out, pushing the door

open and disappearing into the heavy, black night.

Joseph played it smart; he said something only he and Michael would understand, keeping Evan out of the loop so he can't argue. He'll have to find a way to coax the story out of Michael later.

"Well, you heard the man," Evan says, spreading his hands. "No deal." He rises 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'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. Evan hopes Michael will unlock them. "Goodbye, Joseph."

"Oh, we'll be in touch," he says calmly, taking another sip of wine as Evan exits through the front door.

Michael's in bed when Evan gets home that night. His hair is still damp after a shower, and he looks up at Evan, smiles a little, then settles back into the pillows. Evan wonders if a direct offense will be best, or if he should loosen Michael up with affection before asking 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. "Why do you want to know?"

"'Cause I want to know why he's got such a hard-on over bringing you back."

"He didn't tell you?"

Evan sits beside him on the bed. "I'm not stupid. 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 Evan. "My sister LaToya is married to a guy named Jack Gordon. He cut her off from her family for years, kept her under his control. He won't let us speak with her."

The name sounds familiar; Evan vaguely remembers hearing it associated with diamond fencing and drug smuggling.

The big picture is starting to come together now. Joseph accused Evan of brainwashing Michael before, but it slipped his mind in the wake of Ray's death. This theory makes a good deal 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 think he knows it's not like that, but he doesn't want to admit that I'm—" He stops, hesitating. "Not like other guys."

* * *

Evan's next question lingers on his tongue, like somehow he knows it will strike a nerve with Michael. Evan measures the words in his head, trying to come up with a combination of them that won't wound Michael. He decides to plunge in head-first. "Your father told me to ask you about Detroit. What does that mean?"

Michael's shoulders wilt, and he shuts his eyes tightly, like a child trying to make a bad dream go away. "He *would* say that."

"I'm not gonna walk out on you if you did something bad. I've done tons of shit I'm not proud of. I've got no room to throw stones."

"That's different."

"I don't see how."

"What was your first impression of me?"

"Do you want the truth, or do you want the version that doesn't make me sound like a total pig?"

Michael laughs a soft sound through his nose. "I'm serious. 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's almost sickening."

"Right. So what if you learned something about me that doesn't fit that first impression?"

Evan shrugs. "Try me."

Michael turns his gaze away, feeling undeserving of the unconditional love in Evan's eyes. Evan tilts Michael's chin so he'll see that love, see that whatever Evan is about to learn here will not change that.

Michael closes his eyes and nestles deeper into the blankets. Evan lies

beside him and puts an arm around his shoulders. It's slow, but Michael finally gives in and begins to confess.

"Joseph 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, I guess. Jermaine married Berry's daughter Hazel. So when we moved to California, we were supposed to keep working on his behalf. Well, you know Joseph. He doesn't take orders from anybody. He went rogue and 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.

"One day—I must've been about nineteen or twenty at the time — my brothers came home all busted up. They didn't know who sent the guys, but Jermaine didn't have a scratch on 'im, just a real guilty look on his face. I got him alone, asked him some questions, and figured out it must've been Berry who sent the thugs. And that just broke my heart. Berry was like my second father. I didn't want to believe he would send anyone to hurt my brothers — my family — but he did it all the same.

"So I took a little trip to Detroit on my own." Michael's eyes tighten in silent agony. "I went too far. I do that sometimes. When I get mad, it's like I'm a different person. You know how it is."

Evan smiles in understanding.

"And when I was young, it was worse. I was just starting to learn how to make explosives. There was a club in the city where Berry's guys hung out. I snuck in through the back and planted a homemade bomb in the men's room." Michael laughs a tired sound, as if realizing something. "Right out of that scene in *The Godfather* with the gun behind the toilet tank. I just wanted to scare them, maybe damage the place a little, but..."

"Something went wrong." The shock of the revelation doesn't come.

Somehow Evan's not surprised.

"I didn't mean to hurt anyone. I swear. I even made sure to detonate it before the club's open hours, but... I killed two people. I only found out when I got back home, but I was still mad as hell about what they did to my brothers. Nobody knew I had anything to do with it, but somehow Joseph did. If he ever told anyone, I never heard a word about it. But he took me aside in his office and really let me have it. He told 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 you promised you'd take over the business or something?"

Michael 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."

"That doesn't sound so bad, all things considered."

Michael gives Evan a pointed, tragic look, his face flushing as he speaks. "My methods of persuasion were sort of unorthodox."

That's why Joseph allowed Michael to come here in the first place — he saw it as another debt to clear. It's why Joseph accused Evan of using Michael for sex games. It explains how Michael isn't a blushing virgin in bed.

"He whored you out?" Evan asks. Michael squeezes his eyes shut. "How'd he even know you would do it?"

"He caught me once," Michael admits, blazing scarlet. "Joseph 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 a little crush on the guy; he was older than me, so maybe Joseph thought the guy was into me 'cause I was about sixteen." Michael 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."

Evan thinks about how all of this ties in to why Michael's here now. "But he still used it to his advantage."

"As long as I lied to him and promised I preferred women."

Evan understands now why Michael felt so pressured to go out on that date after Joseph asked about it. "And now he's realizing that's not true."

Michael nods.

Evan lets out a deep breath. "So he's a bigoted control-freak? We knew that already. This doesn't really help."

"Does it bother you that I've lied to you since we met?" Michael asks, sounding hurt.

"This is nothing," Evan scoffs. "It's none of my business anyway. So you screwed a few other guys before me and accidentally killed two people. I've done worse in a week."

The phone on the nightstand rings. Evan motions for Michael to wait a moment and answers it.

"Hey, Ev," J.D. starts, "you might wanna head down to the bar — er, what's left of it."

The bar is a burnt-out shell, reeking of smoke and decay by the time Evan gets there. He's glad Michael isn't here to see this. The bar meant a lot to him, maybe even more than it ever meant to Evan. His only regret is losing even more of June now, though since it was the place where she died, perhaps losing it is for the best.

* * *

By the time Evan and J.D. congregate at Larry's high-rise office, the sun's started to ascend in the sky. Evan's weary eyes remind him that he hasn't slept.

Larry opens the mini-fridge below his desk. "Need some caffeine?"

"I'll be fine."

"Suit yourself." Larry shrugs and pours himself a Pepsi. "Man, no offense, but your life sucks."

"Yeah, it kinda does."

"Well, don't worry, I'll take care of this," Larry assures him.

"You don't really believe it was an accident, do you?" J.D. asks.

Evan's been wondering about that. The police and fire departments declared it an accident caused by faulty wiring. If this had happened on its own, Evan's other life tragedies notwithstanding, he would have bought that explanation wholesale. Now he's not so sure. "I have my doubts."

"You got any names?"

Evan runs a list of potential suspects through his head. For some reason, Dave Schwartz's name pops up. He can see how Dave might want revenge after Evan sent Ray to knock him around a bit. The assault compounded with all the other slights Evan has racked up over the years with Dave paints a pretty convincing picture of someone who might have a problem with him.

But the timing is odd. Dave and Evan had their falling-out about a month ago. Why would he wait so long to strike back? Maybe he waited to throw Evan off. If he was able to keep his affair with June a secret for five years, he could definitely sit around for a month before retaliating.

* * *

Something about that theory doesn't quite fit. J.D. watches the expression on Evan's face change as he mulls 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." Evan looks at their incredulous faces. "He's capable of more than you think."

"Maybe we ought'a open the books for him," J.D. suggests. "His rent-a-wreck generates a bunch of cash —"

"No! He has no loyalty."

They don't argue with that.

"What makes you think it's him?" Larry asks, crossing his ankles underneath his desk.

Evan's not ready to expose that wound 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." Evan freezes, too many realizations raining down on him at once.

His place of business had been attacked. Not his home or his person or even someone close to him. Strictly business. Who would have a vested interest in destroying that?

What you're telling me, Mr. Chandler, is that I can't operate my business. You're

imposing your will on me. I'm not a man who takes too kindly to that.

Is it really a coincidence that Evan's bar goes up in flames when Joseph comes to town?

Evan remembers how Joseph signaled to the other man in the Cascios' restaurant that night. He'd only done that after Evan refused to send Michael home. Of course Joseph wouldn't attack Evan's home — he'd run the risk of harming Michael and Jordan. Torching the bar after hours would serve its purpose as a threat without endangering anyone.

"It's Joseph," Evan says. "He's sending a message: you harm my business, I harm yours."

"How'd you harm his business?" Larry asks.

"Joseph claims that Michael staying here is me telling him he can't run his business. So if Michael stays, I'm screwing Joseph over."

Larry and J.D. exchange meaningful looks before turning their gazes toward Evan. He thinks he sees pity.

J.D. 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."

J.D. holds up his hands in mock-surrender. "I knew you'd say that, and I know it's not the most ideal option for you—"

"I'm not giving Michael up. I haven't fought this hard and lost this much to just give up now."

"All I'm sayin' is it might be the best way to make sure you and Jordie

stay alive.”

Evan wants to explain and plead his case, but he knows it would 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.

Evan says, “Or we could just wipe out the whole Jackson Family.”

Larry raises an eyebrow. “You think Michael would go for that?”

They’re staring at Evan like he’s 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, so what else am I supposed to do?”

They exchange looks again. This surreptitious communication going on between them, like they’ve decided something about Evan in his absence, makes him uneasy.

“Is Michael really worth going down for?” J.D. asks.

“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.” Evan doesn’t reply. “Look around. You ever think about how much this job’s cost you?”

Of course he does; he thinks about it every night before he falls asleep or on the nights when worrying leaves him restless. He thinks about it every time he remembers June or their lost child or Ray or his father. Evan thinks about it when he looks at Jordan and Michael and realizes they’re all he has 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 wiping out a whole Family over a personal matter will 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."

Evan's heart sinks in his chest. He looks to J.D., hoping the spineless little wimp will back him up for once.

But J.D. shakes his head grimly. "Sorry, Ev, I'm not steppin' in this one."

"You guys, hold on, let's talk about this."

J.D. 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."

"You're here for the great dental plan?" Evan rolls his eyes. Neither J.D. nor Larry appreciate the sarcasm. "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 won't risk the other Families turning on him if he kills you, especially if you complied with his demands," Larry says.

Evan sighs, 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. 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."

J.D. places a hand on Evan's shoulder as he turns to leave, watching

him with an indecipherable expression. "Have a good life, Evan."

Or what's left of it.

The drive home is a struggle for control. Evan's eyes blur with tears the entire way, his chest hitching with silent sobs. He's barely able to put on a placid mask of composure before he gets inside the house.

Michael sees through the façade almost instantly, and he's at Evan's side asking, "What happened? Are you alright?"

Evan can't answer. His throat is in knots. When he can speak again, he says, "It's just stress. I think my lack of sleep is catching up to me." He scrubs a hand over his eyes to wipe away the evidence of tears. "Where's Jordie?"

"He's fine. He's in the basement playing games. I gave him a little break 'cause he's been helping me around the house all day." Evan closes his eyes a second too long and starts to drift. Michael takes Evan's face in his gentle hands. "Go upstairs and get some sleep." Evan rests his head against Michael's shoulder, and Michael helps him up the staircase. The last thing Evan feels is the soft, cool pillow against his face.

21: Wanted Men

Evan startles awake in the middle of the night, feeling small, warm hands on his shoulders and a voice whispering, "Dad! Dad!"

Jordan's standing by the bed, shaking him awake.

Evan rolls onto his back and fights to open his bleary eyes. "What?"

Jordan keeps his voice to a whisper. "There's someone downstairs."

Evan's on auto-pilot, throwing on his shirt and shorts and grabbing a gun out of the dresser.

Michael's stirring now. "What's going on?"

"There's someone downstairs," Jordan tells him. "I heard a noise, then I looked out my window and saw a car parked outside."

Evan hands Michael a gun after loading his own. "Stay here with Jordie."

Michael's eyes widen in horror. "You're not going down there alone —"

"Michael. Do it."

* * *

Michael does as he's asked and guides Jordan to the right side of the room. They can escape using the bathroom window if things get bad enough, 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.

Evan slips out of the bedroom and inches the door closed behind him. He hears 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.

Evan presses himself against the staircase wall and listens. Noises coming from the living room again. He's still frozen on the stairs. He thinks back to what happened with Ray, how Evan had been stupid and ignored his gut instinct to walk away. He can't let the same thing happen here. He has to stay alive for Jordan.

When Evan reaches the bottom of the staircase, he peeks his head around the corner. He catches a reflection of the living room in the television screen before he retreats 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 he can gather from the quick glimpse of the distorted reflection.

A shadow creeps along the wall in front of him. With the light coming in from the glass doors to the backyard, that means the intruder is midway between the living room and the kitchen. He's also in Evan's blind spot. Evan won't be able to sneak a look at the intruder without potentially giving away his hiding spot.

The proximity of the sounds tell Evan there's only one intruder inside the house. From the way he's ransacked the place, he's probably looking for money or drugs. If that's the case, he'll most likely go

upstairs to check the master bedroom, and if he does...

The shadow moves along the wall. Evan holds his breath and waits. The shadow turns away, giving Evan an ideal opportunity to sneak up behind him without being seen. Evan creeps around the side of the staircase, tip-toeing through the small hallway leading into the kitchen.

Evan turns the corner and aims the gun at the back of the man's 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."

Evan feels the air leave his lungs. The voice sounds familiar. "Don't tell me you're one of the Jacksons."

The man slowly puts his hands up and turns around. When Evan sees his face, he instantly recognizes him.

"Goddamn it, Randy. What the fuck are you doin' here?"

"Joseph sent me to check on Michael."

"Why didn't you just ring the doorbell like a normal person?"

Evan hears a soft voice speak up from the stairs. "Evan, don't shoot! That's my brother!" Evan's gaze slides over to Michael, but his head doesn't move. He can't risk giving Randy 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' good!"

* * *

Evan clears his throat. "Sorry to interrupt this touching family reunion, but you don't have any guys parked outside, do you?"

Randy looks at him. "No, 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. "You can't believe a word he says about Evan. Everything's fine here. I wish you would've asked me first."

"I had no idea, Mike. Just followin' orders."

Michael comes over to Evan and pries one of his hands off the gun to entwine it with his own. "Joseph's been threatening us because he thinks Evan's got me trapped here. But I'm happy with him." He squeezes Evan's hand and smiles up at him. "I don't want to go home."

Randy looks confused for a moment. "You two are..." He makes vague hand gestures Evan assumes are supposed to mean something.

Michael nods, and his dark curls bounce as his head moves.

"Oh man, who would'a thought?" Randy chuckles to himself; Michael does not find this amusing. "This is great! Wait 'til everybody gets a load'a this: Joseph's very own Golden Child's gone rogue and left the family."

Michael squeezes Evan's hand tighter. Evan squeezes back.

"Michael didn't leave the family," Evan says. "But considering the way his father treats him, can you really blame Michael for wanting to stay here?"

Randy fixes Evan 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 Evan with a gentle elbow to the gut. "Hush and let me talk to him."

Evan shuts up.

"I didn't leave the family," Michael explains to Randy. "I'm expanding it, the same way our other siblings did when they got married. I'm sorry 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," Randy shoots back. "Have you done *anything* for us since you've been here? Have you even done anything for *him*" — he gestures to Evan — "that isn't a sexual favor? 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 tirade but says nothing.

Randy continues, "'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. 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 bailing on our duties."

"But you can bail on your wife and kids as much as you like," Michael sneers. "Why are you even here? Just 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 Evan out of the way as he takes a few steps toward Randy — “every single one of you treats your wives and girlfriends like shit! And Joseph’s the worst of all! So tell me, Randy, how the hell would you know how I feel?”

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 it won’t end here if you make Joseph 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. Evan places his hands on Michael’s shoulders. Only now does he see the outline of the gun hidden beneath Michael’s oversized shirt. “Where’s Jordie?”

“In the bedroom. He’s safe.” Michael takes Evan upstairs to show him that Jordan is indeed safe.

“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?” Jordan asks as Michael and Evan dismantle the guns and put the pieces back into the drawer.

“Nah, wasn’t necessary,” Evan says. “You know I’m good at scaring people away.”

“Is that why most of my friends never come back here after hanging out once or twice?”

Evan feels the knife twist in his heart. “Yeah, probably.”

* * *

"Jordie, do you want to sleep in here with us tonight?" Michael offers.

Jordan shakes his head adamantly. "Nope. No way. I'm fine. Don't worry about me."

Evan shuts the drawer and turns to him. "It's okay to be scared, y'know. Everybody gets scared once in a while."

"Why don't you and your dad sleep in here, and I'll go in your room?" Michael suggests.

"No, that's okay," Jordan says. "You can stay." He lets Evan and Michael get settled first before crawling in between them. "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 you just wanted me for my body."

"Yeah, hairy Jewish guys are really in this year."

"I will seriously throw up in this bed," Jordan threatens. "Is this what dating is like?"

Michael chuckles at Jordan's disgust. "What's so bad about being with someone who makes you laugh?"

"Well, nothing," Jordan says, "but you guys are just so embarrassing."

"Then maybe we're doing something right," Evan says, holding Michael tighter.

"Can we go to sleep now? Because I would really like that." Jordan

curls into the blankets and lies on his stomach. "Or are you two gonna keep being gross?"

"I'll try to keep my hands off your father," Michael says.

Jordan sighs theatrically into the pillow.

The next morning Evan wakes up with an arm slung around Michael's waist. Evan moves closer, reducing the gap between their bodies, and pulls Michael to his chest. Michael hums an appreciative, sleepy sound at the sudden embrace.

"Are you awake yet?" Evan murmurs at his ear. Michael makes a noise that might be a yes. Evan drifts a hand between Michael's legs and squeezes his already-hard cock through his pajama pants. "Ooh, good morning to you too."

Michael grunts. "Don't."

"Are you sure?" Evan grinds against the curve of Michael's ass.

Michael huffs an angry sigh and sits up, pushing a hand through his hair. Evan can almost feel the tension emanating from him. "I need to be alone for a little bit," Michael says, and his detached tone makes Evan think twice about making a masturbation joke. "Can you do that for me?"

Evan says that he can and hops out of bed. "I'll go check on Jordie—" His hand's wrapped around the doorknob when he realizes his mistake. Jordan slept in this room last night. And he isn't here now. If he's downstairs...

"Oh fuck." Evan races down the hall to Jordan's room. No sign of him. Evan takes the stairs two at a time and swings around the bottom of the banister. Jordan is searching the refrigerator for sustenance.

* * *

"Hey, what are you doing down here?"

Jordan looks at Evan over the open door. "Uh, I live here?"

"I know, smart-ass. I didn't think you'd be up so early."

"Early? It's noon on a Saturday." Jordan shuts the refrigerator door, 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 Evan to say something about it.

Evan watches him for a moment, and Jordan breaks down with guilt. "Dad, I think I'm allowed to have Oreos for breakfast since we got robbed last night."

"We didn't get robbed." Evan really needs to learn when to shut the fuck up.

"Then what happened?" Jordan gestures behind him to the destroyed state of the living room.

"They were looking for something. They didn't find it."

"Yeah, obviously." Jordan picks one of the ripped-apart cushions off the floor and replaces it 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 not scared they'll come back, are you?" Evan wonders.

Jordan gives a half-shrug. "Not really. Nobody messes with you."

Evan really wishes Ray hadn't shared so many exaggerated tales of his reputation with Jordan. "You got that right."

* * *

They sit together on the couch for a while and mindlessly flip channels. There's a comfortable silence between them, until Jordan cleaves Evan's heart anew with, "Dad, do I 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 Evan's answer in any way.

"No, Jord', you don't have to. Actually, I'd rather you didn't."

"How come? Mom wanted me to."

Evan's 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 mad at each other 'cause we both felt we were right."

It's difficult to put into words how much Evan doesn't want Jordan going down the same path he did. Forbidding it will only entice Jordan, so Evan needs to tread carefully.

"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." Evan leans back against 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," Evan says 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..." Jordan 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."

Evan is touched and honored that Jordan would do such a thing, but the cold finger of guilt prods at him, a reminder that he shouldn't feel anything warm in the cockles of his heart. 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 won't make you do anything you don't wanna do," Evan tells him, "especially if you're only doing it to make me happy."

Jordan nods thoughtfully.

"Do you have any ideas?"

"Not really, but I've got a lot of options."

"Yeah, you do." They sit together quietly until Evan speaks again. "Why don't you call one of your friends and see if they wanna hang out?"

Jordan gives him a suspicious look. "What are you planning?"

"I think you could use the downtime." A little white lie, but Evan plans on either having sex with Michael all day or discussing retaliation on Joseph, and Jordan wouldn't want to be around for any of that.

"But I want my dad more," Jordan says in a sickeningly-sweet way.

Evan rolls his eyes. "Yeah, that doesn't sound like manipulation at all."

* * *

"Give me twenty dollars."

"No."

"Please? Or I take back all the nice stuff I said."

"My own son extorting me. Where did I go wrong?"

"I learned from the best."

"Oh, Jord', I'm sorry, when did I ever teach you —"

"You?" Jordan makes a face. "No, I'm talking about Uncle Ray!" He laughs and moves for the stairs. "You? Dude, 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 go to the arcade with a few friends. Evan takes this opportunity to go upstairs and check on Michael. Michael's sitting on the edge of the bed with his head in his hands. If he hears Evan come in he doesn't show it.

"Hey... What's wrong?"

Michael exhales a deep sigh before raising his head. When Evan moves closer, he sees Michael eyes are watery and red-rimmed. "I've been trying to think of ways to fix this."

"And?"

Michael doesn't say anything, just sits there looking lost and vacant. Evan pulls Michael to his chest and holds him there. Michael breathes out a deep sigh but offers nothing more in the way of knowing the thoughts in his head.

* * *

"Can I help?" Evan asks.

Michael shakes his head. After a moment, he says, "Can I tell you what the worst part is?"

Evan has no idea what he's talking about. "Sure."

"The worst part is that I can see the life we could have together," Michael says, his voice shaking 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."

"For how long?"

"I don't know," Michael says, but Evan knows a kind lie when he hears one. If Michael leaves, it's going to be a one-way trip. "I'll come back — if you still want me."

What a ridiculous notion, assuming Evan might no longer want him. The entire fabric of Evan's family has been altered past the point of recognition simply because Michael exists. "Of course I will."

The hard wall of Michael's back loosens up, and he relaxes. "I'm so sorry. I wish there was something we could do. I think..." He trails off.

Evan presses his lips to the back of Michael's neck. "You can tell me anything. You know that, right?"

"I think I always knew it would end up like this. Maybe that's why I gave you everything, '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," Evan promises.

Michael snuffles and wipes his eyes with the back of his hand.

* * *

"This isn't your fault."

Michael tears out of the 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, this is all on Joseph."

"You'd still have your brother if I never came here."

Michael knows exactly where to aim when he wants to wound someone. Evan drags in a breath, tries to shake off the sting of his words. "Maybe. Maybe not."

"What's it gonna take? Will you finally get it when something happens to Jordie?"

Another carefully-worded wound. "No one's ever 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. When he looks at Evan again, his eyes are harder, more focused. "I have to keep you safe. Just like you have to keep Jordie safe."

"No. I'm not losing you too."

Michael tries to glare, but his true emotions have begun to bleed through his angry mask. Evan sees the subtle creases of worry on Michael's brow and the pain in his eyes. He wants to sacrifice himself, to be the noble one. "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." Evan feels a stab of guilt for hitting Michael in a weak point, but there will be time to lick his wounds later.

* * *

"That's not fair," Michael whimpers.

"You wanna talk fair? How fair is losing 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 Evan stops him. "Yeah, yeah, you 'had nothing to do with that,' but from where I'm standing you're the one whose Family got Ray and June killed, okay? And don't even give me that holier-than-thou 'I'm not like them' bullshit! You've got just as much blood on your hands as they do."

"Fine, you've made your point," Michael says, his tone pure ice. "I'm awful. But you're right there in the trenches with me, so don't you fool yourself. Ray died because of your goddamn temper, Evan, not because of my Family!" For the first time, Evan thinks he hears hate (or something very close to it) in Michael's voice.

"You wouldn't be here arguing with me if going home would change anything; you would've already left. You're trying to piss me off so I won't care if you leave, right? Hurt me in all the worst places so I'll say 'good riddance' when you're out the door, but it won't work."

Michael sinks onto the bed, his head buried in his hands. "Evan, please," he sobs, "please, just make this easy on me." It's hard to stay mad at him when he looks so broken and hurt. "Just let me go."

Evan doesn't know what to feel anymore. The anger seems to have been cut out of him. He sits beside Michael and wraps an arm around his shoulders, trying to stop his tears and the subtle shaking from his quiet sobs. "If leaving would solve everything, you'd be gone by now. Jesus, you haven't even started packing. You made more of an effort to leave when you were pissed off at *me*."

Michael wipes his eyes. "I don't want anyone to die."

"Are you sure Joseph won't take me out anyway even if you go back?"

* * *

"I wouldn't wager on it."

"Then stay," Evan says. "If you wanna protect me, be right alongside me while you do it. 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 nods, sniffing as his shaking slows.

"And what kind of family doesn't let you go off on your own?" Evan continues. "That's not love, that's control. You know that's not okay, don't you? It's really important to me that you know that."

"What can I do? He's my father."

"Don't make the same mistake I did. I tried to get out once, and my dickhead father sent some goons to beat me up. But he made it look like he had nothin' to do with it. 'Come back, and your enemies will become my enemies.' He wanted me under his thumb, so I stayed. Every day I wish I hadn't."

"So where does that leave us? We go on the run?"

"We could start over somewhere. You think there's any mob activity in South Dakota?"

Michael laughs, like he can't imagine this is actually his life. "What about Jordie?"

"Of course we'll bring him."

"I mean, will he be able to handle it?"

"He doesn't have much of a choice."

Michael blows out a breath that makes the loose tendrils of hair dangling in front of his face sway in its breeze. "Will you be able to get

the things you need? Your medication?"

Evan will never get over how considerate Michael can be even in times of stress. "There's no shortage of doctors willing to play fast and loose with a prescription pad."

"Then we just pack up and leave?"

Evan shakes his head. "He'll know to look for us if he sends someone to check in and the place is abandoned. 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."

"Joseph will raise hell if he thinks I'm dead."

"That's why you call him and let him know you're alive," Evan says, a devious grin spreading on his face as the idea comes to him. "Act like you came home and found the place turned over, blood everywhere. Say you're taking Jordie and disappearing, blame Joseph for sending his thugs to kill me, meanwhile we all run off and live happily ever after."

"And you don't think he'll question that if he didn't give the order?"

"He'll think one of his guys went rogue — not the first time that's happened. He can ask all the questions he wants, and if his guys say 'no, boss, it wasn't me,' he'll either figure somebody's lying, or I got whacked over something completely unrelated. It's not like I don't have other enemies."

"He'll hunt me down," Michael says.

"Once he thinks I'm dead, it'll take a lot of heat off you. What really sticks in his craw is that he's lost you to me."

Michael considers this.

* * *

"I know someone who owes us a favor," Evan says. "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 once that he's basically Satan in a Rolls-Royce."

"Is he a lawyer, by any chance?"

"Oh, ha-ha, very funny." Then Evan looks sort of ashamed, his voice low as he admits, "Yeah, he is. He does most of his work for mob Families. Ray worked with him on a few jobs a while back."

"Do you have any friends that aren't total sleazeballs?"

Evan pulls a face, looking offended at the accusation. "I have you."

"I don't think I qualify."

"I'm sure you're only twenty-five percent sleazeball at most."

"A quarter sleazy — you sure know how to flatter me."

Evan smiles sadly. "I guess I don't have any wholesome friends. Everyone I know is pretty awful. Present company excluded, of course."

"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 staying with?"

"Well, not literally *with* him. I figure he's got a vacation home or something we could use. I'll have to call him and ask." Evan rises from

the bed, wiping his palms on the front of his pants. "You reminded me I have a refill on my meds. I'll run out and get that, and I'll call Barry and see what he can do for us. Will you be okay all by yourself?"

"I've seen *Home Alone*. I think I can manage," Michael says with a small smile.

Evan places a kiss to the top of Michael's head. "I love you. I'm so sorry for all that shit I said earlier."

Michael tilts his head up to kiss Evan's mouth. "I know. I'm sorry too."

22: *Partners In (Organized) Crime*

While Evan is out, Michael plans. Part of him always figured it would come to this, the nuclear option, though he was never too thrilled with the idea of abandoning their lives here and setting up shop somewhere else. And yet isn't that exactly what he did when he came to live with Evan six months ago?

A life transplant, Michael thinks as he jots down a list of steps they must take to secure their new lives. As he writes these things on a sheet from the notepad he keeps on the fridge, it reads like a gruesome to-do list: *break back window, toss living room, leave bloodstains (footprints)*.

He intends for Evan to read over the list when he returns and point out things Michael may have overlooked. He continues writing, filling up the front of the sheet with ideas for things they should bring with them and steps to make their staged crime scene look more authentic.

A knock on the front door startles Michael alert. He slinks over to the door and peers through the peephole. It's only Dave, standing there in khaki shorts and a Hawaiian shirt, like he's stopping in for a quick hello before jaunting off to the beach.

Michael opens the door. "Evan's not here."

"I know," Dave says. "I watched him leave."

* * *

"That's not creepy at all."

"What you call creepy I call self-preservation. If Evan saw me coming over here, he might start getting crazy ideas about you and me."

Michael knows he shouldn't laugh, but a nasally guffaw comes out anyway. The thought of him with someone like Dave is equal parts disgusting and hilarious. "Sorry, I thought you were making a joke."

Dave's mouth twists into a frown.

"Evan should be back any minute, so say your piece and leave," Michael says rather coldly.

"Just because Evan and I had a" — Dave searches for the word — "falling-out doesn't mean you and me can't be friends. And Jordie, too. I'm like an uncle to him. I haven't seen the little guy in a while." Dave peers over Michael's shoulder, trying to get a look inside the house.

"He's out."

"You're very curt today," Dave observes. "Everything going alright? Marital troubles?" He says this with an amused lilt, forever amused at the concept of two men together. Michael should be used to this response by now, but he is a constant fool, always hoping for folks to be decent.

"I'm under a lot of stress right now," Michael says, sounding every bit a cliché.

Dave flashes a smug half-smile, the kind that says *I knew it*. "It's Evan, isn't it? Is he being difficult?"

"It's really none of your business. But I guess as long as you're here, you can answer a simple question: why did you do it?"

* * *

Michael expects Dave to play dumb and ask *Do what?* but he doesn't. Smart move.

Instead, Dave huffs a sigh and braces himself against the doorframe. "Does it really matter?"

"It matters to me."

"Then I'll ask you this: how can you willingly turn a blind eye to the kind of shit he does?"

"Coming from a mob Family helps a lot."

Dave scoffs. "What, the Jacksons?" At Michael's surprised look, Dave says, "Yeah, Nat told me all about your family. But you're not like them, Michael. And I don't just mean 'cause you look different. You're a lot like June in some ways."

"How's that?"

Evan always focused on the ways Michael was different from June, which Michael figures is Evan's way of coping with falling for someone after her death.

"You have this air about you sometimes. It's hard to explain, but it reminds me of her. Maybe Evan sees it too."

"She was married, Dave," Michael says, trying to steer the conversation back on track. "How could you do it? I thought Evan was your friend."

"She wasn't happy with him. She was going to cheat anyway. Why shouldn't it be with me?" 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?"

* * *

Michael's tempted to play the world's smallest violin, but he refrains. Big of him.

"When I didn't pay, he'd send his Mafia goons to wreck my lot. And he had the nerve to act like we were pals."

Would this unfaithfulness have hurt Evan so much if he'd truly 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." Dave 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. I just gave her the things he wasn't."

"You're a homewrecker," Michael says.

Dave doesn't flinch at the venom in Michael's words. "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."

"That's going a little far."

"He's poison, Michael. Believe me. Why do you think June miscarried?"

"You're still on about that?" Michael rolls his eyes.

"If Evan found out the baby wasn't his, you think he would just let June go on her merry way with the pregnancy?"

A whole lot of things make sense all at once. Michael's insides gnarl in rage and horror. "The baby was yours? How can you be sure?"

* * *

Dave looks absolutely destroyed. "June did the math. Evan was shooting blanks, but as far as he was concerned, there was at least one bullet in the chamber. June was so terrified Evan would find out the truth. Maybe it was just stress that caused the miscarriage, but I have my doubts."

"Evan would never do something like that," Michael says with certainty. "Maybe you whispered in her ear about an abortion. You knew if Evan found out the baby was yours, he'd kill you."

Dave gives him a crooked smirk. "See how quick you are to assume he'll be violent? What does that say about him?"

Michael doesn't answer.

"So now you know. Did it fix anything?" Dave turns away, shuffling down the walk.

Michael has the truth. He's not sure he wants it anymore.

After picking up his medication at the pharmacy, Evan uses the payphone outside the building and dials the number on Barry Rothman's business card. "Barry, it's Evan."

"Who?"

"Evan Chandler."

"Not ringin' a bell."

"You know, Ray's brother — Ray Charmatz?" The name catches on Evan's tongue a little.

It takes Barry a moment to put the puzzle pieces together. "Oh! Evan! How are ya?" Like they'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?"

"Joseph Jackson."

"Jesus, kid, what'd you do?" Evan wonders if Barry calls everyone "kid". He's probably older than Barry by about a decade.

"I'll explain the whole mess 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?" Barry barks a laugh. "I feel like I know you from all the wild stories Ray's told me over the years."

"Nothing too wild, I hope. I have a reputation to uphold." Barry laughs at that too; Evan thinks the guy's been sniffing gas. "Listen, I'm bringing my son and a friend of ours with me too. Is that okay?" Evan would rather not mention that this "friend" is one of Joseph Jackson's sons, but he knows Barry will understand the mob-speak — Michael can be trusted.

"Yeah, sure, go ahead. I'll put you up in my lakehouse. You'll love it; it's got a pool and everything." Barry gives Evan the address, which Evan writes on the back of Barry's card. "Remind me to pour you a drink when you get here."

Evan doesn't bother telling Barry he doesn't drink. "Thanks. I appreciate it."

"No problem. Tell Ray I said hello, would ya?"

That knocks the breath out of Evan, and pain swells in his chest.

Instead of clamping it down, he lets it ripple outward, feeling entirely too deserving of it. "Yeah... sure thing."

Evan hangs up the phone, staring blankly at nothing in particular while the world seems to wobble around him. He briefly wonders if this is an earthquake before noticing that he's shaking. That's why the world is moving. Panic bubbles up inside of Evan, as if some deep, hidden recess of his mind has overflowed like a science-fair volcano.

Evan's sitting in his parked car before he realizes it, his back against the solid leather seat as he tries to remember how to breathe properly. He can't understand why he's reacting like this, why he's suddenly falling apart at the slightest provocation.

While he struggles to see through blurry eyes, he understands that this is one of the rare moments he has by himself. Of course he has to keep his game face on for Jordan and Michael; he's 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. Evan was right to hide this from them. It's awful at first, guilt and regret and helplessness crashing into him like angry tides. Evan lets himself get tossed around, his chest shuddering with silent sobs. After about thirty seconds, his breathing grows deeper as he fights for control. Focusing on inhaling and exhaling takes precedence over the tumult of anxieties swimming in his head.

When the tears slow, Evan crams all the stress and worry and unfocused anger back into whatever internal suitcase it came from and starts the car.

When Evan gets back home he finds Michael lying on the sofa, staring at the ceiling with tired eyes and a frowning mouth. Something about

his expression conveys more than just his usual pouty distaste. "You alright?"

"It's been a stressful day," Michael says. Evan heads for the couch, and Michael moves his legs, making room for Evan to sit beside him. Evan rubs a hand up Michael's thigh in a reassuring, *I'm here for you* kind of way. "Did you get a chance to talk to that lawyer?"

"I got everything set up with Rothman. We can meet him at his Chicago office, and he said he'll put us up at his lakehouse."

"For how long?"

"I'm sure we can get as much time as we need. He was really fond of Ray." Evan loses focus for a moment, distracted by grief. "Anyway, I figure we can work with him to set up a plan on how to get Joseph by the balls. Barry will know what to do. He's got guys who can look into stuff."

"What if that doesn't work?" Michael asks.

"Then we'll figure something else out."

Michael squeezes Evan's hand and brings himself closer. Evan kisses Michael's hair, breathing in the faint scent of his shampoo and trying not to think about how many more times he'll live to do this.

Michael grabs what looks like a grocery list off the table and hands it to Evan. "Did I forget anything?"

Evan reads over the list. It's an impressive jumble of thoughts, somehow arranged in a way that makes sense.

Michael's plan seems to be this: break a window from the outside (preferably around back), upheave furniture and various items in the living room and kitchen to give the illusion of a struggle, have someone bleed (that someone will probably be Evan) enough to leave a

trail upstairs, as if a wounded victim were trying to escape or reach a weapon, then a pool of blood in the bedroom where Evan is (allegedly) killed.

"Very thorough," Evan says.

"I've never done this before, so I'm sure I missed something."

"It doesn't have to be perfect, just enough to fool whoever Joseph sends out here for a look. You got a script for the phone call?"

"I can improvise," Michael says. "I'm good at righteous indignation when it comes to my father."

Evan nods, conceding the point. He looks at the list again. "You wanna tell me what 'car' is supposed to mean?"

"You think Joseph and his men don't know the car you drive? Or the plates? We need to use a car he wouldn't think to trace."

"Right."

"Well, Dave owns a car-rental place—"

"No."

"— and he owes you big —"

"No!"

"Why don't we just take one off the lot?"

Evan was not prepared for Michael to take things in that direction. "Are you suggesting grand theft auto? Wow, Mike, I didn't know you had it in ya."

"There's a lot of things you don't know about me," Michael says with

a sad smile. "Just let me take care of this, okay?"

"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. We can go after hours, bring your car back here and park it in the garage."

Evan understands the crime scene will look fishy if his car is missing.

"And we can swap the plates," Michael says. "Dave would have the license plates of all his cars on file, right?"

"He's not gonna call the cops," Evan says. "Too risky for him."

"I'm not thinking about the cops. I'm thinking about Joseph. If he sends anyone sniffing around, Dave could be a source of information. You can't tell me he wouldn't want to rat on you if he got the chance."

No, Evan can't tell Michael that, because Michael is right. If Dave thought Evan was being targeted by a rival mob, he would sing like a canary, especially if Evan was allegedly dead.

"I can't believe we're doing this," Michael says.

"Last chance to back out," Evan reminds him.

"No way. You're stuck with me."

Jordan comes home a little while later. He looks surprised to see Evan and Michael lying on the couch fully clothed, or maybe it's their worried expressions that give him pause.

"How was the arcade?" Michael asks.

"Uh, fine..." Jordan shuts the door behind him and studies his parents. "Is everything cool here?" he asks slowly, as if unsure of the

proper words. "You guys seem... weird."

"We were just talking," Michael says a little too quickly.

Jordan doesn't seem to believe them, but he lets the subject go easily. "Whatever," he says like he doesn't care. He grabs a can of Coke from the fridge and goes down to the basement.

Evan exhales in relief. "Jesus..."

"You have to tell him," Michael says. He checks the nearby wall clock. "And you've got about five hours to do it."

"I know," Evan sighs. "Fuck. What am I supposed to say? 'Hey, Jordie, your dad's a wanted man, and you're probably not safe either. Road trip!'"

"We can polish up the wording a bit." Michael rises from the couch, reaching for Evan's hand to help him to his feet. "But right now we have to pack."

Upstairs, they open the wall safe in their shared bedroom and pack their bags. Michael is quicker at the task than Evan is, sitting on the bed with his bag already stuffed with clothing while Evan's still sifting through his closet space.

Knowing this will probably be the last time he sees any of his things fills him with a need to take all of them. Everything in this room, this house, has a memory behind it — often a fond one — and Evan 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.

Evan folds it and pushes the shirt into his bag. "You like it, or are you just trying to hurry me along?"

* * *

"It's the shirt you were wearing when I first came here."

"I can't even remember what I ate for breakfast most days. Why do you remember that?"

Michael's cheeks flush pink. "'Cause you looked good. You know I was attracted to you from the minute I saw you, right?"

Evan grins. "Is that why you volunteered to come here?"

"Mama always told me to land myself a rich mob boss," Michael says, rolling his eyes.

Evan throws a balled-up T-shirt at him. Michael laughs and falls back against the mattress, pretending to be wounded by the fabric assault. He picks up the shirt and examines it.

"I like this one too," Michael says, tossing it into Evan's open bag.

"On what very specific date did I wear this one?"

"Multiple dates, Mr. Know-It-All," Michael says, indignant. "It must have some sentimental value."

Evan nods. "Yeah, June really liked it."

"I've got some extra space in my bag, if you want to bring a little bit more."

Evan takes Michael up on that offer, which allows him to bring the tin of mementos he keeps under his bed. There's not much in there: some of June's jewelry, their wedding and engagement rings, a few stacks of Polaroids and more recent photographs, coins from their trip to Paris, some old baseball cards of Evan's and Ray's, his father's lucky bottlecap, and various other knick-knacks that don't seem like much, but to Evan they're irreplaceable.

* * *

Michael reaches for the tin, eager to inspect its contents. "Can I?" he asks, looking at Evan for permission.

"We're going on the run together. At this point, we have no secrets. Go ahead."

Michael 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. Evan doesn't remember taking these pictures; it must have been Ray. Or Dave, Michael thinks with a full-body shudder.

Next comes June, clad in an old New York Jets T-shirt of Evan's with her long, dark hair twisted up into a bun, holding two-year-old Jordan. There's several more pictures of June and Jordan, sometimes together, sometimes separate. Then a couple of Ray. Evan's eyes blur when he sees those.

The next photograph is of June, but Evan distinctly remembers this one because it was taken during her second pregnancy. She cut her hair shorter; it looked good on her. Evan thinks back to that exuberant smile, how happy June was to be pregnant again, how Evan ruined it all and destroyed his last chance at fixing their marriage.

"A few years before she died, June got pregnant again," Evan says in a small voice as Michael leans back against his chest. "It was gonna be a girl..."

It takes Michael a moment to speak. "Did you pick out a name?"

"Lily." Evan feels a small pull in the center of his chest as he sinks into the black hole of grief.

"I'm so sorry, baby," Michael says, placing a hand atop Evan's own, as if the touch might siphon some of his pain. Evan closes his eyes and rests his chin on Michael's shoulder.

* * *

There's the slight movement of Michael's arms as he looks through more picture, then he exclaims: "Who's this dork?"

Evan groans when he recognizes the photo. "Goddamn it," he grumbles under his breath while Michael laughs. It's an older Polaroid, the hues slightly sun-faded. But Michael doesn't realize that the dork in question is Evan. Or maybe he does and he's being an ass about it.

"Is that Ray?" Michael asks through giggles. "I see some family resemblance there. And there's June..."

"Michael, that's—"

"No way! Is that you?"

Evan's not getting out of this one with his dignity intact. This is a pretty incriminating photo. "Yeah, that's... me."

"Man, puberty hit you all at once, huh?"

"Puberty? I was thirty."

Michael can't stop laughing.

"It's in my best interest to just stop talking right now, isn't it?" Evan says.

Michael's levity dies in a slow fade. "Wait, this looks like it was taken in the seventies."

"So?"

"So you said you were thirty here." Michael gives Evan a bewildered look over his shoulder. "How old *are* you?"

"That information is confidential."

* * *

"I could just look at your driver's license," Michael taunts. "Or do math."

Panic squeezes Evan's insides.

"Let's see, if you were thirty here, that means you were born in—"

"The Bronx," Evan interrupts, kissing the back of Michael's neck.

"It's cute how you think I won't figure this out." Michael looks at him like this conversation is entirely Evan's fault. "I thought you said we didn't have any secrets."

"Will you call us even if I let you laugh at the rest of my old pictures?"

"Let' me," Michael chuckles, flipping to the next photo in the stack. This one is another old snapshot, this time of Evan and Ray at the bar before Evan and June 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 Evan is tuned to the bells of Michael's laughter.

"So that's what Ray looked like back then. Not a lot changed. But you?"

"You're not the only one who's gotten a few adjustments."

Michael tilts his head up to kiss Evan's cheek. "Don't worry. I'd still do you, even back then."

Evan snorts a laugh. "That's comforting."

Michael's quiet for a moment while he examines the picture. "This was taken in 1974."

* * *

Evan squints at the photo, trying to decipher how Michael figured that out. "How can you tell?"

"'Cause that sign in the back there says 'Muhammad Ali Wins Championship.'"

"So?"

The look Michael gives Evan is completely unnecessary. "In 1974, Muhammad Ali won the heavyweight boxing championship."

Evan stares at him blankly.

"Joseph's a huge fan of boxing. He took me and my brothers to see Ali some time after that match." Michael takes advantage of Evan's total bewilderment to do the math. "That means you're..." He stops, actually turns his body so he can look at Evan 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 said my age didn't matter to you." Evan will throw himself out the window if Michael leaves him over this.

"It doesn't. I'm just surprised."

"Is that why you have that horrified look on your face?"

Michael realigns his features until they make up a more neutral mask. "I hope I look that good when I'm forty-nine."

"Won't matter to me. I'll be dead by then."

Michael actually gasps and slaps Evan's arm like he's trying to squish a mosquito. "No! Don't say things like that!"

"Alright, sheesh."

* * *

They look through the rest of the pictures, and Michael tries not to laugh too much — a task which he ultimately fails.

Inside the wall safe are small stacks of bills totaling \$68,804. They stuff the money into a suitcase of its own.

When they finally finish packing, it's around five p.m. They're lying in bed, mouths and hands interwoven. Michael's tongue is shy and chaste, tracing Evan's own when it comes near. His hands are taut with unquenched need.

"I have to start dinner," Michael says, making no movements to do so.

"I'm not stopping you."

Michael slings a leg over Evan's hip, pushing him closer. "Maybe you should."

Michael lets Evan take him, and they move together unhurriedly. Michael is all warmth and appreciation, humming soft sighs as Evan moves inside of him. Evan wonders how many other men have seen Michael this way: his head tipped back in ecstasy, his lips parted in praise. How many other men have felt Michael's hands in their hair, dragging down their backs, gripped around their thighs? How many other men have heard their names slip past his lips?

Michael pulls Evan down for a kiss, and their mouths clash together awkwardly. Michael giggles around Evan's lips, and Evan knows it doesn't matter how many others have had Michael before. 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 with Evan 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 Evan over the edge, his fingers clenched around the sheets to avoid bruising Michael's skin. Michael doesn't wait for him to catch his breath. He brings Evan's face in for another kiss, thankful and greedy. Evan feels the smooth slide of bare legs as Michael fits them into the spaces between Evan's own.

"I love you," Michael whispers in a warm flare of breath over Evan's mouth. "So much."

"God, you're a sap."

Michael smiles and kisses him again. "But you love me."

"Yeah, I do. I really do. I hope it was good, 'cause it's gonna be just you and your hand for a while now."

"We can make time," Michael argues. "Your friend Barry can watch Jordie for ten minutes while we sneak off."

"Ten minutes? Does that include foreplay?"

Michael sighs.

23: The Sins of the Father

Michael and Evan lie tangled together in bed while they create a half-truth for Jordan. Loose curls stick to Michael's damp forehead, and he cuddles closer, resting his head on Evan's chest. "We can't lie to him," Evan says. "I have to be better than that."

"Sometimes I wish my father would have lied to me."

Sometimes Evan does 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 fought about this all the time. She wanted Jordie to get into this 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."

"For two people who grew up into this life, we're not really prepared for it," Michael says.

"I can see he's withdrawing from me."

"That's not what I see. He wanted to sleep in our room last night —"

* * *

"Because he was scared."

"And you're his dad. You're his role model."

Evan scoffs a laugh. "No, I'm not. Not anymore." Not since Michael came along. Maybe there's a bit of resentment in that thought.

"In the long run, you are," Michael says.

"There isn't gonna be a long run if things go on like this. If it goes on the way it is, he's doomed."

Michael lays a hand on Evan's 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 in the way young boys often hate their fathers, but someday when he gets older he'll thank you for it. You're trying to protect him, Evan. He'll grow up and respect that," Michael says.

Evan's fingers play in Michael's hair.

Michael says, "When I look at you, I see the man my father could have been. Jordie's incredibly blessed to have you."

After a quick shower and a clean set of clothes, Evan seeks out Jordan. He's still down in the basement playing video games. Evan doesn't understand how Jordan could spend the afternoon at the arcade and then come home to basically do the same exact thing. If he were to voice this aloud, Jordan would say this means Evan is old. Evan half-smiles at the thought.

"Hey, Jord', can I talk to you about... some stuff that's difficult?"

Jordan pauses the game and turns to face Evan, giving his full

attention. "This isn't about sex, is it?"

Evan huffs a laugh. "No, don't worry." He sits beside Jordan on the flimsy, worn-out couch. A distressed crease forms on Jordan's brow. Looking at his son's eager, innocent face, he knows he cannot lie. Not now.

"Michael and I are in big trouble. It's a long story, and the details don't matter. What does matter is that, in order to keep all of us safe — and that means you too — we have to leave town. All of us together."

"Like in the movies?"

"That's the idea, but it's a lot more dangerous and not-fun than the movies make it look."

"I know," Jordan says, but Evan doesn't think the kid understands. What they must do is scary as fuck, and Evan has never wanted a drink more in his life than he does right now.

"We'll go visit an old friend of mine in Chicago. You've never been there before. It might be fun." Evan gives him a pained smile, and Jordan returns the expression, trying to seem unfazed. "I don't know if we're gonna come back here. Maybe, maybe not. It depends if Michael and I can sort out this mess without anyone getting hurt."

Jordan looks like he's thinking it over. "When do we leave?"

Evan rubs the back of his neck. "We think it has to be tonight."

Jordan's eyes widen in alarm. "Tonight? What about, like, school?"

"Think of it as an early summer vacation."

"But if I'm out of school too long, I'll get held back!"

"There are tests you can take to place in the proper grade. Don't worry

about that.”

“I can’t call any of my friends while we’re gone, can I?” Jordan asks with grim certainty.

“I think you already know the answer to that one,” Evan says sadly. “These people who are after me and Michael know about you, and they probably know who your friends are. It’s too dangerous. But we will settle down somewhere and you’ll make new friends. I promise.”

Jordan ducks his head and turns away, his go-to gesture for when he’s crying and doesn’t want Evan to see. “Is this about Mom? Is whoever killed Mom coming after you and Mike?”

“No, this is about something else.” Evan sighs. “I’m so sorry. I didn’t want this for you, Jordie, but I swear Michael and I will do everything we can to keep you safe.”

“What about you?” Jordan asks in a wobbly voice. “You guys have to be safe too.”

“Of course we will, but you’re the most important thing in our lives.” Evan watches Jordan’s face for discontent. It’s there, but he’s not throwing a tantrum or bursting into histrionics, so that’s good. Maybe that will come later.

“I’m so sorry, Jordie.” It’s an apology for everything, but somehow the words just don’t seem like enough. “I swear, I’ll make it up to you somehow.”

“You can make it up to me by not dying,” Jordan says.

Evan doesn’t know if he can promise that. He nods and rises from the couch.

“Do I have time to beat this level before I have to pack?” Jordan asks, gesturing with his thumb at the TV screen.

* * *

"Yeah, you got about an hour."

Jordan thanks him, and Evan climbs the stairs, feeling wretched.

Michael's in the kitchen preparing dinner, 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 frowny look?"

"We don't have an orange bell pepper."

"Does it really matter?"

"I guess not." Michael closes the refrigerator door, still frowning, as if cutting corners on a recipe physically pains him. Maybe it does; he's 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, dinner is served, and Jordan sets his bag by the couch.

"You're done already?" Because there's no way he finished in thirty minutes. Evan's seen how long Jordan takes 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.

"I was already, like, half-packed."

"Were you gonna run away?" Not that Evan would blame Jordan at all if he ever thought about it.

Jordan looks almost as wounded as Evan is by the thought. "No! Uncle Ray told me to keep a bag in my closet with clothes and stuff so if we ever had to leave in a hurry I'd be ready."

* * *

It's hard to resent Ray now for filling Jordan's head with the harsh realities of mob life.

"It took your dad almost two hours to pack," Michael tells Jordan.

"That was your fault," Evan accuses him.

Michael looks at Jordan with a knowing smile. "I found a bunch of goofy pictures of your dad when he was younger."

"Hey, 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 dad!"

Jordan pulls a face that is absolutely unnecessary and hilarious.

"What, I'm not cool either?" Michael asks with a pout.

Jordan fidgets uncomfortably. "You're both dorks. 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.

They eat dinner in a strange, contemplative silence. Afterwards, Michael cleans up while Evan and Jordan load their bags into the trunk of the Mercedes.

Once the dishes are rinsed and loaded into the dishwasher, the task of staging Evan's murder is next. Jordan wants to help, so Michael lets him break the back window with his baseball bat (from the outside, as an actual intruder would do) and disrupt the furniture in the living room and kitchen.

Michael takes the blender from atop the refrigerator and some boxes

from the cabinet.

"Good idea. I could use a fucking drink before you cut me open," Evan says.

Michael gives him a look. "Don't be ridiculous. We'll do what Hollywood does and fake it."

When Michael grabs the red food dye, Evan gets it. "Fake blood? You're a genius."

"Cool! Can I spread it around?" Jordan asks.

"Sure."

The mixture consists of red dye, water, powdered sugar, and cocoa powder. When it's blended smoothly, the three of them use their hands for on-the-wall smears. To imitate gravitational drops, they let the blood drip off their red-soaked fingertips. They reach the middle of the stairs, and Michael slurps a spoonful of the red goo.

"Ew," Jordan says, his face scrunched up.

Michael spits the blood at the wall in a red mist. "Stippling," he says, as if it's the most natural thing in the world. And it does look like the burst of tiny droplets that would occur if someone were shot here. Evan is learning that Michael is disturbingly creative down to the last detail.

In the bedroom, blood is sloshed on the carpet, puddled in a manner that suggests someone dropped to the floor and bled out. There isn't much to be done about bullet holes; Michael's wary of drawing attention to their scheme during the dinner hour when most of their neighbors are home. The noise from the broken window might have pricked up some ears already.

When the house has been sufficiently turned into a fake crime scene,

Michael makes them wash their hands in the bathroom sink.

“Don’t leave a trail,” he says, and Jordan and Evan are careful no drops are spilled on the way to the bathroom. Michael pours the rest of the fake blood down the kitchen sink, rinses out the blender with water and soap until no trace of red dye is left. After the kitchen has been tidied up and any stained clothes changed and stuffed into a garbage bag, they’re ready to leave.

Evan lingers inside the house for a moment, taking one last look at the place he called home for the last fifteen years.

Evan drives them to Dave’s rent-a-wreck after hours. “So you’re really going to steal us a car?” he asks Michael in disbelief.

Michael turns in his seat to face Jordan sitting in the back. “Normally I don’t approve of stealing, but this is a special circumstance.”

Jordan nods, understanding. “Like when you broke into the bar?”

Michael frowns. “I was hoping you’d forgotten about that.” He pops open the passenger door and slides out of the car. “Take your pick, Evan.”

“Seriously?” Stealing a car is kind of badass, and Evan has a hard time imagining Michael and the word ‘badass’ in the same sentence.

“Just pick something so we can leave. This place gives me the creeps at night.”

“It’s not much better during the day.”

Michael looks mildly annoyed that Evan isn’t 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.

* * *

"Stay here," Evan tells Jordan before getting out of the car. "And if you see anyone coming, let me know."

Michael 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 Evan to not stare at Michael's ass.

"When'd you learn how to do this?" Evan wonders aloud in an attempt to distract himself from the serpentine curve of Michael's spine and stomach.

Michael's fingers work around the wires. "My brother Tito is a big car guy. And how are you the head of a mob Family if you don't know how to hotwire a car?"

"It's not like they make you take a test," Evan says.

Michael gets the car running and pulls himself up.

"But with all your talk about how you hate the mob life, I didn't think you'd actually know how to do the stuff," Evan explains.

"How soon we forget the Detroit story," Michael says with a sad smile. He swings his legs underneath the dashboard and looks at Evan expectantly. "Let's get out of here."

They head back to the house and switch cars in the garage. After swapping the plates, they load the luggage into the trunk of the Charger. Then the three of them pile in and leave town.

Evan lets Michael drive first, and Michael doesn't mind; it gives Evan

time to decompress and collect his thoughts after abandoning his home. This can't be easy for him. Michael wonders how long Evan 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. Michael needs to stop wondering these things. He switches on the radio to distract himself. Evan doesn't seem to object, even though he'd probably prefer Led Zeppelin to Hi-Five.

When they're a safe distance away from their neighborhood, Michael stops at a nearby payphone. "Time to call Joseph," he says. "No chickening out."

Evan wishes him good luck, and Michael gets out of the car. He drops change into the phone slot and dials his father's number. It's late in New York, but in California it's still early enough for Joseph to answer on the second ring.

Joseph's voice on the other end of the line chills Michael's blood. "Hello?"

Michael steels himself for his greatest performance yet. He pictures Evan on the floor in their blood-stained bedroom, and the shaky terror and rage in his voice comes with ease. "You *bastard!* How could you?"

"Don't you run your mouth off at me! Is this about Randy's little visit?"

"No," Michael moans. "You know what you did! You killed Evan! You sent one of your fucking goons to kill him, and I will *never* forgive you!"

The alarm in Joseph's voice is palpable, satisfying, and Michael revels in it. "What the hell are you talkin' about? I didn't give orders to kill nobody!"

"Bullshit! Was this your plan the whole time? Send some thugs to murder the man I love?" Michael knows that will stick in Joseph's homophobic craw. "And I guess you thought you were being *considerate*

by having them do it while I was out with Jordie!”

“I got no idea what you’re on about, Michael. If Chandler’s dead, somebody else got to him first.”

First. Like sending a hitman to kill Evan was already on Joseph’s to-do list.

Michael feels his control giving way, can almost hear it like a wet tear. “That’s awfully convenient for you, isn’t it?”

“Sometimes things shake out that way,” Joseph says, but there’s a nervous twinge in his voice that Michael rarely hears.

“It sure smells like a Joseph Jackson hit from where I’m standing.”

“Michael, I didn’t order this. You gotta believe me.”

“Why?” Michael says in a harsh, choked growl. “So I’ll come home and be a good little soldier? Fuck that! You sent thugs to beat him up and burn down his bar! Why wouldn’t murder be the next step for you? You made Jordie an orphan! He’s barely thirteen!” The sobs come easily when Michael imagines Jordan alone in the world. “I’m all he has now!”

“I swear I didn’t order this!” Joseph roars. “Don’t go runnin’ off half-cocked ‘cause you think I ordered your *man* killed!” The contempt in Joseph’s voice makes Michael sick with anger.

“I know you did, and all it got you was a promise that you’ll *never* see or hear from me again!” Michael says, his grip on the phone tightening as his fury rises. “Was it worth it?”

“Michael—”

Michael slams the phone into its cradle. He gets back into the car, where Evan waits with a proud smirk.

* * *

"Nice performance," Evan says.

"You heard Randy: I can be quite dramatic."

Later, Michael stops to refuel the tank at a gas station just outside of Jersey City. The location is intentional; Michael thinks Evan 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 Michael pumps gas. After a moment, Evan opens the door and slides out.

"What are we doing here?"

"I think you should visit."

Evan's mouth is curled in disgust. "No."

"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," Evan says.

Michael doesn't say anything, choosing to stare ahead at the gas pump.

Evan pushes a hand through his hair. "If I keep living in the past, I'll end up in a grave here too."

Michael drops the subject and lets Evan drive. They take I-80 west after leaving Jersey City. Jordan keeps himself busy in the backseat quietly playing his Game Boy and listening to music through headphones; Michael wonders if Evan hoped for this trip to be an opportunity to bond with his son.

"You okay?" Michael asks lamely as they exit the New Jersey

Turnpike.

"I'll feel a hell of a lot better when we get outta Jersey."

They drive for about an hour when Evan says, "How come you're not all mopey? You loved that house."

"It's not the house I loved. It was sharing a place with you and Jordie where we could be a family. When this is all over, we can find someplace else to do that."

Evan shoots him a look of surprise. "That's way too well-adjusted for me. You're supposed to be the sentimental one."

"I thought you said you were through living in the past."

Evan mouth-glares and turns up the radio.

There's a long, seemingly limitless stretch of country road before they finally stop at a gas station tucked off the Ohio Turnpike. The road is poorly-paved, serving mostly as a truck stop rather than anything presentable. If Michael had a nickel for every semi-truck parked around here, he'd be a rich(er) man. Evan opts to refuel the tank and stock up on provisions while Michael stays in the car with Jordan.

"Are you doing okay?"

"Yeah." Jordan doesn't look up from the book he's reading. Then he does, as if realizing something. "Hey, did my dad call school and tell them I'll be gone? 'Cause I heard a few kids got in trouble with the cops for skipping."

Michael hadn't considered that. A truancy call would likely get the police to the door, and if they see the inside of the house or the broken window around back...

"Thank you, Jordie," Michael says. "That's very helpful. Are you

hungry?"

Jordan shakes his head. "I got chips and stuff." His backpack is loaded with kid-approved snacks.

"If you want us to stop for something, just say so, okay?"

Jordan nods and goes back to reading.

Michael takes this opportunity to study the map. Staying west on I-80 will eventually put them on Indiana Toll Road, where they'll pass through—

Michael's heart stops for a split-second.

Gary, Indiana.

It wouldn't be too convoluted a detour to make. Evan probably wouldn't even notice, assuming Michael is looking for a rest stop or gas station. And Michael wouldn't stay long, just a casual drive by his childhood home.

Michael hates that his first instinct is to hide this from Evan instead of simply asking if they could drive past the place. Evan is all paranoia and distrust, and he might suspect that Joseph has men planted there in case Michael drops by. But Michael wouldn't stay, of course, just a quick look as they pass through—

Michael jumps when Evan opens the driver's side door and slides into the seat.

Evan gives him a quizzical look, the corner of his mouth pulled up into a small smirk. "Did I scare you?"

"I was just looking at the map." Michael folds up said map and jams it between the passenger seat and the console. "Do you think we can power through the night?"

* * *

"We should stop and get some shut-eye first. We show up at Barry's at the crack of dawn, he's gonna want to chat. I'd like his first impression of me to be a good one."

"You do get cranky when you're tired," Michael says. Evan reaches down to hotwire the car. "I'll drive for a bit, okay? You get some sleep."

It's nearing dawn when they reach the outskirts of Gary. Evan has the passenger seat reclined, his back facing Michael as he tries to doze off, but the poor shocks on this car make sleep 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. Just give me thirty minutes, okay?"

"Fine, but you're buyin' dinner."

Michael turns onto Route 12 which eventually feeds him right onto Jackson Street.

Gary was not a visually appealing city when he 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 his 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.

The car slows to a crawl when Michael reaches the old house on the

corner. He's already breaking his promise not to stop here, but nostalgia grips him and makes him step on the brake.

Evan notices they're no longer moving and raises his head. "Food or sleep?"

Michael doesn't answer, staring out the window at the dilapidated house that had once been his home.

Evan sits up and takes in the surroundings. "Jesus, what is this shithole? I thought we were gonna find a motel."

Without warning, Michael turns off the car and steps out, his feet carrying him closer to the house. There's a For Sale sign on the front lawn, swaying eerily in the gentle night breeze. He wonders if anyone's lived here since the Jacksons moved out, or if the house has remained vacant ever since they set their sights on California.

It's not magnificent like Hayvenhurst or Evan's Staten Island home, but this house holds some of Michael's happiest memories of life before violence and crime turned his family into something else. It's strange to think about them here in this quaint little town in Indiana. The idea of Michael's family having any type of normalcy seems discordant and bizarre now, like something reflected in a funhouse mirror.

He lingers there for a moment beneath the stars and the harsh gleam of the streetlights before going back to the car.

Evan's happy once they'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 watches Michael with an *I know you're hiding something* face, one he's been wearing since leaving Gary. Michael hoped Evan might follow Jordan's precedent and go to sleep, but apparently their nutritious fast food dinner has given him enough energy for interrogation.

* * *

Michael and Evan are sitting on the floor, leaning against the foot of the bed while watching 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? All the material goods I gave you for Christmas?" Michael gives Evan a gentle nudge in the ribs. Evan peels the tomato slices off of his burger like they've offended him somehow. "This is the part where you tell me what that little detour was about."

Michael shakes his head and steals some of Evan's Coke.

Evan grunts a rude noise in Michael's direction before demolishing half of his burger. "Still not as good as your cooking," he says, his mouth half-full.

"I would hope not. The day I lose out to McDonald's is the day I hang up my apron."

"But you look so good in it," Evan says with a wink.

Michael blushes. An ad on the television displays the date of a week-long sale at some department store, and a realization hits him. "You know we haven't even known each other a whole year?"

"And yet here we are. Would you have come to live with me if you knew in about six months' time you'd be holed up in a shitty motel, living on fast food and paralyzing fear?" Evan's trying to make a joke out of it all, but the levity falls flat.

Michael hears the guilt in his voice and wonders why it's there. It's

not Evan's fault they're living like this.

"I like the company." That comes out more carelessly than Michael 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?"

"It won't be like this forever. We'll get to your friend's place, figure something out, and we'll be okay again."

"You really think it'll be that easy?"

"Optimism's always worth a shot." Michael gives him a reassuring smile before stealing a few more fries.

Evan sighs, pushes a hand through his hair and watches Michael as if searching his face for doubt. "I know you want something more than this. For fuck's sake, you should be able to have a nice house and a family, and a bed you don't have to share with two other people, 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." He barely remembered to breathe there.

But Michael had a taste of the life Evan just described, and it was the most wonderful thing he could have imagined. It wasn't perfect, but that's what made it feel real instead of just some unattainable fantasy. Now that he's had that taste, he wants to fight for it.

"It won't be forever," Michael tells him again, hoping Evan hears the conviction in his voice. "If we can't find a way to get Joseph to back down, then I'll..."

He's not sure what he's willing to do. Could Michael kill his own father? *Would* he?

* * *

"I won't let anyone hurt you or Jordie." Michael reaches over to lace his fingers with Evan's, giving his words more weight.

Evan lets Michael lean against his shoulder, and for a moment it's tranquil, familiar, like they're miles away from danger.

"You know why I stopped at that house?" Michael says after a comfortable silence. "That was where I grew up."

"No shit, really?"

"What did you think the reason was?"

"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?" Evan asks, his voice soft as he rubs a hand over Michael's back.

"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."

Michael snorts a laugh into his nearly-empty Coke. "There's nine of us: Rebbie, Jackie, Tito, Jermaine, LaToya, Marlon, Randy, and Janet."

Evan counts them off on his fingers, stopping with a frown. "I think your math is off."

* * *

"And me, of course," Michael says, batting his eyelashes coquettishly. Evan's hand snakes up to Michael's hair, tangling in the long, black curls. "I think our parents really wanted us to be protected. I remember we weren't 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."

Michael thinks that desire to protect — coupled with the drive to ensure they would never have to struggle — influenced Joseph's decision to establish the family name as something synonymous with power and wealth.

"I never had much of a real closeness with Joseph," Michael tells him, finishing off the last bite of his burger. "He wasn't big on physical affection. 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 makes Michael's head hurt, a pulsing throb like blood behind a bruise. Something in Evan's expression says that he senses Michael's unease. His mouth is softer, understanding.

Michael says, "The most important thing to Joseph 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 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 guess I could have turned into one of those kids who would do anything to make their dad proud, y'know? But I realized very young that my father didn't love me for who I was. So I didn't see the point in changing myself to earn his approval. I like who I am. Mama likes who I am. My siblings like me. Joseph's the only one who has a problem."

"And he's hell-bent on making it everybody else's problem."

Michael chuckles humorlessly. "That's Joseph for you."

24: Weekend At Barry's

Evan's vaguely aware of something — or someone — nibbling his ear, kissing the line of his jaw. Through the sleepy haze in his brain, he assumes it's Michael. There are warm hands on his shoulders.

"Wake up," Michael mumbles. "You have to call Jordie's school."

Evan groans. "Can we fool around a little bit first?"

"Please don't," Jordan pipes up.

After Evan makes a half-awake phone call to Jordan's school explaining his absence (ye olde "family emergency" excuse), the three of them are 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 fantastic job of eating donuts and not getting crumbs on his shirt or the interior of the car.

The heart of the city is the closest thing to home Evan's seen since leaving New York. The array of multi-story buildings seems to stretch out for miles. Michael gawks out the window; Jordan remains unimpressed, having grown up with similar cityscapes.

* * *

They 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 bears 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.

The first door Evan tries is locked. The other one opens up and brings them into the lobby.

Once they’re inside, the mood changes. The commotion of the city seems worlds away, as if the walls are insulated against the noise. A water fountain attached on the wall trickles a quiet stream.

The receptionist greets them with a timid smile through the shutter, like she’s stuck in one of those booths in front of a movie theater where you buy the tickets. “Good afternoon,” she says, working her long nails with a file.

“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.” Evan gives her a warm, friendly smile. “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.”

She picks up the phone and relays the message. Evan looks around the waiting area. The outside may be ornate and decorative, but the inside sure isn’t.

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!" Rothman offers his hand for a handshake, then pulls Evan in for a crushing hug. He slaps Evan's back like he's trying to dislodge something stuck in Evan's throat. It's somewhat flattering to be greeted like this by a guy Evan's never had an actual conversation with until a day ago.

"Thanks for seeing us on such short notice. I hope we didn't inconvenience you," Evan says as Rothman leads them into his private office.

"What inconvenience? Always a pleasure to help out the infamous Evan Chandler."

Blush, blush. "Aw, shucks."

"'Infamous'?" 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." Rothman says, gesturing to Evan 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.

Rothman 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 why we're here." Evan's about to start explaining how they got into this predicament when Michael interrupts him.

* * *

"Jordie, you wanna wait in the lobby for a bit?"

Jordan picks up on the subtle cues and realizes he probably doesn't want to be in the room to hear this. He leaves and shuts the door behind him.

Michael and Evan sit across from Rothman in too-small chairs in front of the desk.

"So, what's this all about, Ev?" Rothman asks.

Evan squirms 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. Evan sounds like a goddamn moron. He clears his throat and tries again. "You heard of Joseph Jackson?"

Rothman's open face slams shut.

"Yeah, that one. Michael here's his son —"

Rothman slams his palms down on his desk. "You shittin' me?"

"I'm afraid not, Mr. Rothman."

Michael gives him a pleasant, shy wave.

"Please, call me Barry."

"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 hell."

Rothman nods thoughtfully. "I see. He's making threats?"

* * *

"It's gone way past that. He burned down my bar and sent one of his other sons to my house to ransack the place. And he sent a guy to beat me up, except the guy was a dumbass and ended up hurting Michael instead."

"We wouldn't be here if we weren't afraid for our lives," Michael says in a soft voice.

Rothman fixes him with a compassionate gaze. "Why don't you just go home, kid? Save these people the trouble?"

Michael's gaze drops to his hands, which are tightly knotted together in his lap. "I guess I'm being foolish and selfish when you come right down to it. But my father shouldn't be allowed to behave like this. I'm an adult. Shouldn't I be able to make my own choices?"

"What would you have me do?" Rothman asks.

"My brother raved about you, Barry," Evan tells him. "Said you were the nastiest, meanest son of a bitch he'd ever met." Rothman looks oddly flattered by this. "Surely there's something you can do to stop Joseph from messing with us."

Rothman 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'm really not in the mood for mob clichés."

"It might be a cliché, but it still rings 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. Joseph sees Michael staying with me as a business move. He wants Michael to take over for him."

Rothman thinks about this for a moment. "You're forgetting the most

obvious solution."

"Kill him?" Evan asks.

Rothman laughs a hearty noise that sounds like a hacking cough. "No, blackmail."

"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," Rothman says.

Michael speaks up in a low yet stern voice. "You're not gonna find anything."

"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 Evan share a distraught look.

"He, um, he passed away about a month ago," Michael answers when Evan's voice betrays him.

Rothman slumps in his seat as if the air has been let out of him. "No! You're kidding! Really?" He breathes out a deep sigh of lament. "Man, he was a great guy."

Evan nods in agreement.

"You want that drink now, Evan?" Rothman reaches into one of his desk drawers and takes out an engraved silver flask.

"No, thanks, I — I don't drink anymore." Evan's growing more depressed the longer this conversation goes on.

"No shit, really? You smoke?"

* * *

Evan shakes his head.

"You sure? I got a box of Cubans in here."

"I'm good. You go ahead and light up, though."

"Suit yourself." Rothman takes a swig from the flask and lights himself a cigar.

Michael spends most of the afternoon relaying details about Joseph to Rothman, name-dropping cities he spent a considerable amount of time in and people he made connections with.

When Michael mentions Berry Gordy, Rothman's face loses 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," Rothman says.

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?" Rothman gestures to the framed gold records adorning his office.

"You think he might have some dirt on Joseph?"

"Worth a look."

Rothman sets them up in his private lakehouse on the outskirts of the city. The interior is all cream and soft white, save for the guest bathroom which has tacky fish-patterned wallpaper. There's only one road leading to the house, since Lake Michigan backs up against it on the opposite side; Evan figures they won't be ambushed by a nautical attack, at least.

Michael's a big fan of the open, airy kitchen and the fully-stocked pantry. He sets himself to work on preparing dinner with the frozen pound of ground beef in the freezer. A jar of pasta sauce, a bag of noodles, and generous sprinklings of cheese yield a hearty dish.

"Anytime you make something with that layer of baked cheese on top, I know it's gonna be good," Jordan says as they settle at the table. The dining room looks out at the lake, and the water shimmers with moonlight.

Michael gives him a smile. "I do my best."

"This house is awesome," Jordan says. "Can we live here?"

Michael chuckles. "I wouldn't turn it down. But you should have seen the big house I had picked out before I came to live with you and your dad. I still have the listing tucked away in one of my bags."

"What's so special about one house?" Evan asks.

"It's enormous. 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. Oh, it's got lakes, and there's a big pool with a diving board!"

Michael's enthusiasm is endearing; Evan didn't think he could love Michael more, and yet here he is.

* * *

"You'd live in that big ol' house all by yourself?" Evan says. "Sounds awfully lonely."

"I was hoping I'd get married eventually and have a family to share it with," Michael says, blushing.

Evan spreads his arms. *"Hello?"*

"This was before I met you, remember?"

"You still wanna do that? Get married, I mean." Evan fidgets with the metal tab on his can of Coke while he waits for an answer.

"If I find the right person, maybe," Michael teases.

"Well, let me know when you find 'em," Evan teases back.

After eating dinner and cleaning up the kitchen, Michael is accosted by Evan, who grabs him around the waist and leads him toward the double doors that open to the pool. "Join me for a swim, pretty boy?" Evan purrs at Michael's ear.

Michael laughs and offers no protests as Evan opens the back door and gets them outside. "What about Jordie?"

"Nope, adults only. Kids out of the pool."

"I mean will he be alright in there by himself?" Michael feels like worrywart for asking, but if something were to happen...

"He'll be fine. This place is quiet enough you can hear any approaching car for miles."

"If I knew we were going swimming, I would've brought my suit,"

Michael says.

"Don't be such a prude." Evan pulls his shirt over his head and grins at Michael's flushed expression. "Need some help?" He tugs at the hem of Michael's T-shirt, willing and eager to assist him with the task, but Michael backs away.

"I can undress myself, thank you." Michael strips off his clothes while Evan's busy with his own. They slip into the tepid water, and Michael tries to distract himself by watching the light shimmer over the surface of the tiny waves. "I feel incredibly silly," he says with a laugh.

"Because you're naked?"

"Well, yes, but we're naked in somebody else's pool in a new city while our son pretends to be asleep in the house."

"Our son?" Evan cocks an eyebrow and wraps Michael in his arms, pulling both of them to the deep end of the water. His mouth is warm on Michael's neck, and his hands press Michael so tightly against him, like even the water can't fit between them.

For a glorious moment, Michael feels safe. *Please let this not be a dream*, he thinks, gazing at the stars twinkling in the black sky.

"Are you aroused by domesticity?"

"Why don't you tell me?" Evan presses himself impossibly closer, close enough that Michael feels something hard and urgent against his thigh.

"You're making a solid case."

Evan's fingertips trace Michael's spine, and his smile turns wistful. "This reminds me of the first time I ever saw you. Ray totally called it, by the way."

* * *

"Called what?"

"That I'd end up with you. Though I think he just assumed we'd end up in bed together. He was such a prick about it, like me thinking you were hot was the worst thing in the world."

Michael's face heats up. "You thought I was hot?"

"You couldn't tell? My tongue was practically hanging out that first day I met you."

"I could say the same about myself," Michael admits, diverting his gaze from Evan's face to the water.

"Can I tell you something? But you have to promise you won't laugh."

Sincerity is the only thing Evan would fear Michael laughing at. Michael nods and says he won't laugh.

"When June died, it felt like my heart was gone, like I was empty. But with you, I felt alive again, and I knew I could love you forever. That's part of 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." Evan breathes a soft exhale of regret. "My mind is a shitty place most of the time."

"I don't know how you manage it," Michael says, cupping a palm around Evan's cheek and feeling the heat of his skin. "How you carry all that around without breaking."

"The pills help," Evan says flippantly. "*You* help." He pulls Michael deeper still into the water. "Y'know, as much as I love your cooking, it would be such a waste to be in Chicago and skip out on the deep-dish pizza. Would you care to join me tomorrow night?"

* * *

"You askin' me out on a date?"

"It's been six months. I think we're ready."

"What about Jordie?"

"As much of a turn-on as your concern for my son's well-being is, I bet I can get Barry to watch him for an hour or two."

"Don't pick anywhere fancy. We didn't bring any formal clothes."

Evan agrees, and his mouth finds the slope of Michael's shoulder. Michael hums happily and relaxes against Evan's chest. Evan doesn't say anything for a while, just kisses Michael wherever he can. His teeth graze over Michael's neck, making him shiver. "Hey, if you married that girl you pretended you were seeing, your family'd have to accept her, right?" Evan asks. "So why don't you and I get married?"

"Gee, what a simple solution! Why didn't I think of that?"

"I could forge the marriage certificate," Evan murmurs at Michael's ear.

"You really think Joseph's that gullible?"

Evan grunts a sound of dissatisfaction and holds Michael tighter. "It's worth a shot."

A rivulet of water trickles down Michael's throat, and Evan follows its trail with his tongue. He holds Michael's hips in place, grinding against him while mouthing over his nipples. Michael's head tilts back, and he can't help but groan at the soft pinch of teeth against sensitive flesh.

Evan nudges him against the edge of the pool. Their hips clash underwater, and Michael feels something thick and wanting against his thigh. He reaches down to grab it, but Evan takes Michael's wrists

and splays his arms against the ledge. "This is about you, not me," he murmurs, capturing Michael's lips before he can reply.

"But what if I want to get you off?" Michael argues when the kiss is finished.

"You will," Evan says, and it feels like a promise the way he's grinding against him, slow and controlled, as if the slightest touch will break him. "But not right now."

Evan lifts Michael onto the edge of the pool. Michael's heart thuds at the sight of his own nudity, the realization that they've been humping in the pool while the stars watch.

The sandpaper scratch of Evan's stubble makes Michael moan, and he lies back against the concrete, staring up at the sky and sighing blissfully as Evan plants rough, wet kisses on his thighs. Michael whimpers and mewls at the heat of lips and tongue curled around his most sensitive part. He hooks his legs over Evan's shoulders in a plea for more, and Evan doesn't seem to mind, just keeps moving his tongue in tight, slow circles over the head of Michael's cock and keeps licking and sucking and oh God —

Michael crests, his body flushed and tender as orgasm wrings him dry. Evan lingers for a moment before lifting Michael's legs off his shoulders so he can properly appreciate them with gentle kisses. By the time Michael's thighs stop quaking, Evan's gone back to his cock, sucking the head before letting it drop from his mouth in a way that would make Michael hard again if he hadn't just come.

Evan doesn't say anything, just smirks 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.

Michael rises up and smirks back, but it doesn't feel right on his face. "What're you lookin' so smug about?"

* * *

"It's my turn now." Evan glides to the other side of the pool and climbs out. "Coming?"

Rothman has nothing of consequence to report the next day, though he promises that he's "got something cookin'."

That evening, Michael and Evan head to a quaint Italian restaurant a few blocks from Rothman's office for their first date. The restaurant isn't very full in the early evening hour, and it's dark enough that Michael feels tucked away in the corner booth.

There's probably no reason for him to cast nervous glances at the door and wonder how they might escape if the worst happens. The waiter loiters at their table once he discovers that they're friends of Rothman. Evan gives him twenty bucks to scram.

"Mike, you gotta relax," Evan says. "Nothing bad is gonna happen."

"We should have brought Jordie with us," Michael says, nervously jabbing at a slice of pizza with his fork. "We're being selfish."

"It's okay to be selfish every once in a while. About the little things, at least. If my parents had done stuff like this with each other, maybe they would've stayed together."

Michael looks up from his plate. "You don't talk about them very much. What was your mother like?"

"The long-suffering wife, you know the cliché. Except she got the hell out of dodge after a while, which I respect."

"I'm surprised your father stood for that."

"I guess he just wanted her out of the way so he could focus on the

‘important things,’ Evan says. “Ray and I would sneak off to see her after school. I figure she was too afraid of my father to start dating again. I never heard her mention another guy or saw her bring anybody around. She shared an apartment with a lady friend of hers who looked like Greta Garbo.” Evan pauses, a bewildered look coming over his face. “You think they were... like us?”

Michael snickers. “Anything is possible.” He throws a surreptitious glance over Evan’s head to check the front door. He takes a quick sip of wine before attempting to slide out of the booth.

“Hey, hey, where’re you going?”

“Restroom,” Michael says, like Evan’s an idiot.

“To check the toilet tanks for booby traps?” Michael hesitates a second too long, and Evan places a hand over Michael’s own. “Nothing’s gonna happen. Just relax and be with me.” His voice is hard, but Michael hears the pleading underneath.

Michael sits down. Maybe Evan is right; maybe nothing bad will happen, and Michael’s being paranoid for nothing. “Alright.”

Satisfied, Evan clasps his hands under his chin and locks eyes with Michael. “Good. So let’s talk. Rule number one: no business talk.”

“Reinstating our home rule. Good choice. What’s the second one?”

“No kid talk. I don’t want us to be one of those couples who only ever talks about their kids or their jobs. *Snore.*”

“Then whatever shall we talk about?” Michael says, feigning ignorance. “Your screenplays, Mr. Big Shot?”

“I haven’t given writing a thought in God knows how long.” Evan huffs a laugh. “I might be out of stories to tell.”

* * *

"Even after all this?"

"Does that surprise you? I always figured I was a hack."

Michael frowns. It bothers him when Evan talks that way, because whatever uncharitable, self-deprecating image Evan has of himself doesn't match up with what Michael sees. Michael supposes the reverse may be true as well.

"I think you've been through a lot the last few months, and writing is the last thing on your mind," Michael says. "It'll come back."

"I hope so. I'm scared about what I'll do for the rest of my life if it doesn't."

"Rule number three. No talk about the future."

Evan laughs. "Well, damn, we're out of time."

They do, however, find plenty to talk about. Michael tells Evan stories of his childhood in Gary, Indiana, and if they veer too close to "shop talk" Evan doesn't say a word. He listens to Michael with a warm expression on his face, as if he finds this fascinating.

Then Evan talks about his past: driving to Boston with Ray to see a Billy Joel concert (the New York and Jersey dates had sold out), his honeymoon in Paris with June, his time in Jersey as a budding screenwriter.

By the time an hour has gone by, they've finished the pizza and moved on to dessert: a heaping slice of tiramisu. It's decadent, at least the few bites Michael manages to pilfer before Evan devours a third of it in one spoonful.

"I'm glad you saved some for me," Michael says flatly.

"Sorry," Evan grumbles with his mouth full. "Order one for yourself

if you want.”

Michael notices a man coming over to the table. It’s not the waiter, because there’s something oddly familiar about the guy that turns Michael’s blood to ice.

Evan turns in his seat to see what’s got Michael frozen across the table.

When the man gets closer, Michael’s stomach drops in recognition. *I’d recognize that receding hairline anywhere.*

“Mike, imagine running into you here!”

“It’s almost like you followed us,” Michael says, the color draining from his face.

The man slides next to Michael in the booth, ignoring his frown. “You gonna introduce me to your *friend*, Mike?” He emphasizes the word in a way that makes Michael angry.

“Anthony, this is Evan. Evan, Anthony Pellicano. He knows my father.” Michael doesn’t bother introducing Evan with his full name. If Anthony’s been following them, he knows who Evan is by now. And he also knows the crime scene at the Chandler house was a frame-up job.

Which means Joseph called your bluff. But how?

Anthony Pellicano works as a private investigator for Joseph. In his long career, he’s solved missing persons cases, worked for the government, and tangled with the mob.

After his involvement with the Mafia, he was forced to resign from his government work. His reputation hanging in the balance, he worked with Elizabeth Taylor in the late 1970s to find her third husband’s remains, which had been stolen from the gravesite. That

case was how Joseph discovered him and put him on the payroll.

"Please, call me Tony," he says with false modesty. "What brings you all the way to the Windy City, 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. I'm a fairly cheap date."

Tony's lips press together in an angry line. Michael has yet to meet someone entangled in this business that isn't homophobic — except for Evan. But Evan 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. "I was worried my reputation wouldn't have any pull here."

Tony turns to Michael. "You're skippin' out on your family for this *yutz*? What a goddamn shame."

Evan places a hand over his heart in faux shock. "That hurts my feelings. 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."

Evan laughs, amused by the threat. "Big words, little man."

Tony's entire face glares. Even his ears. "What kind of mob boss fakes his death and goes on the run? A pussy, that's who. You're a coward, Chandler. You just run away when shit gets tough."

"You're workin' for Joseph, huh? How'd he know the scene was faked?"

* * *

"Even if I knew, I wouldn't tell you. He told me to investigate, so I did." Tony looks at Michael. "Fake blood? I bet you thought that was real cute. Real clever. All you did was make a goddamn mess. That red shit's gonna be hell to get out of the carpet." Now he looks at Evan. "Was that your lame-brained idea, Mr. Hollywood?"

"Actually, that was *my* lame-brained idea," Michael says hotly. "Did you come here just to put a scare into us? Let us know Joseph saw through the smoke and mirrors? Mission accomplished."

Tony sighs. "Can I talk to you in private?"

"Whatever you want to say to me, you can say in front of Evan."

"Fine, but he won't like it. Dump this deadbeat coward. He ain't worth the trouble."

"You're right, I didn't like that," Evan says, pretending to sound hurt.

Michael says, "Well, Tony, you know what they say about opinions..."

"You'll only end up hurtin' him in the long run if you stay. It's a shame what happened to his brother." Tony shakes his head and tries to look saddened, but Michael knows it's an act. "How would you feel if somethin' happened to that kid of his?"

Michael takes the bait. "You touch a hair on Jordie's head and I'll kill you myself."

"You always did have a soft spot for kids."

"Not just Jordan," Michael says. "Evan too. If Joseph wants me to cut all ties with the Family, he's right on track."

Tony shakes his head in disbelief. "Man, this prick's really got his

hooks in you, kid."

"Is it really so hard to believe that I actually like Evan?"

"What's to like? He's cowardly scum."

"You keep using that word. I do not think it means what you think it means."

Tony does not appreciate Michael's apropos *The Princess Bride* quote.

Michael decides to put it in layman's terms. "I think it takes a great deal of bravery to go up against one of the most powerful Families in the country."

"You call it bravery, I call it stupidity," Tony says. He rises from the booth. "If you're this hard-headed, I wonder why Joseph wants you in charge."

"Like father, like son," Michael grits out as Tony leaves.

25: A Stitch In Time

Day three in Chicago yields potential gold. Rothman calls Michael and Evan to his office, and he's practically bouncing in his chair when they arrive.

"You might wanna cut down on the caffeine, Barry," Evan tells him. "That stuff'll kill ya."

Rothman laughs and beckons for them to sit. "You'll wanna sit down before you hear this." He waits until they're seated and pours himself some 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 this guy who used to work for Gordy about ten years back has some beef with your family, Mike.

"Vinny 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."

Evan looks 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 earn a guy

cement shoes.”

“Or make him rich,” Evan adds, 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?”

Rothman scratches his beard. “Who says he hasn’t? Maybe Joe’s been payin’ him off to keep it on the down-low.”

“Well, he did a bang-up job on that.”

Michael looks at Evan. “You know these guys. They’re like Victor; they’d sell out their own mothers if it meant making a quick buck.” He turns back to Barry. “How much is this costing us?”

“Keep your money. This is just a favor for a friend.”

“I guess you get what you pay for, huh?” Michael mutters under his breath.

“Michael,” Evan says, somehow stern and gentle at the same time.

Michael huffs an irritated sigh that reminds Evan of Jordan; he wonders which one of them learned it from the other.

“Well, hey, fuckin’ strap in, Mike, ‘cause you’re gonna love this,” Rothman 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 not gunnin’ for *me*, it’s Evan—”

“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 bacon than save your own.” Rothman waves a hand in dismissal. “But 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 goes missing. A week later, some teenagers spelunking in the sewers find a woman's body."

Michael breathes out slowly, and Evan sees the revelation has wrecked him.

Michael's eyes glisten with wetness before an abortive head shake stops the threat of tears. "This woman got a name?"

"Source didn't give one," Rothman answers. "I guess he'll try to bleed us for cash before he coughs up a name. I can have somebody dig into police reports around that time and location if you wanna do it that way, but it'll take time."

Evan's drawn to the small, suspicious crowd gathering outside of the office building a few floors down. "Hey, uh, Barry, those your guys outside?"

Rothman 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."

Could these be some of Joseph's guys? This mob of people and Tony's appearance and the restaurant last night can't be a coincidence.

Rothman 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.

Michael and Evan hit the floor. Evan feels a rip of pain in his left arm. He probably landed on the scar from the bullet wound or stuck himself with broken glass.

* * *

Rothman's cowering underneath his desk like a true soldier.

Evan tries to think through the haze of panic in his brain. More shots ring out like the hard spatter of hail. "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!" Evan pushes himself off the floor.

Jordan's out in the reception area, and if he goes to the window to see what's going on, or runs in here—

"Evan, stay down!" Michael shouts. "Don't be stupid!"

They wait out the rattle of gunfire, which feels like an eternity but only lasts about a few seconds.

When the air is quiet and still, a man's voice sounds through a megaphone. "We don't wanna hurt anybody. Just give us Rothman."

"Oh, Christ," Evan grumbles. "Who the fuck are these guys?"

"Well, the good news is Joseph didn't send them." Michael does a double-take when he looks at Evan. He goes sickly pale, his eyes wide with horror. "You're bleeding."

The left sleeve of Evan's shirt is soaked with crimson. He hadn't even noticed among all the chaos. "I'm fine. I probably just cut myself on the broken glass." His fingers fumble for the scratch. Instead, they find a wound that's bleeding pretty heavily. Panic grabs a hold of him despite not feeling pain. The adrenaline's pumping too quickly now.

Michael stares at the blood seeping between the cracks in Evan's fingers. Then he snaps into action by crawling underneath the

windowsill. "Let's talk about this," he calls down to the 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."

Evan's crawling across the floor to reach the door, one hand pressed against his hemorrhaging wound. He twists the doorknob and peers out into the reception area. He doesn't see or hear any commotion. Michael's still negotiating this bizarre situation.

Evan sticks his head out the door. "Jordie?"

Jordan's voice is thin and reedy. "Dad, are you okay?"

"Yeah, just peachy. Where are you?"

"In the booth." Jordan's hand sticks up and waves from inside the receptionist's booth.

"This happens at least once a month," the receptionist says. "I'm used to it."

"Great, you two stay there 'til I come back, alright?"

"Is Michael okay?" Jordan asks. "Did anybody get shot?"

"No, we're fine. Just stay hidden."

When Evan gets back into Rothman's office, Michael is standing up and leaning out the window to negotiate with the attackers. Evan hears the faint wail of sirens and really doesn't want to be hanging around when the cops show up.

* * *

"Let me talk it over with him," Michael calls down. He ducks away from the shattered window.

"Are they gonna leave?"

Michael looks at Rothman. "Give me your Scotch and a lighter."

Rothman 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. 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, then a *whumpf!* sound. A rattle of surprised, angry shouts erupts from below.

Evan feels useless with a hand pressed against his arm to stem the bleeding while Michael does all the work. The sirens grow louder, and the attackers sound like they're surrendering and scattering, threatened by the impending police presence. There are fewer voices than before, and Evan hears the sound of engines revving and tires peeling out.

Michael risks a glance out the window. "We gotta take Jordie and scram. The cops'll be here any minute." He looks at Evan, hurries over and places a hand on Evan's red-soaked one. "You need to —"

"I'll be fine. Let's just get out of here."

"You torched my car!" Rothman 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!"

"I'd rather they killed me!" Rothman wails.

* * *

Evan says, "Guys, I'm shot, and the cops are coming. We can argue about this shit later."

Michael gasps. "You got shot? You said you were fine!"

"Leaving now!" Evan pulls Michael out the door with his good arm. "Jordie, c'mon, we gotta go!"

Jordan's sneakers clunk against the floor as he hurries to catch up. "Dad, why are you bleeding? Are you okay?"

"It's just a flesh wound."

"He'll be okay," Michael tells Jordan, trying to be soothing. "He's quoting Monty Python."

Michael drives while Evan keeps steady pressure on his arm. The rusty smell of blood curls his stomach, but at least the wound seems to have stopped bleeding.

While they're stopped at a light, Michael rips another long strip of cotton from the hem of his shirt and presses it against Evan's arm. Evan watches the bright red blood stain the white scrap.

"I'll live, but I'll never wear this shirt again," Evan says with good humor. His light blue shirt is painted red down the left sleeve.

Michael presses his lips together in a hard line, his face as white as bone as drives them back to the lakehouse.

Inside, Michael helps Evan onto the edge of the tub in the master bathroom. Jordan follows them in, his face even whiter than Michael's as he takes in the blood-stained shirt on the tile floor and the red smears on Evan's skin.

The dark red mouth of the gash on Evan's arm must frighten Jordan most of all, because that's where he's looking, his gaze wide and

disbelieving. He's trying very hard to seem unaffected by all of this, but thirteen-year-olds are not the best actors.

"You don't have to watch this," Evan tells him, trying to sound casual. "I'll be fine." The Chandler/Charmatz family mantra. Someone should carve *Don't worry, I'm fine* on Evan's tombstone.

"You're bleeding," Jordan says.

Michael opens the cabinet under the sink and pulls out a small black bag.

"Just pretend it's the fake blood we smeared all over the house," Evan says.

Jordan's brow creases. "But it's not. I know it's not."

Evan glances at his wound. Most of the blood on his arm has dried somewhat, but there's still a slow trickle leaking from the cut. "Bleeding's slowing down."

Michael makes a soft noise in his throat and digs through the med-kit. "It's deep. You might need stitches." His hands are gentle, even when the sting of alcohol is not. Evan grits his teeth; it feels like ten thousand ants are crawling inside the wound.

Jordan's standing by and watching with awe, so Evan feels the need to put on a macho front. "It just tickles."

"You're not ticklish," Michael says.

"I am when you're touching the inside of my skin." Out of the corner of his eye, Evan sees Michael pull out a needle and a thread-like material. "Oh, fuck no."

"Evan," Michael sighs, like he's trying to feed vegetables to an unruly child. "Don't make this difficult."

* * *

Upon closer inspection, Evan sees the thread isn't standard sewing fare but hospital-grade sutures. That doesn't make him feel better about the oncoming pain, but at least the stitches will dissolve. "Numb me first," he says.

Michael does, though Evan still feels the squeeze of fingers when Michael pinches the skin closed. Then there's another pinprick and an under-the-skin tugging sensation that makes Evan nauseous. But to let on that he's in pain will only worry Jordan more.

In order to sleep soundly, Jordan needs to think Evan is indestructible. So does Michael, now that Evan thinks about it; the guy carries too much guilt around already.

"Who were those guys anyway?" Evan asks to distract himself.

"Apparently Barry's in big-time debt with some creditors. They hired those goons to rattle him a bit," Michael says. "I thought the windows were supposed to be bulletproof."

"No such thing. Just bullet-resistant. And they probably tampered with the bullets anyway." Evan feels Michael shudder at the thought. If one of those bullets had found him or Michael... Or Jordan.

Mercifully, Evan's brain doesn't let him go further with that thought.

"Too bad you don't drink anymore," Michael says. "Might help with the pain."

"Y'know what's not helping? You talking about it." Evan feels another tug of thread and pinch of skin.

"Sorry."

Evan closes his eyes, focusing on how Michael's touch melts heat into his skin. Then there's the void of his fingers when the stitching's done.

Michael digs in the bag for a bandage.

Jordan sniffles, and Evan looks at him. Globular tears rise in his eyes and spill down his cheeks. He sniffles again and wipes his face.

"You alright, kiddo?"

"Shut up, I'm not a baby," Jordan whimpers, dabbing his face with the hem of his T-shirt.

"No one said you were."

"Jordie, are you okay?" Michael asks, suddenly in doting dad mode. "Are you hurt?"

Jordan shakes his head, his eyes still shining with tears. He backs up against the tub and slides down its smooth porcelain front. "You could have died! Both of you! 'Cause that's how it happens, just like that. Just like Mom and Uncle Ray. You're here and then you're not, and I hate it!" He starts to cry awful little sobs that cleave Evan's heart.

Michael rushes over and crouches in front of him. "Oh, honey, I know it's scary. I'm scared too. So is your dad."

"No, he's not! He just makes stupid jokes and acts like a tough guy," Jordan says, and Evan feels unfairly attacked. "Can you tell me why all these people are trying to kill you?"

Michael shoots Evan a *I thought you told him already* look. While Evan did have that conversation with Jordan, he skimmed over the reasoning behind it all.

Evan explains, "You know how Michael and I are together? Like a couple?"

Jordan nods slowly, like he's trying to piece things together in his

head.

"Michael's father isn't exactly our biggest fan."

Jordan gives him a puzzled look. "So what? He wants to kill you 'cause you like each other?"

Evan shifts uncomfortably. That could be a lot closer to the truth than they think. "Well, here's the problem: Michael's dad only sent him to live with us for a short time. He didn't think Michael would actually want to stay. His dad sees that as Michael abandoning his 'real' family."

Evan's trying to skirt around the central issue of Michael's Family being responsible for what happened to June and Ray.

"Michael's dad is a dangerous man, and he controls a lot of dangerous people."

"Kinda like you do?"

The air hitches in Evan's throat. "Yeah. When you get right down to it, Michael's dad is just a bully who has most of the school on his side, and we can't tell a teacher because they either don't want to get involved or they're on his side." Evan doesn't know how to simplify Mafia relations for his son, but, by God, he's trying.

"So that's why we're moving..." Jordan blinks, and more tears run down his cheeks. "He figured out that you didn't really die at the house?" He understands far too much for a thirteen-year-old.

"I suppose he did. But what happened today had nothing to do with that. It was just a matter of being in the wrong place at the wrong time."

"That's worse," Jordan wails, "'cause it's like what happened to Mom."

* * *

Michael pulls Jordan close and hugs him. "I promise we will keep you safe."

"But what about you and Dad?"

"We have to be safe too in order to protect you. Try not to worry about us. We will find a way through this," Michael promises.

After dressing Evan's wound, Michael moves him into the bedroom, insisting that he sleep and try to recover. Jordan agrees, so Evan is outvoted.

Evan grudgingly allows Michael to change into more comfortable, less bloody clothes and get him into the bed.

It's daylight outside, and here Evan is, confined to a bed while they're on the run. If Evan's life were a horror movie, he'd be the first victim to die a gruesome death.

Michael sits at Evan's bedside while Jordan's in the kitchen heating up a can of soup for him.

"I don't have the flu," Evan insists.

"A warm meal goes a long way," Michael says. "You lost a lot of blood. You need to recuperate. 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." Michael glances at Evan's wounded shoulder. "I need to get you some decent pain meds. Could you call Mark and ask him if he knows anyone in the area that might be able to help?"

"That seems awfully risky."

* * *

"Maybe Barry was right," Michael says with a sigh.

"About what?"

"About how we'd rather save each other than ourselves."

Evan shrugs his good shoulder. "Everybody needs a hobby, right?"

Mark nearly has a conniption when Evan calls him about thirty minutes later. "Holy shit, you're alive?"

"Barely," Evan says 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'a seen the fuss Joseph Jackson kicked up lookin' for you and Mike. He came around asking if I knew where Michael would have taken Jordie. I don't know why I didn't put it together that you staged the whole thing." Mark laughs in relief. "Shit, where are you anyway?"

"Your phone's not tapped, is it?"

Evan can almost see the *you're an idiot* look on Mark's face. "Evan. Please."

"I'm in Chicago."

"No fuckin' shit, really? Me too! I got this client who's a huge girl when it comes to pain."

"Uh, doctor-patient confidentiality?"

Mark scoffs. "What're you doin' in Chicago anyway? You got an

appointment with Barry?"

It hurts to furrow his brow this hard, but that doesn't stop Evan. "Are you talking about Barry Rothman?"

"Well, yeah."

Evan shuts his eyes. "How the fuck do you know Barry Rothman?"

"Who do you think introduced your brother to him all those years ago? So, Ev, what do you need?"

"Michael thinks I need some pain meds. Whatever you got on you is fine."

"You got hurt 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?"

"Alright, tell me where you are and I'll stop by —"

"No, I can't risk you being followed. I'll send Michael to meet you somewhere public."

"Great. You be safe, Ev. Try not to get shot again before Michael gets back."

Smart-ass.

Mark and Michael meet up in a Kmart parking lot. He finds it absolutely hilarious that Michael stitched Evan up, though Michael doesn't see the humor. Mark gives him a bottle containing sixty Hydrocodone for Evan — "just in case he gets shot again," Mark said with a laugh. Michael still doesn't get the joke.

* * *

After trading stilted small talk for a minute or two, Mark drives off in his Jag. Michael reaches over to put the pills in the console when he hears knuckles rapping on the driver's side window. He turns his head, thinking Mark must have forgotten something (another crack about Evan's proclivity for injuries, perhaps), but instead Michael is face-to-face with his own brother Marlon.

"Yo, Mike, how's it hangin'?"

Michael's heart lodges in his throat as a spasm of panic grips him. His first instinct is to get away, but doing so might raise suspicion, and he doesn't want to run over Marlon's foot with the car. So he just sits there, frozen in fear.

"What's with that look? I'm not here to hurt you or nothin'! I just wanted to make sure you're okay!"

Michael finds his voice. "Why wouldn't I be?"

"Lots of reasons, man. The horror show at Chandlers' house, your phone call to Joseph. We got ears all over, and I heard about what happened downtown today. All that gunfire... We got worried. Plus you're here gettin' pills from some doctor," Marlon says.

"You've been trailing me?"

"No, nothin' like that."

Michael finds it isn't hard to fill his voice with indignation rather than fear. "You just so happened to be here at the same time I am? Go on and pull the other one while you're at it."

"I was in the area and heard Torbiner was around. Figured he might lead me to you or Chandler."

"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'm here. Start talkin'."

Marlon shakes his head. "Go on and take those pills back to Chandler. He must'a got busted up pretty bad if you came out of hiding to get 'em. Just promise me we can talk tomorrow. The hit is called off, okay? More important things are goin' on."

Michael wonders what that might be, but he also wonders if his brother is lying. "Okay. I'll talk to you tomorrow, then. But if you bring any backup, the deal's off. You gotta meet with me in good faith. And don't even think about following me."

"Of course. I'll be at the Starbucks on the corner of North Wabash at ten." Marlon walks off to a car, and Michael waits until he's driven off in the other direction.

There's a good possibility that tomorrow's meeting will be a trap, and yet Michael can't refuse.

Michael keeps watch that night. After the attack on Rothman's office and the resurgence of Marlon, Michael figures hypervigilance is appropriate. He paces around the house, peeking through the curtains every now and then to check for suspicious activity.

Will this mindless traveling from state to state consume the rest of their lives? Endless nights that are too cold or too hot, run-down motels that smell like smoke and sex and mold, always looking over their shoulders wondering when the other shoe will drop. If Michael and Evan are constantly running, what kind of life is that for them, for Jordan? How can they put down roots somewhere and have a normal

family life?

"Mike, come to bed," Evan calls from the bedroom. "I'm gettin' lonely."

Michael stands in the doorway. "You have Jordie."

After the day's events, Jordan requested that they allow him to sleep in the master bedroom. He used the armchair cushions to create a makeshift mattress on the floor.

"He's out like a light," Evan murmurs. "I gave him a Benadryl after dinner when he said he couldn't sleep."

Michael steps inside the room. He picks up the bedside clock and sets the alarm for eight a.m. "I have a meeting in the morning," he says by way of explanation.

"With who?"

Michael wishes they could have sex; the post-orgasm intoxication usually makes Evan pretty agreeable, but the idea of doing that while Jordan's in the room (asleep or not) makes him uncomfortable.

"I saw my brother Marlon today. He heard about the shooting and thought I was the one who got hurt," Michael explains, as if that makes it better. "He doesn't want to hurt us. He just wants to talk to me."

"It's a trap," Evan mumbles in the worst impersonation of Admiral Ackbar Michael's ever heard.

"He said the hit is off. Something must be going on back home."

"You don't think it's a ruse to get you out of here so they can make a move on me?"

"I don't know if Joseph would risk that now," Michael says, joining

Evan in the bed. It's warm there, and Michael feels the heat emanating from underneath Evan's bandage. "Even if he doesn't think you're dead, he knows what would happen if you were. If he was responsible, at least. And if he's gunning that hard for me to take his place, he wouldn't want to drive me away. It's possible Joseph has nothing to do with Marlon showing up."

"Trust your gut, Mike," Evan says, his voice murky with sleep. "That's all you can do."

Michael wakes up before the alarm ever sounds. He switches it off (Jordan's still asleep and needs all the rest he can get) and lies there in the bed for a moment. The morning sun warms his skin, and the scent of coffee fills his nose. The bed is empty, but a small trace of Evan's warmth lingers on the sheets.

Michael gets up and finds Evan in the kitchen, stirring a cup of coffee. "Well, good morning." Michael slides his arms around Evan's waist, and he presses a kiss to Michael's cheek. For a split-second they're home again, then it all rushes back.

Evan offers the cup, but Michael declines. "Mm, suit yourself," Evan says before taking a sip.

Jordan's still asleep in the bedroom, so Michael doesn't worry about shielding his innocent eyes when he slips his hands beneath Evan's T-shirt. Evan softens under the touch, letting Michael's fingers glide over his hip bones. He sighs, soft and happy, and places a hand on the small of Michael's back, bringing him closer.

"Was that 'let's just get married' thing a joke?" Michael asks, because he's nothing if not skilled at ruining nice, comforting moments.

Evan's fingers spread out over Michael's spine, and he breathes a quiet laugh. "Of course I mean it. Getting Joseph off our backs would just be a great bonus."

* * *

"I didn't know you were such a romantic."

Evan kisses Michael's forehead. "It's a blessing and a curse, but I've sworn an oath to only use my powers for good."

"Like seducing me?"

"I think that definitely falls under the heading of 'good.'"

Michael smiles, but a dark thought flickers in his head like a faulty light bulb: *good for who? It seems like the only good that's come of this relationship has been for ourselves.*

As if to answer Michael's inner question, Jordan emerges from the bedroom, rubbing his sleepy eyes. "No PDA in the kitchen," he grouses. "That's where we eat."

"Can't you be happy for your old man?" Evan says good-naturedly. "I know you prefer to think parents reproduce asexually, but I'd like to celebrate getting laid on a regular basis."

"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.

Michael watches his two favorite men in the world bicker like children, feeling pure joy bubble up inside of him. For another brief moment, they're a family, the struggle of the road forgotten. But only briefly.

Michael glances at the wall clock. It's nine in the morning.

"I have to meet with Marlon at ten," Michael reminds Evan. "Will you two be alright?"

* * *

"We did okay before you came along, Mike. We'll be fine."

Michael meets Marlon at the coffee shop a few minutes before ten. Marlon's sitting near the window and sipping something foamy. He's wearing a nice suit, absolutely looking the part of a mobster, while Michael is dressed in a simple button-up shirt, jeans, and sneakers.

There's a chocolate chip muffin and a small latte on the table when Michael sits across from him.

"I ordered for you," Marlon says. "You still like that froofy shit, right?"

"I do, thank you." Michael takes a sip of the coffee to identify the flavor: cinnamon dolce.

Marlon laughs. "You never did like real coffee, did ya? I remember the first time you ever tried it back in Gary. You remember?"

Michael had been very young then, and Mama was always flitting about the kitchen with a pot of coffee brewing. Michael was curious, as most children are, so he asked if he could try it. Even with cream and sugar, he thought it was nasty. They all laughed, except for Michael, who was too busy shoveling in bacon and eggs to get the bitter taste out of his mouth.

Living with Evan changed his views on the drink, though. Some of his fondest memories at their Staten Island house involve the scent of coffee on Evan's breath when he would kiss Michael in the morning.

"Yeah, I remember," Michael says with a smile. "I looked in on the old house a couple'a days ago."

Marlon nods. "How do you think I found you?"

Michael feels two hands press hard on his chest. "So you *were* following me!"

* * *

"No, not exactly. Joseph had some guys stationed there when he found out you went runnin', figured you'd pass through Gary. You always were sentimental, and he thought without any other place to go you might try raising Jordie in the same place you grew up."

Not a chance, Michael thinks, his hand shaking as he reaches for the muffin.

"After that, he figured Chicago would be your next stop, and he told me to keep an eye out since I was in the area. Then when Torbiner showed up..." Marlon shrugs, trails off.

"You sent Tony, didn't you?"

Marlon looks at Michael like he doesn't understand English. "You got Tony on your scent? No, that was all Joseph. I wouldn't talk to you through a middleman, Mike. You're my brother."

"You keep saying that." Michael isn't buying Marlon's buddy act. How many days has he been watching them? Did he see Michael and Evan on their date? Did he find Rothman's lakehouse?

"I don't want nothin' to do with Joseph's vendetta, not when it puts you in the line of fire," Marlon says.

He's building up to something, Michael can sense it. "What do you want, Marlon?" His mouth forms an "o" of surprise. "I know you didn't come here for coffee and a conversation. So what is it?"

They 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."

* * *

“Too old for what Joseph’s putting her through.”

“She knows I’m okay, right?” Michael can easily imagine a situation where Mama isn’t aware of Michael’s angry phone call to Joseph, where she hears of the gruesome discovery at the Staten Island house and thinks the absolute worst.

“Yeah, but I don’t know, Mike, things are pretty bad back home,” Marlon says, staring into his coffee cup.

“What? What are you talking about? Is she all right?”

Marlon fixes his eyes on Michael. “You need to know that this has nothin’ to do with all this, alright?” Michael nods limply. “While you were gone, Mama caught pneumonia, and at her age...”

Michael’s 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 Michael’s mouth as he slumps in his seat. With sudden, sharp terror, Michael thinks of his mother falling ill without her closest son at her side.

26: In Place of Someone You Love

Michael bolts into the lakehouse, his eyes blurred with angry tears. Evan feels his distress like a disturbance in the air and moves to offer Michael support, comfort, or strength — whichever he needs. “What happened? Did someone hurt you?”

Michael shakes his head numbly, burying his face in Evan’s chest. Evan carries him to the couch and lets him sit. Michael cries without pause. Evan shushes him and strokes Michael’s hair.

“Oh, jeez, Mike!” Jordan cries, emerging from the hallway. “Are you hurt too?”

Michael shakes his head, struggling to speak through the sobs hiccuping in his throat. “My — my mother...”

“Did she die?” Jordan asks, his voice practically a whisper.

Michael shakes his head again, the mere thought making him cry harder. “No, no, no, she’s — she’s sick...’cause of me.”

Evan brushes Michael’s hair out of his face, and his palm is warm on the back of Michael’s neck. “Did Marlon tell it was your fault?”

“No, but — but I was gone...” Michael snuffles and wipes his eyes. “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. Mama was always an early riser...”

“You’re leaving us?” Jordan asks, and Michael catches the split-second of disappointment on Evan’s face before it disappears.

“Not forever. Just long enough for my mother to get better.” Michael hurries to the bedroom and finds his luggage. He reaches into one of the bags and digs around. “You two can’t stay here. Joseph already knows about Barry. It won’t be long before he finds this place, if he hasn’t already.”

Michael pulls out a small address book and tears out a stub. “I want you to go here.” He hands Evan the paper, and Evan studies the address scrawled there. “His name’s Frank Dileo. He’s a good guy. I used to stay at his place sometimes when I wanted to get away from the Family. Joseph will never trace him. Don’t worry.”

Evan seems slightly relieved that Michael has a plan for him and Jordan, but there’s still worry etched along his brow. “Slow down and think about this. Don’t you think it’s possible that this is just a pile of crap to get you home? If they can’t drag you back, then they’ll just make you *want* to come along. And making you think it was your decision just disguises how manipulative it is.”

A part of Michael cries out that, *yes, of course this is a trick, you fool!* But he could never forgive himself if the worst happened.

“I know. Don’t think I haven’t thought about it,” Michael says. “But even if it is a lie, I’ll be able to look into what Barry was talking about. I’ll be like a spy infiltrating the enemy camp. Maybe I have to be there so I can pull the thread that unravels them.”

* * *

"I don't like splitting up," Evan says.

"I don't either, but I promise I will come for you."

Evan's mouth curves into a smirk. "You always do," he murmurs at Michael's ear before kissing his cheek. Michael turns his head to meet Evan's lips.

Jordan makes a quiet sound of disgust at their display of affection.

"When it's safe, I'll call Frank and make sure you guys made it okay," Michael says, quickly packing up his belongings.

"And if you don't?" Jordan worries.

"I will."

The Jacksons, as deranged as they might be when dealing with other people, would never kill Michael. They need him alive, especially if they want to know where Evan and Jordan are hiding.

When Michael finishes packing, Evan drives him to the nearest bus stop along with Jordan in the backseat. Michael agreed to meet Marlon at the Starbucks again when he's ready to leave, but he wanted to make sure Marlon couldn't trace where he came from or find where Evan and Jordan are hiding. Those two will be long gone by the time any of Joseph's goons find the lakehouse, however.

"Remember, don't stop too long for anything," Michael reminds Evan. "You good to drive? You can ditch the car if you need to, right?"

"C'mon," Evan says. "You think I'm totally helpless without you?"

"I know you aren't."

"You're sure your Family doesn't know about this Frank Dileo guy?"

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 out of the business?" That piques Evan's interest, and he raises his eyebrows.

Michael leans in and squeezes his hand. "Evan, don't let anything happen to yourself or Jordie, okay?" Michael kisses his mouth, lingering a little too long. "I love you."

"I love you too," Evan murmurs around Michael's lips. Michael savors the scratch of stubble against his chin before Evan pulls away. "You can tell me all this mushy crap later."

With a final goodbye, Michael grabs his bags and departs. He takes the bus to the closest stop near the Starbucks.

Marlon's waiting outside his car. Michael gets inside and tosses his bags into the back seat. After riding around in the stolen vintage Charger, Marlon's sleek, leather-interior car is a drastic change. The passenger seat has just the right amount of give to it. Michael's body sinks into the seat and thanks him for the comfort, but it just doesn't feel right without Evan and Jordan there too.

The long drive to O'Hare is spent mostly in silence. Michael keeps the radio switched on, but it only sounds like white noise.

About halfway through the drive, Marlon makes a call with his car-phone. Michael listens intently, trying to decipher whether or not Mama's condition is as bad as he imagines.

"It's Marlon. I got Michael; he's comin' home. ... 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 land."

Marlon hangs up and leans back in the seat.

* * *

"Well?" Michael prods. "Did she say anything?"

"She must be asleep right now, 'cause he didn't put her on the phone."

She was sleeping when Michael called, too. Dread wraps around his 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."

"Does this 'job' have anything to do with tracking me or Jordan down?"

"The world don't revolve around you, Copernicus," Marlon jokes. "We got other business goin' on."

Evasive. Are the alarm bells ringing yet?

They're quiet for a moment before Marlon speaks up again. "Hey, you remember Alejandra?" Michael presses his lips together, trying to recall the name. "Randy's girl?"

"Oh, right."

"She's with Jermaine now."

"So I leave for a few months and everybody goes nuts?"

"Seems like it."

The unspoken insinuation that he needs to be present at all times to keep the more adventurous members of his family in line is there, needling Michael. "He really needs to re-evaluate his life choices."

"Speakin' from personal experience?"

* * *

Michael takes the jab without flinching. He'll need to take more verbal barbs tonight when he returns to Hayvenhurst; enduring Marlon's teasing here is 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 Michael. Michael tries to busy himself with reading the magazines stuffed into the seat in front of him. But his thoughts keep drifting to Mama, if she's sick because of him, if he inadvertently killed her by being reckless and stupid and stubborn.

He thinks about Evan and Jordan and wonders if they're safe, if they'll make it to Frank's place and hide out until Michael can come back for them. There are no safe thoughts in his head. Thinking back on happier times with Evan and Jordan just makes Michael miss them more. Thinking about Mama fills him with worry, and thinking about his siblings makes him fear how desperate they may be to bring Michael home.

He stares out the window at the endless swirls of cottony clouds. After a few moments his eyes slide shut, his body exhausted from the near-constant assault of stress. The images that flicker behind his lids are nowhere near pleasant, but he manages to get a few hours of rest before Marlon jostles his shoulder.

"Yo, Mike, wake up."

Michael sits up. "Trouble?"

"Nah, we're home." Marlon sounds much happier about this than Michael is.

Tito picks them up from the airport. He claps Michael on the shoulder and then pulls him 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 Michael.

"It's nice," Michael says after loading his luggage in the trunk. The interior is black leather, with windows tinted dark enough to shield his eyes and skin from the sun. Michael slides into the passenger seat. "Couldn't you have stolen something less conspicuous?"

Tito and Marlon share a laugh. "I didn't steal it, oh ye of little faith," Tito says. He turns the key, and the engine comes to life with a roar. "I gotta tell you, that fake blood shit was dope! You had me fooled right up 'til the end!"

Michael pretends to keep up the charade. "Who said it was fake?"

"If you wanna blame anybody, blame Jermaine. He's the one who remembered all the pranks and stunts you pulled when we were comin' up. With that and the timing of the whole thing, Joseph thought it was fishy. He swore he never ordered anyone to kill your man, so he sent Tony to take a look at the house."

Michael had forgotten about Tony, had assumed Joseph would write off Evan's 'death' as a happy coincidence and focus his attention on Michael. And yet where Michael goes...

We should have split up from the very beginning, Michael thinks. I take Jordie and we make the best of it. Maybe Evan was doomed from the moment I set foot in that house six months ago.

Michael shuts his eyes to keep the sting of tears at bay. Joseph would never give the order to kill a child, would he? No, Michael can't imagine it. Evan might be marked for death, but not Jordan. Michael hopes whatever thug Joseph sends to do the deed will take mercy on Jordan and bring him to Hayvenhurst where Michael can spend the rest of his life making amends to the kid.

Michael recalls Jordan's words: *You could have died! Both of you! 'Cause that's how it happens, just like that. Just like Mom and Uncle Ray. You're here*

and then you're not, and I hate it!

"You look glum, chum," Tito says, oblivious to how frayed Michael feels at his edges. "Got yourself some boyfriend trouble?" He and Marlon snicker.

Hardy har-har, isn't two men together such a hi-larious idea! Hyuk, hyuk. Maybe Michael's being uncharitable toward his brothers, but he doesn't much care. He's sick of all the snide jokes, of the wary glances once people learn he and Evan are a couple. He remembers the stricken look in Barry Rothman's eyes when Evan spilled blood in the office. It was a look that said, *We might be pals, but you two are queers first and foremost, so get your tainted blood out of here.*

Marlon slaps a friendly hand on Michael's shoulder from the back seat. "Don't trip! It's good to have you back. We missed you. Especially Mom."

Michael nods lamely, looking out the window at the familiar city of Los Angeles and letting a few tears escape.

After a considerable amount of time, they pull up to Hayvenhurst. Tito takes Michael's bags, and they start up the walkway. Marlon steps in front of Michael to open the door.

The inside of the mansion is unchanged from when Michael left, with nothing moved out of place. He wonders if that means anything, if his presence in the family allows them to change and evolve rather than stay stagnant.

Marlon pats Michael on the back as they stand in the foyer. "Welcome home!"

To Michael, this place certainly isn't home. It may be where he spent most of his years with the family, but it wasn't a particularly happy time. Tito and Marlon don't hover, letting Michael climb the stairs to his room and pull open the door. A familiar scent lingers inside,

having been shut in this room since he moved out. He ignores how that makes him feel.

Everything is pretty much the same as it was when he 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 he left on the floor remain in their places. It's comforting in a way, yet it isn't. It's a painful reminder of the family's grief, how they refused to move on and accept that Michael left.

Michael unpacks to maintain the illusion that he's staying here longer than a day or two. He's thankful that no one hovers while he unpack the bags. It's nice to be alone and not have to force enthusiasm.

Michael finds one of Evan's T-shirts tucked in among some of his own. Evan probably won't even notice it's gone — or maybe he will. He wears it a lot. But Michael needs a tangible reminder of Evan now, one that's absorbed his rich, familiar musk into its fibers. Michael presses the fabric to his nose and inhales one deep whiff of the scent.

"Gee, you come home and don't even say hi to your favorite sister? Rude," Janet says from the doorway.

Michael nearly falls off the edge of the bed, flailing his arms and scrambling to shove the T-shirt back into his bag. "Haven't you ever heard of knocking?"

"Your door was open."

"You could still knock." Michael shuffles through the rest of the items he hasn't unpacked yet, embarrassed that she's seen his secret.

Janet closes the door as she walks inside. "Is that *his* shirt?"

"What?" Michael tries to play it off like he's got no idea what she's talking about, but the furious thumping in his ribcage might be audible.

* * *

"You took one of Evan's shirts as a memento, didn't you?" Janet sits beside him on the bed.

"It could be mine."

Janet grabs the shirt and sniffs it. "Since when do you bathe in Aqua Velva?"

"Since now."

"God, it physically hurts me to watch you lie." Janet hands him the shirt, which Michael stows away safely in the top dresser drawer. "No wonder Joseph called your bluff."

"Was it that obvious?"

A familiar voice sounds in the hallway: "Michael, is that you?"

"Mama? I'm home!" Michael nearly trips over his own feet rushing out to greet her. He's about to engulf her in a bear hug before he remembers that she's sick.

Mama, however, plays by no such rules. She wraps her arms around Michael as tightly as she can and kisses his cheeks over and over. He imagines his 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 Michael places his hands on her shoulders.

"Mama, don't overexert yourself—"

"Overexert my foot! Give your mother a hug!" She embraces him again, and Michael doesn't fight it.

"But your condition—"

* * *

Mama pulls away and gives him a puzzled look. "What *condition* are you talkin' about?"

Everything crashes down on Michael at once. "You're... not sick? Marlon said you had pneumonia."

Mama gasps. "Pneumonia? Honey, I'm doing just fine! I may not be as young as I used to be, but I'm sure not sick!" She shakes her head. "That Marlon. He's not too old to get a whuppin', I'll tell you that."

Mama takes Michael's hand and guides him down the stairs. "C'mon, honey, let's get supper started."

Michael's feet take each stair, his entire body in a numb sort of shock.

They had lied. They lied so Michael would come home. So he would leave Evan and Jordan. Thank God Michael had the hindsight to send them somewhere safe before he left.

He had suspected it was a lie (hadn't Evan raised the same concern as well?), and this only confirms it. Mama's bewilderment and her jaunty steps down the stairs only reiterate the lie. This is not a sick woman.

Michael feels it coming now, the snap Joseph has been waiting for. Michael expected to feel frightened when things reached this point, as he knew they might, but he's relieved to find a calmness spreading throughout him. Fear is there, but so is something else, something with teeth.

"Janet, help Mother in the kitchen," he says coolly. "I'll join you in a moment."

Janet doesn't argue. She knows that tone of voice.

Michael stalks through the living room and grabs Marlon by the

collar of his shirt.

“Whoa, hey!” Marlon yells.

Tito, Jermaine, and Randy jump up from their seats, as if to interfere, but they hang back, unwilling to share Marlon’s fate.

Michael pays them no heed, dragging Marlon into the backyard by his shirt collar.

“How could you?” Michael shrieks as he throws Marlon onto the grass. “You lied about *our mother?*”

Marlon scoots away as Michael advances. “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 Michael from behind. He stabs an elbow into their ribcage. Michael hears an *oof!* sound, and the iron fetters disappear.

“Mike, Mike, please, just listen for a second!” Marlon pleads, his voice filled with fear and understanding. His breath comes in quick gasps, although Michael hasn’t hurt him yet.

“No, I think I know exactly how this played out,” Michael snarls. “Daddy Dearest told you to do it, didn’t he? How much did it cost?”

“Nothing! No money!”

“So you lied and manipulated me for free? That’s so much worse!”

“‘Cause you lost your head, man!” Marlon wails. “This Chandler guy’s got you good.”

“He’s not controlling me!”

* * *

"Maybe not, but you ain't yourself anymore! You've changed. And the way you're runnin' with him, it's gonna end up gettin' people killed. Good people like me and your brothers. And he ain't worth it."

"That's not your call to make!" Michael shouts.

"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."

Michael isn't proud of what he does next. He kicks Marlon in the side so hard the man lifts off the ground. Marlon squawks a noise of pain.

Michael grabs him by the collar of his shirt, this time using it to hold Marlon steady for a punch. Marlon, heartbreakingly enough, doesn't cry for mercy or beg Michael to stop. He puts up no fight, just lets the blows rain down until Tito and Jermaine interfere. They pull Michael away from Marlon, and Michael doesn't bother holding on.

Tito tends to Marlon, whose nose and mouth are bleeding, and leads him into the house to patch up his wounds.

Michael slumps into the grass. Maybe Marlon is right, and Michael isn't himself anymore. Would Michael have even considered assaulting his own brother six months ago? Doubtful.

For just the briefest moment, Michael understands why Evan solves most problems through violence: it feels good. It's an act of control in otherwise helpless situations. No waffling or overthinking, just acting on pure instinct, and the chemical cocktail of adrenaline and dopamine acts as its own reward.

Jermaine kneels beside Michael on the lawn. "He'll be fine. He's gotten in worse scuffles before. He won't tell Joseph, if that's what you're worried about."

* * *

Michael almost laughs. Joseph would be delighted to hear that Michael's hardened up. *Like father, like son.*

Nobody mentions the lumpy, swelling bruises on Marlon's face that evening over supper. Joseph looks like he wants to ask but thinks better of it, instead scooping out an extra helping of corn casserole.

"Glad to have you home, Michael," Joseph says with pride. "I guess when your back's against the wall, you come home to your real family."

"Or when you use my mother in a lie," Michael murmurs to his pork chops.

"What's that? Speak up. You've always been a real soft-talker. Is that what Chandler liked about you? You keep quiet and don't raise a fuss?"

Michael scowls at his plate. He knows Joseph's saying these things to egg him on, to start an argument that Mama will ultimately cull due to her "no fighting at the table" rule, and Joseph will take that as a victory in his corner.

Michael knows all of this, and yet he takes the bait. "That's not what he liked about me." Michael is careful to use past tense, wanting Joseph to get the impression that the Evan-Michael union is no more. *Perhaps only then will he leave Evan and Jordie alone...*

"So I was right. It was a sex thing," Joseph says.

"Joe," Mama warns.

Michael's certain he's blushing all the way to his roots. "It doesn't matter now. It's over."

* * *

"Poor baby," Mama says from beside him, wrapping a supportive arm around Michael's shoulders. "I know he meant a lot to you."

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, Michael. Might save you a whole lot of trouble. Good thing Tony's on it."

Michael freezes mid-chew, feeling as if someone's reached into his chest and squeezed his heart. If Tony's still tracking Evan and Jordan, if Michael left them unprotected...

"Don't you think we should use Tony for somethin' else?" Marlon says. "Mike's home. That's what's important. And you heard him: it's over."

"Boys, you know the rules. No business at the table," Mama chides.

Joseph sets his jaw in that way of his and bites into a pork chop as if it's personally offended him.

Marlon approaches Michael later that evening while he's clearing the table after dinner. Marlon doesn't speak at first, just gives Michael a look that says he's sorry for everything.

"Thank you," Michael whispers, his hands and voice trembling.

Marlon gives a nod and helps Michael clean up by stacking dishes and gathering utensils. "I owed you one."

"I don't know what's wrong with me," Michael looks at his brother and sees how dark the bruises have become. "I'm sorry."

"Shit, man, I get it. Love makes people crazy. You think I wouldn't do the same thing if Joseph tried to keep me from Carol?"

Michael hadn't really thought about that before. "Well, you're lucky your relationship isn't a huge joke to everyone."

* * *

"We tease you, but I forget how sensitive you are sometimes. For what it's worth, I don't think it's a joke. This guy must be somethin' pretty special if you're willing to raise hell like this. I'd be scared if I was Joseph." Marlon laughs. "I thought about movin' away too, maybe down near Atlanta."

"Atlanta, Georgia?"

"Well, the local one's all booked up." Marlon chuckles at Michael's frown. "But Joseph wouldn't let me. He wanted me to stay close. So, yeah, maybe I can sympathize."

"I never knew that."

"We all got our secrets."

Sleep evades Michael that night, and he stares at the ceiling of his bedroom as he lies there. Although there's nothing truly safe for him to think about now, he can't help but let his thoughts drift to the travesty of his family. Driving through Gary and reminiscing about life's happier days was almost suffocating, because when Michael resurfaced he had a new clarity with which to see his closest kin.

They've all been changed and twisted by their success and 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. They've sacrificed trust and love for heartbreak and betrayal, and because they don't trust, they're a discordant mess of emotions, rigged to explode and crumble at the slightest threat to their unity.

Joseph preaches loyalty and integrity but twists the 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?

* * *

Michael can't trust them. He knows they're waiting for the right opportunity to exploit him for their own gain. What ethics? They've already proven they have no qualms about lying to him or manipulating his emotions. Lying about Mama's health to get Michael to leave Evan is Joseph's attempt at forcing him into this life through isolation; without Evan and Jordan to ground Michael, it will be easier, Joseph thinks, to make him cross the line and become his successor.

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 they taught besides bending and breaking the rules for the sake of your family?

It's no surprise that Joseph balks at Michael's relationship with Evan. Not only because Evan's another man, but because he has the capacity to show Michael what unconditional love and trust are. Joseph knows once Michael got a taste of that he'd never come back.

Michael rolls onto his side, pulling the blankets around himself and still feeling much too cold.

27: Family Business

Michael joins Janet at the mall food court during her lunch break. He's spent the afternoon at her shop, helping her restock the racks of clothes when groups of wild-haired high-schoolers come in and buy overpriced apparel with their parents' money

"How do you like being back home?" Janet asks, her sympathetic smile a flicker. She laughs at his disgusted expression. "Then tell me about Evan. Did you really choose us over him? All due respect, but this family is a sinkhole. Get out while you still can."

Janet is oddly separate from the Family proper, so Michael knows he can tell her anything.

"I had to send them somewhere safe. Marlon lied to get me here. He said Mama was sick with pneumonia. I thought I would only stay long enough for her to recover."

"So that's why Marlon's face looks like he was chasing parked cars?"

Michael snickers, but the levity soon fades. "I don't see a way out of all this. How can I get back to Evan and Jordie without everyone destroying each other?"

"Maybe you just gotta do a little innocent blackmail," Janet says.

Michael raises an inquisitive eyebrow. Barry Rothman suggested that as well. "That's how I got my shop." 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 him when he wrecked Mama's precious Hummel collection and had them all replaced with fakes."

Michael's jaw drops.

"Honestly, that man ain't afraid of nothin' but Mama."

Michael feels the jealousy he's harbored against Janet drop away like it's been cut out of him. Janet hadn't been more special or loved more by Joseph; she just had a way to tilt circumstances in her favor. Now Michael needs to find one.

He remembers what Marlon said last night about secrets, what Rothman said about Joseph's rumored infidelity and how far he might go to keep it under wraps.

When Michael gets to Hayvenhurst, Joseph's on his way out.

"Where were you?" Joseph asks as Michael gets out of the car.

"Janet's store. She needed help restocking stuff."

Joseph sets his jaw in that way of his when he doesn't like an 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. "So what happened to change your mind about 'im?"

Michael keeps his voice steady. He knows what Joseph wants to hear.

“Nothing happened. I just... When Marlon told me Mama was sick, I realized how much I love her. How much I love and miss my brothers. And all of you. This business is so dangerous. It’s a wonder we’re all still here, y’know? So many of Evan’s people have died, and it happens so quickly. If I lost any of you...” He trails off, and while his tears aren’t fake, they certainly have a manipulative edge to them that Michael’s taking full advantage of.

Joseph gives him an acknowledging nod and departs for his car.

A pastime of building listening devices and taps means Michael has plenty of the necessary materials to construct a half-decent bug. It may not be the most modern of surveillance equipment, but it should get the job done. The bug itself is three inches thick and the diameter of a quarter with small wires coming out. It runs on AC current, which means, for Michael’s purposes, he’ll plug it into a lamp cord. When Joseph turns on the lamp, the bug will turn on, too.

The recorder, which draws power from the lamp cord, is about the size of a pack of cigarettes. Michael figures he can stash it in a drawer or stick it to the underside of Joseph’s desk. Joseph won’t be expecting this, and Michael’s counting on that oversight.

Jimmying the locks on the door of Joseph’s office takes about three minutes, thanks to his trusty multi-tool. When Michael gets inside, his first step is to install the bug.

There are two lamps on endtables on either side of the couch. Michael picks a lamp at random and follows the cord to an electrical socket hiding behind the mahogany leather sofa. He unplugs the cord, finagles with the bug’s wires as necessary to tap into the cord’s power current. Then he attaches the bug’s remaining tapwires to the recorder.

The recorder slides into the space between the wall and the sofa.

Judging by the amount of dust back here, Joseph won't discover the reel-to-reel anytime soon.

Michael isn't worried about anyone catching him in Joseph's office. He'll hear Joseph's Oldsmobile rumbling into the driveway, and the windows overlooking the front lawn ensure he'll see the car, giving Michael enough time to make a quick escape. The house is empty save for Mama, who's taking her mid-afternoon nap, and if she sees him in here, she certainly won't say a word about it to Joseph.

Once the bugging is done, Michael scans the room. Gathering blackmail information on Joseph will be tricky, because Michael isn't sure where to look or what exactly he's supposed to look for.

Michael supposes if Joseph is hiding anything, it's going to be, well, hidden. So he checks the obvious places: the barrels of his pens, the battery compartment in the radio on his desk, the conspicuous flowerpot on the balcony railing. Michael only finds small stashes of cash and nine-millimeter ammunition.

In Joseph's desk drawers, there are handguns, stacks of papers, a few books and magazines, and various knick-knacks from the family's 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. Michael can't recall Joseph ever using it — or anyone in the family, for that matter. Maybe it was something Randy picked up on one of his hauls.

Michael glances out the windows again before he scurries across the room. The speaker is a square contraption about the size of a large suitcase, much like the oversized amplifiers onstage at rock concerts. Michael kneels and turns the speaker for a better look at the back panel. Just as he'd hoped, the back can be pried off.

His fingers grip the edge, and he overestimates how much force is needed to pry off the back panel. Someone has opened this thing up

before, maybe plenty of times by the ease with which it comes apart.

The inside of the speaker has been scooped out like a Halloween jack-o-lantern. The wires and electronic bits and bobs Michael expected to see are gone. Instead, there are stacks of VHS tapes.

This must be where Joseph hides his porn, Michael thinks with a chuckle. Mama certainly would not approve.

Michael pulls out a tape and examines it, expecting some outlandish name like "Backdoor Sluts 9" or "Busty Asian Beauties" on the label side. But what he finds instead turns his insides loose and hot, and he fears he may vomit.

Along the bottom of the tape is a golden yellow label with a name and a year scribbled in Joseph's handwriting: Gamble '76.

Michael remembers that name and year, remembers them very well, in fact. It's a name that goes along with another name that same year, and Michael wonders if the next tape might be what he thinks it is.

Of course it is, a voice inside him speaks up. You think it's a coincidence these tapes are hidden away, and that one just so happens to have the name of a man who accepted a blow job as persuasion to get on Joseph's payroll? Is it another coincidence the tape is dated in the exact year you did it?

Michael picks up the next tape and reads the label: Huff '76. His pulse beats rapidly in his throat. *Christ Jesus, let it be a coincidence...*

Joseph met Kenneth Gamble and Leon Huff while expanding his empire in the northeast. He was in danger of losing their allegiance to Berry Gordy, whose connections in the northeast and midwest were more plentiful than Joseph's. Joseph needed an edge on the competition, so he offered them Michael on a silver platter. *Five minutes alone with my barely-legal son. He'll do whatever you like, and he won't say no.* In Joseph's mind, it may have been a perverse sort of punishment for catching Michael in the act with another man a few months prior.

* * *

At least he did the honorable thing and waited until you were legal before whoring you out, the voice speaks up again. But somehow that's the worst part, Michael thinks. If Joseph hadn't waited, well, he would be awful, of course, but at least he would have no illusions about his own awfulness. Waiting for Michael to hit that tenuous point of adulthood is Joseph's way of pretending he has scruples, that he's not like those other sickos who pimp out their underage sons and daughters to the highest bidder. The fact that consent on Michael's part was dubious at best doesn't seem to concern Joseph.

Michael's hands shake as he picks up the next tape: DeMann '77. Out of morbid curiosity, he checks more tapes. The labels hit him like fresh slaps: Weisner '77, Rubell '77, Jones '78, Jones '82, Branca '83, Russo '86.

Oh Christ, no. He's got them all. Every single one. Why? For God's sake, why?

Michael remembers hazy bits of each encounter like pieces of vivid dreams. He remembers the bitter taste of semen on his tongue, the way they liked to grab his hair and fuck his throat (strange how none of them were gentle), how a few of those men said the filthiest things (and how some of that dirty talk turned Michael on), the slimy mouthfeel of sour jizz, and the rare times Michael gagged not from the size of the dick in his throat but *the smell* of ball-sweat and ass.

No more, Michael thinks. *I can't bear to look at any more. Let's just put these back and go down to the grand room. Raid the liquor cabinet and guzzle a bottle of the strongest thing you can find. But stay far, far away from Joseph's porno palace.*

It seems perfectly reasonable, and yet Michael can't stop himself from peeking at the labels of the other tapes. He understands rubbernecking now, the disgusting impulse to gawk at a wreck on the side of the road.

Hoefflin '86, Sneddon '86, Fields '87, Weitzman '89, Sneddon '89, Sneddon '91, Sneddon '92...

* * *

Michael recalls the frequency of his sexual liaisons took a dive in the last ten years. The Jacksons were an established name, and only the most powerful allies required this type of persuasion. Most people were happy to land on Joseph's payroll, provided he took better care of them than their last 'employer.' Michael would sometimes go an entire year (and on rare occasions, longer) without catering to the sexual needs of Joseph's prospective clients.

But Tom Sneddon broke the pattern (*and Michael himself*) wide open.

Michael remembers Tom Sneddon — not fondly, but he was a 'repeat customer.' After winning the Santa Barbara election for District Attorney, he approached Joseph intending to play hardball. Now that he had earned a greater position of power in the county, it only seemed fair, Sneddon reasoned, that Joseph renegotiate his services. For Sneddon, this meant another go-round with Michael, only this time Michael had to provide more than just a blow job or a hand job.

"Your father informed me you wouldn't say no," Sneddon said, tracing a finger along the line of Michael's jaw. Michael had been stricken dumb by that, this awful promise extended on his behalf, but he knew what lay in store for him if he refused. Sneddon was a high-ranking public official, and he could destroy the whole Jackson family with a whisper of organized crime in their ranks.

So Michael did not, in fact, say no, even when Sneddon took from him what no one else had taken before.

Michael stares at the stack of tapes, his breath gone. It's bad enough Joseph made him do these things, but to tape each encounter without Michael's knowledge?

Michael's performance never much mattered in the end. What put these men on Joseph's payroll was the blackmail these tapes provided, and eager young Michael is the star of it all. The first day they met, Evan probably stood within ten feet of these tapes.

* * *

How about that drink now?

Numbly, Michael puts the tapes back into the speaker and closes it up. He turns it against the wall, the way it had been. He leaves the room slightly less substantial than when he entered, because any love he had for Joseph has been locked away with the tapes.

There aren't enough pine tree air fresheners in the world to mask the smell of food in Evan's car. He'll just have to get used to it, since he and Jordan practically live in the Charger for sixteen hours a day. Michael told them not to stop if they could help it, so most of their meals are consumed while driving. What Evan wouldn't give to eat food at a table like a normal person instead of chowing down at the wheel like a guy who's late for work.

Tonight's dinner is around two p.m. In lieu of keeping Joseph's goons off his tail, Evan's adopted an unorthodox sleeping schedule: sleep during the day, drive at night. Anyone trying to find the two of them would likely check motels at night and passing cars during the day. Flipping those expectations keeps them one step ahead.

"I can't wait to eat, change clothes, and go to bed," Evan complains when they pull up to the motel after a food run.

"Does your arm still hurt?" Jordan asks, opting to carry the pizza box and bags stuffed with garlic rolls and lasagna.

"Just a little bit." Evan unlocks the door to find Anthony Pellicano lying on the bed and flipping through the scambly television channels. He looks at Evan with a smug, punchable smile. "Y'know, I thought you would've descrambled one of these stations, but I guess they don't offer your kind of *entertainment*."

* * *

“What the fuck are you doing here?”

Tony places a hand over his chest. “Why, Evan, that’s not very polite. Do you always use that kind of language in front of your son? 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. “Looks like Michael finally dumped your sorry ass. Better late than never, I guess.”

“You sound like a spurned lover, Tony. What’s the matter? Michael didn’t call you back?”

“Always with the jokes.” Tony shakes his head. “A defense mechanism for weak, scared men.” Jordan said something similar the other day; Evan expects his son to know his behavioral quirks, but not some irritating stranger.

“Then we’ve got something in common,” Evan says, because Tony’s been cracking a lot of jokes, too. “Now answer my question: what the fuck are you doing here?”

Tony stands up and moves closer. Jordan backs away, but Evan doesn’t move. “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. And as gratifying as it would be to blow your head off right here, that would be much too scarring for the kiddo. I’m not a monster.”

Yes, you’re just such a great guy, Tony. Stalking me and scaring my kid.

“I just wanted you to know,” Tony continues, ignoring Evan’s dirty glare, “I’ve got my eye on you.”

“I’ll make sure to leave the blinds open when I get undressed. Give

you a little show.” Evan winks at him, which absolutely infuriates Tony if the color his face turns is any indication. Homophobia gets ‘em every time.

“We’ll be in touch,” Tony says, slapping Evan on his sore arm (*Tony, you fucking douche*) as he takes his leave. He’s probably figured out that Evan isn’t running out of fear — this journey has a purpose, a destination. He’ll stick around to find out where that is. Evan hopes this Frank Dileo guy is as trustworthy and protected as Michael said.

Jordan shuts and locks the door behind him and places the food on the small dining table. “Who was that guy?”

“Some jerk Michael’s father sent to keep tabs on us,” Evan explains. He sits down and snags a slice of pizza from the box.

“Why don’t you just kill him?” Jordan asks, and Evan nearly chokes.

“It’s not that simple. I don’t want to kill anyone unless it’s unavoidable. It’s my belated new year’s resolution.”

“But what if he kills you first?”

“Ah, he wouldn’t do that. I think he’s got a little crush on me.” Evan grins; Jordan looks dubious. “Besides, if he wanted me dead, he would have already shot me. None of this ‘not in front of the kid’ shit.”

Jordan stares at the food, like he’s unsure if he’s hungry. Or maybe the run-in with Tony spoiled Jordan’s appetite. “I hope Michael’s okay.”

“He’s fine. His family wouldn’t kill him. Matter of fact, he’s probably safer than we are.”

Jordan finally takes a slice of pizza. “Y’know, if it wasn’t for the whole ‘people wanting to kill you’ thing, this would actually be kind of fun.”

“Nothing like a good old-fashioned father-son road trip.”

* * *

The bug in Joseph's office doesn't yield anything particularly interesting until the next night at an almost ungodly hour. Michael is curled in bed, listening to the bug's radio receiver while flipping through a magazine.

Since Joseph has gotten older his hearing has worsened; as a result, he cranks up the volume of his phone calls so both sides of the conversation are audible. Mama's tried to convince him to get a hearing aid, but Joseph is nothing if not stubborn.

"Ain't nothin' wrong with my hearing!" he bellowed after one such plea from Mama. "The problem is y'all are soft-talkers! You and Michael are the worst of them, no doubt about it."

This compensation for Joseph's hearing means the bug picks up his voice and the caller's. Most of his calls are typical, trite, and un concerning. Man-to-man talk. So when Michael hears a woman's voice on the other end, he perks up.

"Joseph? It's been a week. You're late."

Joseph's gruff voice comes through the headphones: "I'll get you the money. Relax, baby."

Why would Joseph call anyone but Mama "baby"?

"Don't you 'baby' me, Joseph. She's your child too. You promised you'd help me."

Michael doesn't recognize the voice, but one thing is certain: it's not Mama. It's another woman talking about a child. *Their* child.

Something in Michael's soul snaps like a dry twig. Joseph had an affair, and he's got a child out there to prove it.

* * *

Surely Mama couldn't know about this. 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 behind closed doors.

"Joh'Vonnie needs this for college, Joseph," the woman continues. "UCLA costs a pretty penny."

Anger flares up in Michael's gut. College? That means this girl is at least eighteen. Joseph has kept this affair and lovechild hidden for almost two decades.

It takes every shred of self-control Michael has not to burst into that office now and start screaming at him. Each minute that passes by scorches him like he's burning on a pyre.

It isn't until Joseph finally exits the office and retires to his bedroom that Michael can take action. He sneaks down the hall and gets the locks picked. This time it's different. Here in Joseph's office, Michael knows there's evidence his father has betrayed everyone in this house.

Michael's search begins with the stacks of papers in Joseph's desk drawers. The first stack yields nothing of use, but beneath it is a locked compartment. After picking the lock, Michael opens it up to find a brown leather-bound journal. He flips it open to the first page.

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.

Michael skips straight to the 'J' tab and skims two pages before finding the name he's looking for, scrawled in red ink: Joh'Vonnie Jackson. Below the name is a phone number and address in Los Angeles. Sweat trickles down his face. Michael copies the information onto a Post-It note, and he's back in bed within three minutes of sneaking into the office.

* * *

The next morning, Michael makes a quick call to this Joh'Vonnie Jackson. If she's home, he plans on paying her a little visit. After all, she is his illegitimate sister.

He dials the number, and a woman's voice answers. "Hello?"

"Are you satisfied with your telephone company? Pacific Bell is — "

"No, thank you." *Click.*

She's home. Will she be home about thirty minutes from now? He'll have to take the chance.

Joh'Vonnie lives in a modest apartment just off of Wilshire Boulevard. Michael finds it strange that she doesn't live on campus if she's a student at UCLA just down the road, but it's not as if Michael himself would choose to live in a dorm.

Joh'Vonnie's father is, of course, rich. Putting her up in her own apartment would cost pennies to him. And, Michael suspects, it's a way of controlling her social circle.

Michael pulls into the parking lot, far enough away from her apartment building as to not appear suspicious but close enough for surveillance. He stares at the apartment through the car's rearview mirror, pondering his next move. If he goes up the stairs and knocks on that door, he gets Evan and Jordan back. But it's sure not for free.

Is it a worthwhile trade? Hard to say. Michael's not a huge fan of barging in there and turning this girl's life upside down. It's a safe bet Joseph never told Joh'Vonnie about his other family. Joh'Vonnie probably thinks the same thing Michael did, that her father had no other woman in his life other than her mother. To shatter that illusion would be needlessly cruel. None of this is Joh'Vonnie's fault; Michael would do well to remember that.

* * *

As Michael sits and watches, he reconsiders his original plan. Joh'Vonnie doesn't need to know Michael exists in order for the blackmail to work. He has all the information he needs. Why should he disrupt the little peace she has?

In the mirror, the door to her apartment opens. Michael holds his breath and watches an attractive woman leave the building. She's wearing a wide-brimmed hat that blocks his view of her face. She descends down the staircase and walks toward him, her dark hair swaying with each step. Every instinct in Michael's brain tells him to leave before she spots him, but fascination keeps him held in place.

As she moves closer, he gets a better view of her face; though her eyes are hidden behind designer sunglasses, those Jackson cheekbones are unmistakable. Michael sees his father's genes at work.

Joh'Vonnie is close now, so impossibly close Michael fears he's been spotted. Mercifully, she rounds the bumper of the yellow VW bug parked beside Michael's Integra.

You parked right next to her car, you dolt! What kind of half-assed spy are you, anyway?

Joh'Vonnie gets inside the Beetle and starts the engine. Michael sinks in the driver's seat of his own vehicle, wishing he'd worn a baseball cap to pull over his eyes. Why hadn't he thought to snag one of Jackie's Dodgers caps before he left? At least he's wearing sunglasses.

But Joh'Vonnie doesn't seem to notice him. She backs out of the parking space and drives away, leaving Michael with his heart pounding in his throat and sweat rolling down the back of his neck. He can feel his foundation starting to give way. Seeing her is life-altering in a way nothing else has ever been. Michael has a sister he's never known about for almost twenty years.

When Michael regains control of himself, he goes up the steps to the

apartment as if he has every right to be there. He hopes no one sees him breaking in with the multi-tool, but the complex is silent and low on activity; it's around 10 a.m. on a weekday, which means most of the residents are at work. The door unlocks, and Michael steps in.

The interior of the apartment is about what Michael expects from a college student: youthful and disorganized, each item displaying a memory or interest. He's not sure what he's looking for, maybe some insight into what kind of person Joh'Vonnie is without disrupting her life to obtain it.

Her bedroom door is open, and Michael can see inside. Stepping into her room seems like a violation, so he stays outside the door and peers in. 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 his attention next. There are a few pictures of Joh'Vonnie with an older woman Michael presumes is her mother. Then a couple pictures of people he doesn't recognize, probably her friends or family on her mother's side.

Then his heart stops.

There are three photographs of Joh'Vonnie with Joseph. Both of them are smiling exuberantly. Each picture was taken at different stages in her life. One depicts 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 baseball game inside Dodger Stadium. Michael grits his teeth. Joseph 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 cap and gown at her high school graduation. Joseph is standing beside her,

beaming with fatherly pride in a way Michael is almost unfamiliar with. Disgust knots in his stomach. This isn't real. The Joseph Jackson that Joh'Vonnie knows isn't real. He can't be.

The only thing that keeps Michael sane here is the understanding that this is the kind of family Joseph really wanted. He didn't have much of a choice with Michael and his brethren. They were too deeply entrenched in the underworld of the mob to ever live like this. And Joseph knew that. So when Joh'Vonnie was born, he saw her as a clean slate. He had a choice.

Michael's done nothing but fight with this man his entire life. He's had to fight and beg for Joseph's attention, affection, and approval. Michael has fought for his own independence from the family. Now he's fighting for the lives of Evan and Jordan. But here is a child of Joseph's who never had to fight or beg for anything. It all just came naturally, as if it were her birthright.

Michael leaves the apartment and drives back to Hayvenhurst.

28: *A Man of Honor*

The sun is setting when Evan and Jordan arrive at Frank Dileo's ranch in Ojai, California. Behind the massive, wrought-iron gates Evan sees the regal mansion in the distance, along with a stable and pastures for horses. A few horses wander around the grounds, their dark tails swishing. The vegetation is finely clipped and manicured.

"Why do I feel like I'm in the beginning of *The Godfather*?" Jordan asks.

"I'd better not wake up with a horse head in my bed."

The security booth is set up like a drive-through window. Guards are plastered around the gates, and one of them sits in the booth. They're eyeing Evan suspiciously, which he can't really blame them for.

After a quick show of identification and some name-dropping, the guards open the gates. Frank Dileo greets Evan and Jordan in the driveway of the Tudor-style mansion.

Frank was born to play the role of the classic mobster cliché. He's short with a rolly 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.

"You must be the Chandlers," Frank says, offering Evan a meaty paw

as he gets out of the car. They shake hands. "Michael told me you'd be comin'."

"You heard from him since?"

"Not yet. He should be callin' pretty soon. Whadd'ya say we get inside so we don't miss him?"

Jordan and Evan carry their 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 backyard, and Evan spots the azure glow of a swimming pool before they're whisked away to the east wing.

Frank leads them up the spiral staircase and down the hallway into a modest guest room. The room is rather large, consisting of a king-size bed, two chairs, and a small couch.

"The couch folds out into a bed," Frank says, like he's a real-estate agent trying to make a sale. "Bathroom's across the hall. You two get settled in, and I'll get the grub started."

Dinner's on the table by the time Evan and Jordan are both showered and dressed — Italian food, by the smell of it. Evan's overwhelmed by the size of the meal Frank's prepared for them. He's proving to be a pretty considerate host.

Frank notices Evan's look of surprise. "I don't mind goin' the extra mile for a friend of Mike's." He motions for them to sit. "He called, by the way. I told 'im you both got here safe 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."

"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 Evan the bottle, but Evan politely declines. "He actually sent Michael to try and convince me to work for him."

Evan remembers with a pang how Michael had *convinced* people to work for Joseph.

"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?"

"Nah, I was on my way outta the biz by then."

"Michael told me about that. How did you get out?"

"You tell me how you met Mike first."

A fair trade. Evan finds himself censoring 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 allowed Michael to come live with us and help out around the house and my bar."

Frank raises an eyebrow at that. Clearly Evan has said something he doesn't like very much. "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."

Evan gives him a glare. "Have a little discretion, huh?"

* * *

Jordan just shrugs. "Hey, he asked."

"You don't know what people will think about stuff like that."

"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; Evan hopes 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."

Frank doesn't elaborate, but Evan knows what he means.

Michael knocks on the door to Joseph's office that evening. Joseph lets him inside, scrutinizing Michael's expression as he sits at his desk. Michael opts to stand. Neither of them say anything for a while.

Then Michael says, "I know about Joh'Vonnie."

The color drains from Joseph's face.

"I know about the affair, and I know you treated Joh'Vonnie with more affection and love than you ever did with any of us."

"Michael, you know that's not true." Joseph doesn't deny the affair, just the accusation that he loves her more than the rest of them.

"Do I? You took her to a Dodgers game! Jackie wanted to play ball professionally. Did you ever take *him* to a game?" Michael watches Joseph sit there and say nothing. "Yeah, didn't think so. So here's what's going to happen. You're going to call off your vendetta against the Chandlers and let me and Evan and Jordan 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 pay a visit to Joh’Vonnie. She’s just dying to meet the rest of the family, especially Mama.”

Joseph stares at Michael the way you’d stare at a person who has revealed himself to be crazy. And Michael thinks, on some level, he might be.

“You’re out of your mind! I bust my ass and stick my neck out for you and your brothers and sisters, and this is how you treat me?”

“You’re not the long-suffering martyr you think you are,” Michael says. “You raised us to be criminals, and you have the nerve to ask for respect?”

“Maybe I did a lot wrong, but I did a lot right, too.”

“Don’t try to spin this. You were the one always goin’ on about how family is everything, how togetherness would make us strong, but you broke away from the family, not me.”

Joseph exhales angrily through his nose. “You wouldn’t hurt your own father like this, Michael. It’s not in your nature.”

“Maybe I’m more like you than I want to believe.”

“Yeah, maybe you are.”

Joseph sits there with his fists clenched and his eyebrows drawn low, smoldering in fury.

“Call your guys. Tell them to leave Evan and Jordie alone,” Michael says.

* * *

"Katherine would never believe you," Joseph says, suddenly defiant.

Michael doesn't have time for this. He moves for the door. "Fine, then I'll take my dear mother out to lunch, and while we're out I'll bring her to that little apartment on Wilshire Boulevard and introduce the two of them. I'll show Mama 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."

"Michael," Joseph snarls in warning, but Michael opens the office door and steps out. "Michael! Don't you *dare*!"

Michael keeps walking, unafraid of Joseph's fury. The worst Joseph can do is beat Michael, and Michael has lived through beatings.

Joseph's angry footsteps sound behind him. "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're the one who hurt her, not me." Michael stops in front of Mama's bedroom door. She's most likely napping behind it. He raises his knuckles to knock.

"Don't," Joseph says, and beneath the anger there is pleading. But Michael can't believe they've come this far without Joseph backing down. He's been willing to call Michael's bluffs right up to the very end.

This time, however, Michael isn't bluffing. He fully intends to knock on that door and hold Joseph accountable for his actions. But Joh'Vonnie isn't the only ace in Michael's deck...

Michael lowers his fist. "Fine. I won't tell her about Joh'Vonnie. No need to drag that poor girl into things. So why don't I tell Mama about the tapes instead?" Michael sees the fear in Joseph's eyes and, most of

all, comprehension. "If Mama knew what you made me do, if she knew that you taped it, *every single one* — "

"No, you wouldn't." Joseph's voice trembles. "She'd have to shun you for your wicked ways — "

Michael knocks on Mama's bedroom door.

"You're crazy!" Joseph whisper-shouts. "You're a goddamn fool!"

Michael just shoots him a look.

"Michael?" Mama calls from the other side of the door. "Is that you?"

"Yes, it's me, Mama," Michael says, all of the anger in his voice gone. "I thought I'd take you to lunch if you're feeling up to it."

Joseph stares at him with wide eyes.

Mama, clad in a flower-print house dress, opens the door after a moment. She looks somewhat confused to see Michael and Joseph standing there but doesn't question it. "That's very sweet of you, honey. Give me thirty minutes, will you? I need to put on my face and look presentable." She kisses his cheek and closes the door as she returns to the bedroom.

Michael glances at Joseph. "I'm sure we'll have a lot to talk about over lunch." He can almost see the gears turning in Joseph's head, see him sorting through the outcomes of every possible decision here.

Do you get it now? Do you see there's no way out of this without letting Evan go? If this comes out, it won't just hurt Mama. The whole family will hear of it, and you can be certain they'll take sides. Maybe my brothers will gloss over the affair, but the tapes will horrify them. You really think they'll shun me, the victim in all of this?

Joseph's fists unclench at his sides. "Fine, Michael. You win. You got

me. I'll call it off."

"Forgive me if I don't take your word for it."

In Joseph's office, he makes the call. "It's Joe. Ease off'a Chandler. No one touches him or the kid unless they want me comin' down on 'em."

Evan wakes up the next morning from what feels like a coma. His body is in the same position it was when he flopped into bed last night right after dinner. Sunlight blares through the flimsy drapes and lights up the room. Evan thought he might wake up groggy after such a long sleep, but he feels well-rested in way he hasn't been in ages.

Jordan's gone, so Evan assumes he must have ventured out into the house. Evan throws on a change of clothes and goes downstairs. Frank and Jordan are in the lounge playing cards.

Frank sees Evan out of the corner of his eye and greets him 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."

"That's my boy," Evan says, sitting beside him. He wonders where Jordan learned to play poker but figures Frank's letting the kid win.

Jordan looks suddenly excited, as if remembering something. "I talked to Michael this morning! He called and said we were safe."

Evan's heart leaps into his throat. "He did?"

"Does that mean we can go home now?"

* * *

By some extraordinary miracle of God, Michael may have gotten Joseph off their backs, but the problem of Anthony Pellicano's vendetta still lingers like a bad rash. Tony is acting of his own accord, independent of Joseph's orders. Evan needs to make sure Tony's taken care of before they're truly safe.

"I've got a few things to take care of first, Jord'."

Jordan seems to be okay with that.

Later he goes for a swim in the pool, leaving Evan and Frank to make small talk over a game of cards.

"There's one thing I don't understand about all this," Evan says. "How come Joseph's so gung-ho on making Michael the head of the Family?"

Frank takes a puff of his cigar and jets smoke from his nostrils. "You'd be surprised what Michael's capable of. He's a pro at compartmentalizing."

So Evan has seen. Michael never let fear or grief paralyze him. Evan, on the other hand... "But he doesn't want to take over."

Frank shrugs. "Mike was always different from his brothers anyway. Quieter, gentler, y'know. But when his skin started to change he backed off the business a lot more, got a couple surgeries on his nose. Between you and me, I think he did it so he wouldn't see his father's face starin' back at him in the mirror."

Evan can certainly understand that, having had a few alterations himself.

Frank continues, "Even a couple'a years ago, Mike was much darker than he is now. So when the pigment really left, maybe he felt like even more of an outsider."

* * *

Evan wonders what Michael looked back then.

"I gotta say, when Mike called me and told me you were comin' up, I was pretty worried."

"About?"

Frank 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 things that'll stay with him for a long time if it means keeping his loved ones safe. I've seen it happen before."

Frank must be referring to the Detroit incident, unless there's more blood in Michael's past Evan doesn'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 Evan with hope. To what lengths did Michael go to ensure their safety? 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, huffing out smoke. "He doesn't push this hard for someone's head on a stick unless he feels threatened. He thinks you're takin' Michael and using him to overthrow the Family from within."

Victor suggested something similar, although in reverse. Evan hadn't seen it at the time, because Victor was polluting Evan's head with insinuations that Michael was fucking Jordan.

"Well, he doesn't need to worry about that," Evan says. "I'm out. 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."

* * *

Evan looks out the sliding glass doors leading to the backyard and watches Jordan swim. He wants so badly for the boy to be truly safe. To do that, Evan needs to take care of Pellicano.

29: All Hell Breaks Loose

Evan takes a drive that afternoon to meet with Tom Sneddon, the district attorney of Santa Barbara County. Sneddon had been one of Robert Charmatz's business contacts — dear old Dad was a strict proponent of having ties on both coasts. From what Evan's heard, Sneddon is a big fan of payoffs.

They meet at a restaurant called The Hitching Post outside of Santa Barbara. Neither of them 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 Evan when he sits across from him at the table. Sneddon'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."

"Shit, really? I'm sorry to hear that. Your father was a good guy."

"So they tell me."

* * *

Sneddon reaches into his lap and places a manila folder on the table between them. "Here's the dirt you wanted on Pellicano. You want to tell me how you got mixed up with him?"

"Just give me a quick run-down for old time's sake."

Sneddon sighs and opens the file. "What do you need to know?"

"Any ways you could make him, say, disappear?"

Sneddon frowns. "I may mingle in your circles, but I am, above all, an enforcer of the law."

"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 are the same. I've got half a mind to call that racist."

Sneddon ignores that and keeps reading. "He worked with Los Angeles attorney Howard Weitzman to defend John DeLorean on charges of cocaine trafficking, although DeLorean was caught on tape by the feds selling cocaine to an undercover agent. There were charges that Pellicano had intimidated government witnesses." He raises an eyebrow. "When a doctor 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 aforementioned 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 did my song and dance. Now it's your turn. Tell me how this guy got

up your ass.”

“You know Joseph Jackson?”

A small quake runs through Sneddon’s face. “That’s a fairly common name. You’ll have to be more specific.”

“And yet you look like you’ve just seen a ghost.”

Sneddon tries to wave it off. “If you’re we’re talking about the same man, then, yes, I’ve put out a couple fires for him. His sons have landed on my radar quite a few times over the years.”

A cold finger traces up Evan’s spine. “How’s that?”

“Toriano — you might know him better as 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,” Sneddon says with a lilt of a smile.

Evan feels a growl rumble through his chest. He knows what’s coming, but he can’t resist prodding at the question out of morbid curiosity. It’s a struggle to keep his voice even and detached when he asks, “Was Michael involved in any of this?”

“Yes, he was very *open* to negotiation.” Sneddon says it with an unmistakable edge.

Evan wants so badly to punish him for treating Michael like a sex toy, but violence will only make an enemy of Sneddon, and Evan really needs him to be a friend right now and eliminate Pellicano. So Evan clenches a fist beneath the table. Sneddon has no idea how close he came to being worm food.

* * *

"Joseph put Pellicano on my trail," Evan tells him, redirecting the conversation away from Sneddon's indiscretions with Michael. "That's how he found me."

"This is the part where I ask 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?"

"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." Evan tries 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 this attempt to tug at his heartstrings. "Maybe you should've thought of that before you became a mobster." Mr. Sympathy.

"Objection, Counselor. Speculation."

"Your father paid me for favors, and here you are following in his footsteps. I think it's safe to say you step over the line of the law every now and then."

Evan wants to point out that Sneddon steps over that line too, but he holds his 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 thinks Pellicano tampered with her home and office phones. Wiretapping's illegal, Counselor."

"I know the law, Chandler," Sneddon says with a scowl. Evan tries not to grin at that. It always amuses him when tough guys get indignant and call him by his surname, as if making it absolutely clear

that they're not buddies.

"I'll look into it. If I can nail him for that, I might tack on a few extra charges to keep him in custody. But it won't be for free," Sneddon says, noticing the hope on Evan's face.

"But of course. A gesture of goodwill is so rare nowadays."

Sneddon smiles and leans in. "I think fifteen up-front is reasonable." It's clear he doesn't mean fifteen dollars.

Evan makes a face. "That's highway robbery."

"You want to protect your son, don't you?" Sneddon 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."

Evan gives an impatient handwave. "Alright, alright, spare me the humanitarian act. Fifteen up-front."

"And an extra ten to make sure I put him away for quite a while."

Evan doesn't mind coughing up the money. He may only have a limited amount of cash, but his offshore accounts and shell companies are worth a bundle. The only thing that irks Evan about forking over \$25,000 here is that he knows Sneddon's milking him for all he's worth. He wants to see how much he can drain out of Evan before the well runs dry, and Evan is in no position to haggle. It's oddly humbling to be on the other side of one of these backroom deals.

"Like yourself, I've built a formidable reputation," Sneddon says, as if he doesn't think Evan is convinced. "I can be rather 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." Evan reaches into his jacket and counts 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."

Evan makes it back to Frank's ranch hours later. The sun is just beginning to set, making the entire estate look warmly picturesque. He thinks about living on a big, sprawling property like the one Michael described that night at the lakehouse. He wonders if it's still for sale.

It's easy to imagine a life with Michael when the dust settles, how they'll make love morning and night, how they'll raise Jordan and live out a perfect little piece of heaven together. Jordan would call Evan a total sap if he knew his father was such a hopeless romantic.

Frank's reading a newspaper and gnawing on another cigar when Evan gets inside the house. "You get what you need?"

"I think so. Where's Jordie?"

"His uncle stopped by to take him to a movie."

An icy hand squeezes Evan's 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 Evan's ears. "Oh, *fuck*."

Frank straightens up. "He's not one of the guys that's after you, is he?"

Evan shakes his head, the numbness beginning to seep in. "He shouldn't be. But Jordan wouldn't know..."

Evan knows he should calm down and think things through

rationally, but this is his son's life hanging in the balance. 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.

"Dave is an old friend of mine — or at least, he was. He had an affair with my wife, but Jordie doesn't know. Of course he'd be happy to see him."

"This guy ain't gonna hurt Jordie, is he?"

"No, no. He loves that kid. It's me he's got a problem with."

"How come?" Frank's questions are good for Evan, keeping him focused. There's nothing more terrifying than that total blackout of fear and helplessness.

Evan says, "Dave got it in his head that I was mistreating my wife. I don't know what June told him about me. Maybe some of it was true, maybe it wasn't. I love her dearly, but June was no saint. She could lie and keep secrets just as good as I can."

"How do you think he found this place?"

Evan has 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 ain't gonna hurt Jordie?"

Evan nods.

"You think it's just a simple kidnapping?"

"Then why didn't he leave a ransom note or make any money demands? No, this is a setup. He wants me to come to him."

* * *

"Don't go alone, Evan."

"I can't just sit this one out."

"I'm not askin' you to. But we should wait until we come up with a plan that doesn't leave you totally exposed."

Evan tries not to think about the last time he saw Jordan smile. Had he known it would truly be the last... "How long ago did Dave stop by?"

"About an hour or so."

Evan's heart starts jackhammering.

"And you're *sure* he won't hurt Jordie?"

"Jordie's safe with him," Evan admits, the words like poison on his lips. As much as Dave may loathe Evan, he's still got a soft spot for Jordan, most likely due to the kid being a living link to June.

"Then it's in you and your boy's best interest to wait for backup. He did this to screw with you. Don't fall into his trap."

Evan nods slowly, trying to believe that. Frank rushes into the kitchen to make a phone call while Evan stays in his chair, trapped in the vortex of his imagination. Imagining worst-case scenarios will do no good here. Evan struggles to think clearly.

What he said to Frank was true: Jordan is in no mortal danger with Dave. The abduction is a ploy to force Evan to meet with Dave unprotected and unprepared. And then it will be over for Evan. Dave won't make Jordan watch. He may be stupid, but he isn't cruel, at least not where Jordan is concerned.

Dave must have 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 is an extension of his anger with Evan. Dave watched the family fall apart, and there was nothing he could do until it was too late.

Would it really be so bad for Jordan to live with Dave? The guy's an unstable mess, but so is Evan when he's off his medication. Evan is no saint either; he's done worse things for less justifiable reasons.

Evan would die for Jordan and give up everything to keep him safe. But now Evan wonders if he's the right person for Jordan to structure his existence around. As much as it kills him to think about surrendering his son to Dave, this isn't about Evan. It's about what's best for Jordan.

Are you strong enough to do the right thing?

Frank comes over to Evan and sees him on the couch with his head in his hands. "I called Michael. Remember what I told you? There's nothin' he won't do to protect the people he loves."

Michael bursts into Joseph's office without knocking. "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 Joseph's 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? Crazy fucker can go overboard sometimes."

"It was Dave Schwartz." Something in Michael's head suddenly clicks. "Did you hire Dave to kill Evan?"

"No, Michael, and I'm offended that you think I would."

Michael slams his hands on the desk and stares Joseph 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."

"I sent some guys around Staten Island to see if any of Evan's associates knew where he went."

"When was this?"

"When my guys discovered your little crime scene. Tony said the blood was fake, so we went knockin' on doors. Y'all forgot about Dave."

"Who already had an axe to grind with Evan," Michael says in realization. He should have known that surprise visit from Dave on the morning of their departure was fishy for more than the obvious reasons.

"When he found out you two stole one of his cars off the lot, he gave us the plate numbers and make and model. The plates didn't help us much, but we put lookouts all over. We spotted you when you passed through Gary. I had a couple guys stationed in the house across the street from our old place, just in case." Confirming what Marlon told Michael when they met in Chicago.

* * *

"So Dave gave you information on how to find us. He played his part. Why'd you need to go and do this?"

"I didn't!" Joseph protests. "I swear on my life I didn't." Something about his face tells Michael that this isn't a lie.

"Then how did he find Evan, and where did he take Jordie?"

"I don't know."

Michael grabs the phone off his desk and dials Frank's number. "Frank, put Evan on."

"Michael?" It's the first time Michael has heard Evan's voice in days. He shouldn't sound so damn sad.

"Joseph says he didn't hire Dave."

"So he doesn't know where Dave might have taken Jordie."

"Jordie's not gonna get hurt, is he?"

"No, Dave's after me."

"Then why didn't he tell you where to meet him?" Michael asks. Evan is quiet while he thinks it over. "Does he assume you'll know? Is there some place you both knew or talked about in the past?"

"No. Nothin'."

Now it's Michael's turn to think. "So this isn't about money or even killing you."

"Taking Jordan would be enough to kill me, Michael. He knows that."

Dave may actually succeed at stealing Evan's entire family from him.

The thought breaks Michael's heart anew.

"We're avoiding the obvious solution here."

"It ain't obvious to me."

"Get the police involved."

"Michael—"

"Listen, my father has connections here. He's got a police chief, commander, a judge, hell, even the L.A. 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? First of all, Dave's not a hardened criminal; I'll bet he doesn't even have so much as a traffic ticket on his record. We don't know what he'll do if he sees cops. He might panic. 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 much Joseph's paying 'im — would be a fucking idiot not to bring us down. You know the drill. They'll offer him immunity or the chance to plead to a lesser charge if he talks.

"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." Evan sounds calmer, as if explaining this has made him more secure in his convictions. "Okay, so we just gotta find out where Dave's taking him."

"I'll get in touch with one of my father's contacts, see if Dave owns any property in the area."

"You might wanna see if he's working with Pellicano on this."

Michael shoots 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..." Evan trails off with a harried sigh.

"Alright, I'll make some phone calls. Try to relax, okay?"

Evan chuckles dryly. "Sure. You too."

Frank's watching Evan when he hangs up the phone.

"Maybe you ought'a call the cops in on this," Frank says, and Evan shuts his eyes in pain. "They're experts at this stuff. You're not."

"If I do that, I lose everything, especially Jordie. He'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 love that kid more than my own life, but maybe Dave's right about me. Maybe I am a shitty father. Maybe I should've been around more or not at all. June and I had problems in our marriage. Maybe if she divorced me and married Dave, Jordie wouldn't be where he is now."

Frank's entire face frowns, which makes him look like a sad bloodhound. "My opinion probably doesn't mean nothin', but from

what I saw, Jordie seems like a well-adjusted kid. If Michael likes you this much, you're probably a good guy. I don't think Jordie'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. 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."

The silent moment drags on before the phone rings. Evan answers immediately, expecting to hear Michael on the other end. Instead, it's Jordan.

"Dad?"

30: A Friend of Ours

Panic floods Evan's throat. "Jordie? Are you okay? Where are you?"

Jordan's 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 with you?"

"Yeah."

Evan can hear his heart thumping in his chest. He presses the phone harder against his ear. "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 in Evan's head. He pulls one out of the air. "What hotel are you staying at? Do you remember?"

"Yeah, hold on." Evan hears him rummaging around for something, probably more change for the pay phone. "It's called the Regent Beverly Hills Wilshire Hotel, room 350."

"That's a mouthful, kiddo. How'd you remember all that?"

"I took one of the pens from the room. It's got the name on it."

Evan feels a swell of pride and elation. "How'd you know to call here?"

"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 secret agent.

"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."

"St. Vincent?"

"Yeah, that's it!"

An almost frightening calm spreads over Evan. His son may have been abducted by a guy who wants Evan dead, but he knows the plan now. Evan can act accordingly.

"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."

Jordan hangs up before Evan can tell him the same.

Evan sets the phone down, tears flooding his eyes. He can't remember the last time Jordan said that. The older Jordan got, the more he rejected that kind of 'mushy stuff.' Evan's sure that love is there, that Jordan felt like saying it would make him uncool. Maybe him saying it now means something profound.

Frank's voice sounds from behind Evan. "He's alright?"

"Yeah, and I know where Dave's taking him."

Joseph lets Michael drive his gold Mercedes on the way to the Regent Beverly Hills Wilshire Hotel. There's a duffel bag of guns and makeshift flash grenades in the trunk. Joseph sits in the passenger seat, looking very displeased at the arrangement. He doesn't appear to be nervous.

Michael, on the other hand, is way too jittery to be behind the wheel of a vehicle. His knuckles are white around the wheel, his leg bouncing up and down through the periodic stops.

When they get on I-405 heading into Beverly Hills, Joseph asks, "What exactly is your plan again?"

* * *

"Evan and Frank will meet us at the hotel. If Dave is already there, we'll use the flashbangs. 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?"

Michael doesn'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."

Joseph seems oddly satisfied with that answer. "What's this guy's beef with your man, anyway?"

"Dave was sleeping with Evan's wife. I guess five years of pillow talk gave him the impression Evan was a thug. Dave actually told me he thinks Evan *beat* June into a miscarriage." Michael snarls around the words as though they're something foul. "Can you believe that?"

"Evan didn't want more kids?"

"No, that's just it. He *did*. And so did June. But Dave is certain the baby was his. I don't know how. Maybe June had a blood test so she'd know for sure, but I'd bet my life that Evan thinks he was the father. And I don't ever want him to know otherwise." Michael snuffles. "It would have been a girl. They were gonna name her Lily."

Joseph doesn't respond to that. He's never been the best at handling tender moments.

"Why are you helping me?" Michael asks.

* * *

"Why wouldn't I?"

"Oh, please. You had your guys chase me and Evan across the country. Don't act like you're innocent."

Joseph 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 thought you hated Evan."

"I realize him and this boy mean a lot to you. I don't wanna see what you'll do if you lose them."

The car phone rings and interrupts this father-son moment. Michael pries a hand off the wheel to answer it.

"Michael?" It's Evan, of course. Michael gave him the number to the car phone before he left Hayvenhurst.

"Yeah?"

"I'm about thirty minutes away. Where are you?"

"Outside of Bel-Air on I-405. Fifteen minutes, tops."

"Shit, okay." Evan sighs in frustration. "You won't mind sittin' 'til I get there?"

"No, I'll be fine. 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?"

Michael's cloud of despair lifts momentarily at the levity in Evan's voice. "Then I'll see you there."

* * *

"I love you," Evan blurts out. It's not the first time he's said it, but Michael still gets chills.

"I know."

Evan does something Michael's not expecting at all: he laughs. "Did you just Han Solo me? I have the best boyfriend ever."

"No, I think I do," Michael says around a grin. "I'll see you there." Michael hangs up, and Joseph's giving him a look best described as frustrated confusion. "What?"

Joseph shrugs, putting his palms up as if warding off the accusation. "Nothin'. I ain't sayin' nothin'."

Evan pulls 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. Evan tries to sneak up on him, but Michael hears the car pull up and shut off. His head whirls around, then he gets out of the car and rushes out.

Michael leaps into Evan's waiting arms and wraps him in a tight embrace. The force of it would have knocked Evan off his feet if he hadn't been ready. Michael kisses him hard, like he doesn't know how to stop. Evan's heart may be pounding and his mind racing with panic, but Michael's mouth sets everything right for one blissful moment. He rests his forehead on Evan's chest.

Evan closes his eyes and kisses Michael's hair. "I missed you."

"Good."

"Is he in there?"

Michael straightens up and takes a step back. "I don't think they've

come back yet."

"Jordan must be stalling him, then."

"My Family uses this hotel as a meeting place. You want me to find a way inside?"

"You can't just break in yourself?"

Michael shakes his head. "The locks here are too difficult." Probably why they use it as a meeting place. "The doors work on electronic cards. I have a spare 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."

Michael grins. "Of course."

Evan notices another person sitting in the passenger seat of Michael's car. It looks suspiciously like Joseph Jackson. "Why's Joseph here?"

Michael looks back at his father, who opens the door and steps out. "He wanted to help," Michael says with a shrug.

"Why didn't you tell me he was coming?"

"It was a spur of the moment decision on his part," Michael says.

Joseph approaches them, and he and Evan shake hands. "We gotta stop meetin' like this," Joseph says.

"I hope next time is a little more pleasant."

Michael pats Evan's hand. "You two get acquainted. I'll let us inside." He struts off before Evan can say anything else. Evan watches him

walk away.

Joseph clears his throat; Evan does his best to look like he wasn't gawking at Michael. "I assume Michael told you the hit is off, huh?"

"Yeah." Evan isn't sure what else to say. Is he supposed to thank Joseph? It's not like he called it off out of the goodness of his heart.

"You and him gonna move away and live together, raise that boy of yours?"

Evan finds 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'd rather die than hurt Michael."

"I might have to call your bluff someday."

It's not a bluff, but Joseph will 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 lookout and potential getaway driver.

Joseph and Evan head inside to meet with Michael. Evan looks around the room, which is dimly lit by the moonlight pouring in through the curtains. Jordan's backpack is still here, as well as a few duffel bags that must 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," Evan says, sitting beside Michael on the bed. He has to nudge the bag of explosives Michael 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 it's unlikely Jordan would have known.

"Can Jordie even leave the country? Does he have a passport?"

"We went to Monaco one summer when he was about ten." Evan plucks nervously at his fingernails. Michael places a warm, comforting hand over his.

"It's going to be fine."

"What if we're making the wrong move? What if he panics at the sight of us here and hurts Jordie?" Evan was so certain Dave wouldn't hurt Jordan, but now that the sand in the hourglass is running out, he's having second thoughts. It's probably just nerves.

"He won't. He raved about Jordie. Loved him like a son." Michael squeezes Evan's 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. Dave wants to raise Jordie as his own. He wouldn't go through all this just to hurt him."

"Why's this guy so pissed at you anyway?" Joseph asks from his spot in the chair by the window.

Michael looks up at him. "Is your memory goin' too?"

Joseph glares. "I heard it from you, but I wanna hear it from him."

Evan says, "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 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 I'm the cause of this whole problem—"

"No," Michael says. "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."

They sit in silence for a few minutes before Michael perks up. He motions for them to be quiet — like they were talking at all to begin with — and Evan strains to listen, unsure what Michael heard.

The doorknob rattles.

After that, things happen very, very fast.

Michael whips a out a gun and rushes over to the window to hide behind the drapes. Joseph follows suit. Evan presses his back flat against the closet wall, a Smith & Wesson .38 at the ready.

Michael and Joseph have put themselves in a vulnerable position. Dave will spot them first if he turns on the light when he comes in, but Evan is obscured until Dave reaches the beds. Then Evan can take him by surprise.

The door to the room opens.

Evan holds his breath. He tries to swallow, but his throat is too dry. His heartbeat must be loud enough to give away his hiding spot. He presses a palm over his chest, as if this might muffle the sound. So many thoughts swirl dizzily in his mind. More than anything, Evan wants to tell Jordan that he loves him.

He hears the door shut.

* * *

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 has two guns pointed at his head, yet he has the audacity to laugh. "What is this, Hamlet? Just leave it alone, Michael. It's better for Jordie this way."

"I'm afraid I can't do that, Dave," Evan says.

"Dad!" Jordan's voice is rich with relief. Evan can't see him yet. Neither Dave nor Jordan have walked past the wall Evan's using as a hiding spot.

"It's alright, Jordie. You're safe now."

Dave takes a few steps forward and finally sees Evan with his gun drawn. "Really, Evan? How did you find me, anyway?"

Dave's caught between the three of them. Evan still can't see Jordan. Maybe it's best for him that way; he's right by the door in case things take a terrible turn.

"Just a hunch," Evan says. "The bigger question is: how'd you find Jordie?"

"The enemy of my enemy is my friend," Dave says. "Your pal Tony was happy to help. You thought stealing one of my cars wasn't gonna end up biting you in the ass?"

So it had been a tracking device in the Charger. Figures. "Just give my son back, and this will be over." Evan can't see the bulge of a holster or any other signs Dave might be carrying a concealed weapon. Of course, that doesn't mean he isn't.

"No, Evan, I don't think I will. Living with you is not what's best for

Jordie.”

“Well, I’m the guy who 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 hurt. You’re not willing to do that.”

“I came here to save him from *you*,” Dave accuses. “You don’t think this violent, unlawful lifestyle is going to harm him in the long run? It certainly harmed June.”

“Leave her out of this,” Evan snarls.

“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. June must have lied to him, then.

“Dave, just walk away,” Michael 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. Everybody wins.”

Dave turns to Michael. “You’ve seen it first-hand. You’ve lived it. You can’t think this unstable drunk asshole is more fit to raise Jordie than I am!”

* * *

Jordan's voice sounds further away now. He must have sneaked into the bathroom to hide and is 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.

"And you're gonna prove it by forcing my hand and making me shoot you, aren't you?" Evan shakes his head. "You stubborn old fuck. 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 want to do this."

A vein pulses in Dave's neck. "You think I don't know how you work? You're a fucking parasite, Evan, but you feed off pity! That's the common thread between June and Michael; they felt *sorry* for you! 'Oh, this poor, pathetic manic-depressive alcoholic just needs to be *loved*!' She was going to leave you. Did you know that? We were going to take Jordie and Lily and make a life together."

Evan takes the blow without flinching. He'd known the day would come when he would be presented with the divorce papers, or even a moment where June might spit the words out in the heat of an argument. It's not really a surprise, but hearing it still breaks his heart. "Yeah, I sorta figured that."

Michael's voice is a stern warning. "Dave, don't do this."

"But, no," Dave says, enraged now, "you had to go beat June into a miscarriage because you knew —"

Ka-pow!

A gun explodes in the quiet room. Evan's heart leaps as if he's been zapped with a cattle prod. Blood blooms on Dave's white shirt like a

red rose. He places his hand over his chest, and it comes away red. A confused look crosses his face, and he goes down. The air stinks of gunpowder and blood.

Joseph holds the smoking gun, his face a mask of indifference, as if he's just swatted an annoying bug. "Old fool talks too damn much," he says with a shake of his head as he tucks his gun into the holster beneath his sportcoat.

Evan stares at the body on the floor and feels a twinge of pity. "Joe, did you..."

"Somebody had to. I thought you were Mr. Tough Guy."

Evan's frozen in shock watching Dave bleed out onto the carpet.

"Dad! Are you okay? Who got shot?" Jordan calls.

"Everything's perfectly alright now. We're fine. We're all fine here now."

Jordan groans, recognizing the *Star Wars* reference.

Michael steps over the body with lithe grace and embraces Evan. "Take Jordie back to Frank's, spend the night. I'll make arrangements for the morning." He kisses Evan's half-open mouth. "Go on. It's over."

"It's not over until we're together."

"Then just wait a little longer."

"Dad, I'm fine, really."

"You sure?"

* * *

Evan and Jordan are in Frank's guest room, getting ready for bed around ten p.m. that night. Jordan hasn't been acting unusual — opting to play his Game Boy in silence most of the evening — but Evan still thinks he'll need a lifetime of therapy after all this.

"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. He didn't even have a gun."

"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?"

Evan's chest shudders at this innocent question. "Yeah, yeah, he was."

"Was Mom in love with Dave?"

Evan has to remind himself 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," Evan says.

Jordan nods slowly, understanding. "I thought Dave was your friend."

"So did I."

"Then why did he try to take me away?"

Evan wonders 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 away 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. This is probably confusing for him.

“You used to think me dating Michael meant I didn’t love your mom anymore. That’s what Dave thought too. And sometimes people get really” — Evan searches for the word — “stubborn about what they think is right.”

Jordan nods and crawls into bed.

“Will you be able to sleep?”

“I told you, I’m fine. I don’t see why it has to be such a big deal. I mean, I do, but... I’ve been through worse.”

We both have.

“You know this doesn’t have anything to do with you, right? None of this is your fault, Jord’.”

Jordan nods. “Yeah, Dad, I know. I’m okay, really.”

Evan takes his word for it and switches off the light. The room goes dark.

“Do we get to go home now?”

“I don’t know. Michael and his father are taking care of that. I guess he’ll call us tomorrow and we’ll go from there. Would you be upset if we lived here? In California?”

“No, that’s okay. I just want things to feel normal again.”

“Me too, buddy.”

* * *

Joseph and Michael sit in molded-resin chairs in the backyard of Hayvenhurst 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 found Michael here about fifteen minutes ago, sat beside him and said nothing. It's a comfortable silence now that they have an understanding.

"Did you shoot Dave so he wouldn't tell Evan about the baby?" Michael asks.

Joseph shrugs. "I just wanted him to shut up."

Michael takes that as a yes. Joseph will never come out and say it, but Michael knows how to read between the lines.

After a while, Joseph says, "I guess those two can stay in the guest room 'til y'all get back on your feet. You can't exactly go back home, can you?"

Michael looks at him like Joseph has just grown an extra head. "Is this one of your tests? Am I supposed to 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."

"You're not gonna cheapen it and call them your 'future' relatives?"

"You've gone to hell and back for 'em. I guess they're already family."

Michael feels something reach into his chest and squeeze. He wipes his newly wet eyes with the back of his hand. "Thank you."

Epilogue: A Nova Vida

May 1993

Michael corrals Evan and Jordan into the Charger, grinning from ear to ear like a kid on Christmas morning. He asked them to pack their things the night before.

Not one for surprises, Jordan asks, "Where are we going?"

That's a damn good question.

Michael 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, Evan and Jordan have been staying at Hayvenhurst in the guest wing for the past couple of weeks. Michael's accompanied them in their room at night, making sure none of the more vengeful members of his family try anything. But by "vengeful" Michael must mean Joseph.

Joseph's demeanor toward Evan and Jordan since the "incident" has been... interesting, to say the least. With Jordan, Joseph is pleasant and jovial, cracking jokes and generally acting like a real human being.

* * *

With Evan, well, Joseph would rather pretend Evan doesn't exist, but on the off-chance they catch each other in the hallways or are forced to share a few sentences, Joseph is stubbornly civil. One evening, he passed Evan a plate of rolls at the dinner table.

Michael's mother Katherine has accepted Evan and Jordan into the fold. On their first evening at the house, she showed Evan countless pictures of Michael over the years that he would definitely deem embarrassing and unflattering. Evan thinks he looks beautiful in every single one.

Michael's siblings are warm and welcoming in their own ways. Jackie and Evan watch baseball and bicker about team superiority. Sometimes Evan helps Tito with his cars out in the garage. Marlon tells Evan embarrassing stories about Michael. Evan plays cards and foosball with Randy and Jermaine. He still doesn't know which brother shot June, but maybe that doesn't matter anymore.

Evan has tied up various loose ends with Larry over the phone. Larry seemed suspicious of Evan's sudden thoroughness pertaining to the insurance for the bar, but he didn't argue. Evan gave 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 Evan could do for his almost sister-in-law.

They drive in silence for a while as Michael moves to a song on the radio. He's way too upbeat today.

"Did Joseph ask you to keep us out of the house while he bugs our room?" Evan asks, because that sounds like something Joseph would do.

Michael laughs a light, airy sound. "No! Nothing like that! I promise, you'll be pleasantly surprised."

After a few minutes pass, Jordan says, "Are you kicking us out?"

* * *

"No way! Jordie, trust me, you're gonna love it."

Evan breathes an exasperated sigh. Surprises do not bode well with his knee-jerk reaction to expect the literal worst from every situation.

"Are we there yet?" Jordan whines.

"Thirty more minutes max," Michael says.

Jordan groans theatrically and takes his Game Boy out of his backpack. Evan has no such distractions, so he stares 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. Michael might be planning on killing them. Yes, of course, he's been ordered by Joseph to shoot them and leave them for dead in the vast countryside where no one will ever find the bodies.

Evan knows his internal theater of thoughts is ridiculous, and yet...

They drive through a long, winding valley and come upon an oak gate that opens for them. About half a mile inside the property is an enormous, elegant house, sprawling over what seems like acres of land. It looks like something out of a fairy tale, a place where magic might actually exist.

Of course, Evan missed the obvious. Michael has taken them to a massive resort where they can relax and have some time away from his family. Evan's expectations of something sinister seem ridiculous now.

Michael parks the car out front, and they walk up to the entrance. Evan looks around for resort staff or other guests, but the entire area seems desolate. "Where is everyone?"

* * *

Michael laughs and opens the front door. 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 them on all sides.

Evan's 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 he notices 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," Evan quips as he walks inside, his shoes clomping on the wooden floor.

Michael laughs in that way of his when he knows something Evan doesn't. "Where do you think we are?"

"A resort that isn't even open yet?"

Michael sighs, but there's a smile there. "We're home."

The words get stuck in Evan's throat, but he manages to croak out, "What?"

If Michael smiles any wider his face will split in half. "Remember that place I told you about, the house I wanted to move into?" He gestures grandly, his arms spread wide. "I bought it for us!"

Jordan's jaw drops. "Seriously?"

Michael puts his hand in Jordan's hair. "Yep! This is our new home."

Evan is officially shocked. He gawks at the gigantic living room, blinking in disbelief. "You're absolutely insane, Michael," he says with affection. "This place is enormous. How..."

"Don't worry about moving in. I called Larry and told him what happened. He was more than happy to arrange the move."

* * *

"The move?"

"You didn't notice all you guys' stuff was here?"

Jordan peers inside one of the boxes. "Here's some stuff from the living room!" Evan looks inside and recognizes one of the framed paintings that hung on the wall, a mirror, and a few vases. "Is there a basement?"

"No, but there is a big game room," Michael says proudly.

Jordan practically squeals with delight.

It's hard for Evan to comprehend that they're going to live here. Never in his wildest dreams could he imagine living with Michael and Jordan in a grand space like this after barely a year's time. In the span of about one chaotic month, they managed to save the idyllic life they fought for, unite their families, and give Jordan a wonderful, limitless future. Now Evan is with Michael, their own blissful life stretching out before them.

Michael approaches Evan 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? I hope you like it."

"Of course I do, but... You gave me a house. How am I supposed to top that?"

Michael pulls him close, taking Evan's hands like a man in a dream. If this is a dream, Evan hopes it lasts a little while longer. "Just give me you," Michael says. "That's all I've ever needed."

*

Sometimes the hardest part isn't letting go, but rather, learning to start over. ~
Nicole Sobon