

# GERMAPHOBE

A FORBIDDEN ROMANCE THRILLER

CALLIE MOSS

**GERMAPHOBÉ**

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For a detailed list of the potentially upsetting themes in this book, please check out the content warnings tab on my author website:

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## DEDICATION

This one is dedicated to anyone who has ever had to explain that, no, they don't *actually* want to fuck their stepbrother.

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# CHAPTER ONE

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### You're Somebody Else by Flora Crash

I was nine years old the first time I laid eyes on the woman that would change my life forever. More so, I was freshly nine years old the day I met the moody, damaged boy that would become my best friend, confidant and protector. He was the best part of my day, where I went to seek solace when the nightmares got too bad. When the girls at school had something ignorant and snotty to say, he was the only place that felt right to let those tears out, but only after he promised not to fight their brothers. He was everything. From the moment I saw him sitting on top of the hood of his car, I knew he was going to be the best part of this whole new family deal. He looked so undeniably cool, his hair such a deep shade of brown it looked nearly black. The only hint of its true color coming in the rare moments the sunlight hit it. I remember how nervous I was that day, how my heart drummed painfully in my chest.

*Much like it's doing right now.*

The deep breath I drag through tight lungs doesn't feel like enough as I sit clutching the locket around my neck, the one I've held tightly in my hand

since the day everything in my life went to hell. As if holding it close to my heart will somehow dull the ache.

*It doesn't. Not even a little.*

“We’re about thirty minutes out.”

I give the Uber driver a small smile from the backseat, leaning my head against the cool window. Staring blindly at the large buildings, skyscrapers, and cars off to the side as we fly down the highway. Portland, Oregon, exactly two thousand forty-two, point one miles from my home in St. Louis. From everything and everyone I've ever known.

*Except him.*

Even that brings me little comfort. It's been nearly four years since I've seen him. Save for the quick update from Lynn when she'd cling to a rare article featuring a picture of the *eccentric shut in* software engineer to the gods. At least that's what they all say. I know the video games he's developed are insanely good. Everything from first-person shooters to RPG and horror survival games. I can practically taste the bitterness creep up the back of my throat at the thought of my stepbrother. Someone who just four years ago I would've sworn hung the stars in the sky just for me.

*Then everything changed, changed in such a substantial way it can never go back. Being close to him would only rub salt in a festering wound.*

*But there's nowhere else to go.*

Despite myself, I can't help the glimmer of hope that I'll step out of this car, and he'll wrap me up in a hug, pulling my feet off the ground, my head going light as he spins us. A selfish, silly glimmer that it'll be like stepping back in time, before he became someone I can never forgive. Someone worthy of my disdain. I'm not the type to hold grudges. At least I wasn't

before. They've always seemed like more trouble than they were worth. For years I made excuses for him, lied to myself time and time again.

*I was endlessly patient.*

*Endlessly patient because he made promises to me. Ones we sealed with our pinkies. I was patient...*

Until I wasn't. Until that awful day when he, the person I needed most, was nowhere to be found. Barely stayed on the phone for five minutes when I sobbed, trying desperately to get the worst words I had ever spoken out.

*“I'm sorry for your loss.”*

Those were the words he said to me before the line went dead, he's sorry for *my* loss. I had never in my life felt as lonely as I did at that moment. In that empty dark house filled with memories I was tasked with boxing up because I wasn't even allowed to stay there. I close my eyes, steady my breathing as more silent tears slip down my cheeks. The skin underneath my eyes is permanently puffy and stinging from the constant flow of liquid. I've never understood how people could say that love and hate often went hand in hand. How could anyone hate someone they love? It never made sense to me. I had never hated anyone at all. Not even the people from before dad met Lynn Bennett, and I met her weird brooding son, Cohen. People that definitely deserved it. I had never hated *anyone*, much less someone I loved. Now things have changed. Things changed a long time ago and I was just too immature to see that for what it was. I think... I think I might hate Cohen.

### **Reagan Nine Years Old**

My hand feels so small in dad's, something that usually makes me feel safe, but I squeeze his hand anyway.

*One.*

*Two.*

*Three.*

Just the way he taught me to if we were ever somewhere or around someone that made me feel uncomfortable. It's not that I have a problem with Lynn. She's been really nice to me. Even got me some cool art projects to make. I bump into dad as he stops short just outside the restaurant we're meeting them at. Lynn and the kid that's going to be my new stepbrother, I'd always wanted a big brother.

*Like always.*

Dad kneels in front of me, his knee popping loudly as he squats, clasping my small hands in his, “You know the deal kiddo, three strikes and we’re out but-“

“I have to give it an honest chance first.” I shift on my feet, my eyes scanning the parking lot again. He sighs, smiling down at me even though he’s crouched. His coffee-colored eyes look nervous too.

“Break it down then, Rea. What has you worried?”

“This isn’t like the other new things, or new people. These people are staying for good. There’s no trial period. If I mess it up, we’re stuck and he’ll hate me. We’re moving in with them, and what if they both end up hating me? It’ll be my fault we end up back at-“

“Hey, nobody is going to hate you, nobody. You’re too damn cute. Cohen is almost a grown man; he might not be what you had in mind when you asked Santa for a big brother, but he’s not bad. Just a little different. What do we say about people who are different?”

“Being different makes the world a more interesting place.”

He nods, bopping my nose lightly with the tip of his finger. His smile infiltrating my nerves.

I roll my eyes, my cheeks getting warmer. It's not like I ever really thought Santa was real. I mostly just did that for his sake. He had to work very hard for the presents he got me. I know Lynn makes him happy, so I won't chicken out. After a few really long moments I nod, giving him a smile as he kisses my forehead. My nerves further unknot as my eyes fall on Lynn sitting on a bench in front of the restaurant, her hair pooling around her shoulders in big, manicured curls.

*She even looks like a mom. Like a really good one.*

*I can't mess this up for dad.*

*I won't.*

“Hey! How was work?” She asks him as he leans in, kissing her right on the lips. I frown, staring at my old sneakers because *gross*. I look up when I hear a scoff come from beside me. I almost missed the man standing there, like he just blended in with everything else in the parking lot. He looks down at me with a smirk on his face, his dark hair is messy like it needs to be cut. He kind of looks like... *oh*. I freeze, my head snapping back down at my feet.

*Come on, say something.*

“I hope you worked up an appetite at school today lady Rea. They make the best waffles here.” Lynn's voice is so soft, it almost feels like a whisper as she pulls me into a hug. I soak it up before she turns me towards the man who looks like he couldn't care less about anything going on here. “Cohen, get off the hood you'll dent it.”

He shoots her a glare before hopping down, resting back on it almost immediately. His black t-shirt has some design on it I don't recognize. The ripped holes in his dark jeans make him look... cool as crap. Like the high-

schoolers that sometimes hang out on the lawn in front of the middle school. They smoke at the gazebo there, right in front of the teachers!

“Rea, this is Cohen my son. Cohen, this is Reagan.” I shoot a nervous look towards dad not sure what to say.

*Probably hi, would be a good start.*

“Hi, it's nice to meet you.” I mumble, fisting my hands behind my back. My heart seizes in my chest like someone reached in and gripped it as he leans down, squatting, so his tall frame is closer to my height. “The waffles aren't really that good, the edges are always too hard. Pancakes are okay, but only if you get the strawberry syrup.”

Lynn makes an annoyed sound from above me, which he completely ignores.

I smile at him even though I think he's about to get in trouble, “I'm allergic to strawberries. Since I'm gonna be your new sister, you should really know these things.”

“Step-sister.” He corrects, as he stands up.

“Cohen...” Lynn warns.

“I'll make a note of it.” He adds before saying hi to dad quickly and heading inside without even a second look back at us as we follow. I rejoin my dad quickly, gripping his hand like a lifeline as we head in behind him.

I tug on him until he leans closer to me so I can whisper in his ear, “I can't tell if that went well or not.”

He chuckles, “Me either, kiddo.”

*Not comforting.*

I didn't try to touch him, which was rule number one, according to my dad. Although I still don't really understand why. I can't really imagine why anyone wouldn't want a hug. They make everything feel better. As soon as

we sit down, Cohen grabs a bunch of napkins from the holder and begins wiping down his silverware and the table in front of him. His thick eyebrows pull together, his lips thinning as if he's focusing extra hard, making sure to get every nook and cranny. Lynn carries on talking to dad as if his behavior is totally normal.

*Is it? Are dad and I the gross ones?*

*No, Lynn isn't doing it either.*

He continues the process after his drink arrives with the rim of the cup, making sure nothing, including himself, ever actually touches the table. I give my dad a look as Cohen excuses himself to wash his hands for the third time, just as our food arrives. Dad opens his mouth, taking a deep breath before shutting it and turning to Lynn as if he's not sure how to answer either.

“Cohen has a thing with germs.” She explains, before giving a sympathetic glance toward her son's retreating back. That makes sense, I guess. I'm no stranger to people doing things that seem off to me. Dad says we shouldn't judge, and I do my best not to. One lady at a shelter dad and I stayed at for a little used to carry around this tattered Elmo doll like it was a baby. She'd make the crying sounds all hours of the night too. To be honest, it scared me at first. She ended up being nice. She even let me hold her Elmo baby a few times. I was happy to, even though it didn't smell very good. She scared me at first, but she was always nice to me and dad.

*I think Cohen is nice too, just different like dad said.*

I'm about halfway through my plate of pancakes when I catch him staring at me with a strange look on his face. I glance down at myself, my cheeks burning, maybe I'd made a mess.

*Nope, still clean.*

*For now.*

I take a sip of my water, accidentally making eye contact with him again, “What?”

“How's the pancakes?” He asks, making Lynn stop mid-sentence and nearly gawk. Another thing I don't really understand.

*Guess he doesn't talk much.*

“Might be better with strawberries.”

He raises his eyebrows, smirking, “Guess you'll never know.”



“Miss? Miss?”

I jolt awake, my cheeks heating as I wipe the drool from the corner of my mouth. Trying to casually wipe the rest from the car door with my sleeve before he notices, “I'm sorry.”

He chuckles, “It's cool. People fall asleep all the time.” My head is still drowsy as I stare out of the window, gawking at the giant, severe looking house we're parked in front of.

*This can't be it...*

“Uhm, are you sure this is the right place?” I ask, sincerely hoping it's not and I have another two to three business days to mentally collect myself.

The driver flips through his phone, “Yeah, this is the address you gave me.” He glances up approvingly at the strange angular stone walls, “Sweet house too.”

I just nod, taking a deep breath as I step out of the car. My back aching from being seated all day. Even the air smells different here, yet another thing to remind me I'm not home. The cool tones and stone exterior of the sleekly designed house make it feel far from welcoming. There's no decorations dotting the large front and side lawn. Not even a gnome or welcome sign to lighten the place up a bit.

*Because it's not welcoming, it's not meant to be.*

My heart nearly springs from my chest, flopping to the gravel as the front doors swing open. Cohen squints despite the dark clouds in the sky. As if he hasn't been outside in a while, which doesn't surprise me. He looks so... grown. His face is more chiseled, the faint dusting of facial hair on his chin and his trademark messy dark hair all scream the Cohen I once knew, but an older, harder version.

*But he isn't someone I know, not anymore. I suppose I'm glad for the differences.*

I don't smile at him, silently cursing myself for even wanting to. Chastising my heart for the way it's pounding in my chest. I turn back, nearly bumping into the Uber guy who is extracting my one suitcase that wasn't shipped here ahead of me, "Oh sorry." I mumble.

He smiles down at me, "That's like the tenth time you've apologized since you got in my car." He chuckles, his hazel eyes glued to mine.

"I'm sorry?"

That earns me more laughter, which makes me laugh too. A much-needed break from the grief and anxiety.

"You can leave that there." Cohen's deep gravelly voice shakes me to my core as I glance over my shoulder. He already looks annoyed. I try to ignore him all together, taking the bag from the driver thanking him.

“Hey uh, you said you aren't from around here, but I live just a half hour away if you ever wanted to hang out. I could show you around Portland.” He smiles, nervously shifting on his feet. It's cute.

“Yeah that'd-“

I'm cut off as Cohen grabs my bag from my shoulder, his leather gloves straining with how hard he grips the handle, “Thanks for bringing her, you can go now.”

*Still rude.*

“... be fun, thanks.” I finish.

I watch his smile fade as Cohen steps up beside me, not getting so close to me or the driver that it would compromise his ozone of cleanliness, “I'll be there in a minute Cohen.” I snap. His jaw ticks as he clenches it, before turning around sharply. His tall, muscular frame almost looks comical next to my small one.

“You have my number from the app, right?”

The guy hesitates, his hand already on the door handle, his eyes flicking towards the house. “Your friend didn't seem to hype on the idea.”

“He's my brother, hardly my friend.” I mutter, looking down at my sneakers as I toe at the gravel.

“I better get going, people don't like it when I'm late.” He says as he gets back in the car. My cheeks flush once again with embarrassment as I reluctantly turn and face the house.

*It's only for a month or two Reagan, then you can use the money from dad and Lynn's life insurance to get the house back and go home. It'll go back to normal. Like I never left St. Louis.*

I drag my feet as I climb the large concrete steps leading up to the house, careful to step out of my shoes before I walk inside. The house is just as

dimly decorated and lit as the rest; the only light provided by the floor to ceiling windows lined throughout the large open floored living space. A large industrial style living room off to my left has them as well, not that it does a ton of good with the dark clouds in the sky today. Even the weather knows my arrival here is bullshit.

“All of your stuff is already in your room.” Cohen's voice makes me jump, pulling my eyes up to my right. He leans lazily over the iron banister of a staircase I hadn't even noticed. His hands are covered with black gloves that look like expensive leather, a new habit he's picked up, I guess. I ignore the way my heart clenches to think his germaphobia has gotten worse. That he's been holed up in this house alone all these years.

*Because that's what he wanted. He left you, not the other way around.*

“Miss. Bennet, if you would please wash your hands before entering.” An older women mutters, walking in from a back room. “My name is Gilda. I take care of the house. Mr. Bennet is particular about hand washing.”

I try to hold back my scowl as I follow her into a nearby bathroom, away from *him*.

“There's an antibacterial wash just there. When you're finished, please dry and add the sanitizer beside it. Twenty seconds over-”

I cast her a sympathetic smile, “Over the hands and at least fifteen seconds under the nails. I remember.” Even those words make my chest squeeze like a vise around my heart. My smile falters as she leaves the sleek room that screams sophistication and *money*. As I wash my hands, I close my eyes for a moment, imagining the warm tones and fuzzy bathmats from home. When I emerge my eyes immediately find him again, like there's something magnetic pulling them that way. He's still waiting at the top of the stairs, his phone in his hand, the black gloves discarded. He frowns, the

space between his brows creasing before he pockets his phone. Abruptly tugging the black hoodie off as I climb the stairs. I quickly avert my eyes as his shirt lifts, showing off an equally chiseled six pack. He raises his eyebrows the way he always has his blue eyes searching over me, as if he's confused by my appearance too.

*You aren't the only one that's changed, asshole.*

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## CHAPTER TWO

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Cohen disappeared into his room almost immediately after my arrival, letting his housekeeper show me around the estate. At least she was kind, giving me every bit of the warm welcome my stepbrother couldn't be bothered to. I shrug off my jacket, tossing it over the back of the uncomfortable looking angular couch before sitting down. After one full hour of scrolling my social media feed I was nearly bored out of my mind shut in my fake room filled with boxes that were stuffed to the brim. The objects wrapped carefully inside stand as reminders of a life that I can't recognize as mine anymore. It's nothing less than psychological whiplash. The rough start to my life, to the happiest I've ever been... just to lose everything. Ending up worse than how I started.

For a moment I wish dad had never met Lynn, that they hadn't fallen in love because then they'd be out there somewhere still. Sure, she wouldn't have helped dad find a job at the Action Agency where she worked and our lives would've continued in shelter after shelter and charity drive after charity drive, but she'd be out there somewhere, alive.

*And so would he.*

I spend a solid fifteen minutes just glaring at the beautiful abstract butterfly painting above my bed, swirls of deep red and purple and a ton of other colors I probably don't know the proper names of. Its presence felt like a stab to the gut forcing upon me memories of him and butterflies. An insect I had been obsessed with for the better part of my childhood.

*And well into high school.*

Sure, I could've unpacked, done something productive instead of wallowing, but I'd like to put that off for as long as possible. As if keeping my things in boxes will make it feel less like I actually live here. I watch as a seemingly endless amount of rain runs down the large windows. Their streaks merge with one another, making larger droplets before fizzling too far down to track. It's moments like this where I feel more peace than I've experienced since that awful day. Moments when I can let my mind go blank and think of nothing at all.

*Three months. Three months since I've felt even a glimmer of hope, happiness or anything remotely good.*

“Mr. Bennet, I assumed you would have your dinner in your office as usual. I'll set another place at the table.”

I take a deep breath before tipping my head backwards on the couch, the upside-down version of *Mr. Bennet* descending the stairs. His icy blue eyes watching me; his expression nearly twisted enough to be considered a scowl. I frown as Gilda rounds the couch, interrupting our stare down, her graying black hair wound tightly on the top of her head. “Miss. Ben-“

“Reagan, please.”

She smiles nervously before continuing in a hushed voice, “Reagan, please take your feet off the coffee table when Mr. Bennet is around. He'll have a fit.”

*Ah yes. The house rules.*

A several-page-long email I received yesterday morning from the man himself. Or I'm assuming someone he dictated to send it for him. Nearly all of them pertaining to the cleanliness of the house. Those aren't the ones that bothered me, we lived together for years. Those, while they are more extreme now, I expected, I had adjusted to years ago. It's the *rules-correction* restrictions around my coming and going that made this already bitter deal taste like absolute garbage. Not only was I given a curfew, despite being an adult, I'm also not allowed to bring anyone over. Ever. Under any circumstances. Nor am I allowed to go out without the full disclosure of my whereabouts and only after getting the broody sad gamer boy turned headmasters' approval.

*We'll, see about that Mr. Bennet. Lynn and dad trusted me. I've never given them a single reason not to. Yet I'm being put on house arrest, punished for simply being here. As if it was my first, second, or even third choice.*

“I'm sorry.” I mumble, sitting up a little too quickly, making my head spin. It's nearly six in the evening and I haven't eaten since five yesterday morning... I think. Tears threaten my eyes as I picture the horrified look on Lynn and dad's face if they knew I hadn't been eating properly. Skipping meals all together most days. Eating seems more like a chore than something I look forward to. I couldn't bring myself to stand in that empty kitchen. The place where I used to smile and laugh so hard it hurt. Finding weird recipes with dad online that usually ended up tasting awful only to order a pizza with them afterwards.

“Reagan...”

I drag my eyes to him, hoping he's still self-aware enough to tell I'm not interested in conversing with him, "I don't mind that much. If you want to put your feet there." The lie spills out between his bowed lips as he clenches his fists. I know how much it bothers him; I suppose that's part of why I did it.

"Your house. Your rules."

I stand, ignoring the way the room tilts around me as I head for the dining room, not bothering to glance in his direction as I pass him at the bottom of the stairs. My breath hitches in my throat as he catches my wrist. The leather of his gloves feels warm but uncomfortable. It feels *wrong*.

*Or maybe it's just his touch.*

"It's your house too, for as long as you want it." The sincerity in his voice takes me aback, "I know we've been out of touch but- "

"Two months." I interrupt his lame half-assed excuse for why he's ignored me for four years. Why he wasn't there for me is the last thing I want to hear from him. I don't care, I will never care again. I jerk my wrist away, making anger flare in his silvery blue eyes.

"Two months what?" My skin breaks out in goosebumps at the dark tone of his voice, I'm not unfamiliar with it. It's haunted my dreams more times than I can count.

"Did you not listen to any of my voicemails?" I ask, crossing my arms as I take a step back. The deep mossy smell mixed with hand sanitizer I've associated with him forcing its way into my nose. Memories of countless nights curled up on his bed, clinging to his sheets as I cried for him flooding back in. He looks down, shifting on his feet.

*He didn't. He didn't even bother listening to them.*

I huff as I dig my nails into my palm, willing away the burning ache in my chest, “I’m only staying for two months, less if I can help it. I’ve spoken with the bank and insurance company already. Two more months max, by then the insurance payment will have come through. I can be out of your hair.” I hate this feeling. I want it to go away. I want *you* to go away, Cohen. I’m nearly inside the dining room, casting a sympathetic look at Gilda, who I’m sure feels uncomfortable now when he finally speaks. Leaving me immediately wishing he hadn’t.

“No.”

I whirl around, nearly knocking myself off balance. “No, what Cohen?”

“Stop that.” He raises a hand, pointing at me the way a dad points at his unruly child. His thick brows knit together the way they do when he concentrates hard on something.

“For the love of God, stop what?”

“Saying my name like I’m a fucking stranger, Rea.”

I laugh, but it comes off chipped the sound devoid of humor before straightening my back. Letting all the anger I can muster flow through my eyes, imagining it skewering his heart, “Aren’t you?”

That anger doubles down, flaring and burning away any warmth that might’ve hidden in his eyes. It’s a look I’ve only seen one other time. Never had it been directed at me, “Gilda a moment.”

My heart pounds in my chest as he stares at me, keeping my legs from moving despite everything, every fiber of me screaming *run*. Things are different between us, our relationship nonexistent, but he would never hurt me. Right? The look in his eyes tells me he would. It tells me he wants to. As soon as Gilda is gone, a gasp leaves my lips as he closes the distance between us. I scramble to backtrack until I hit the front door. My head

swimming, too light for comfort as I reach for the door handle that's mere inches out of my grasp. His gloved hand connects loudly with the door beside my head as he cages me in.

“Cohen...”

He doesn't speak, but I can see the millions of words spilling across his eyes just the same. I exhale a shaky breath as his expression softens, speaking through gritted teeth, “I thought you would stay.”

A light dusting of pink fills his sculpted cheeks as he looks down. A glimpse of the hardened boy with a sweet, shy interior I grew up loving peeks through just long enough to shred my already fatally wounded heart. He lowers his head further, lightly resting his forehead on his arm briefly before pushing away from me. “It's harder than I expected, Reagan. Seeing you after all this time.”

*You can't just say things like that.*

God, why is my heart beating so fast? “I'm an adult. I want a life of my own back in St. Louis. Not here. Not living under my brother's roof.”

He clears his throat, “Stepbrother.” He corrects, “You're eighteen that's barely an adult. What about college? You could stay here, get your degree—”

“I'm not staying.” I can hear my heartbeat whooshing in my ears as my face grows hot. Too fucking hot. I feel... not right. Like my legs don't want to hold up my body anymore. He frowns, taking a half step closer to me. I can barely hear the words that leave his mouth. It sounds so far away, I feel like they were important. I take an unsteady step forward, clutching the fabric of his shirt.

“Reagan?”

The room plunges into darkness as his strong arms wrap around me. For a moment, I allow myself to feel it. To feel *him* and every horrifying

emotion that comes with him.



## Cohen

My heart rages in my chest as I watch her evergreen eyes flutter open. Her head resting on my lap as Gilda rounds us where we still sit on the floor, a cool, damp rag in her hand. I ignore the look of surprise on her face as I jerk off my gloves, gently placing it on Reagan's forehead, "Hey."

She clears her throat, squeezing her eyes shut tightly. Hiding them from me... I decide I hate that. That I've spent too many years without them on me the way they used to be. Reagan would watch every move I made. She was relentless. Following my friends and I around, hanging just slightly behind, pretending she just so happened to be there. Always watching my every step as if she was trying so hard to work me out in her mind. Like if she just looked hard enough, she'd see the bits she wanted to, the confusing messy parts that I kept hidden from her.

"Reagan." I whisper, my jaw clenching when she shakes her head.

"I haven't eaten today, I'm fine." She says it so quietly I nearly miss it. Part of me wishes I had. She was alone in that fucking house for so long, of course, she hasn't been eating. She was alone with her grief while I was here, feeling something akin to hope for the first time in years. Her whole life has been upturned and... I just couldn't wait until she was finally forced to my doorstep. I was the only one outside of them that was aware of their financial situation. I knew it was only a matter of time before they took the

house. All I had to do was wait her out. I watch her pink tongue dart out, wetting her full bottom lip before she promptly tugs it between her teeth. My grip on the rag tightens, making water squeeze out onto her forehead, rolling down her smooth cheek.

Her eyes snap open, that fire I saw in them earlier returning, “You’re getting me wet, asshole.”

My eyebrows shoot up at the curse, the tension in my chest tightens like the loop at the end of a rope. Those evergreen eyes I love so much are locked onto mine just like I wanted and suddenly they feel like too much. Suddenly I’m too aware of the rag in my bare hand, the way I’ve infected myself. It’s probably overflowing with bacteria. It could make me sick, or her sick. I take a steady breath as her eyes widen, a tinge of rose filling her cheeks before she jerks the disgusting rag away from me, bolting upright. The groan that leaves her lips damn near makes my constant frustration and worrying about her take a backseat to a whole host of more concerning thoughts. I frown, working my jaw. Not sure what to do. My chest is tightening again. Discomfort ruining the effect of having her so close. I want to look at her, to work out what she’s feeling. Instead, I stare at my hands. My skin feels heated. I can almost imagine the germs festering on them.

*Dirty.*

“Go.”

“Not until you eat.” I spit out, far more aggressive than I meant it. I can feel Gilda’s staring. It’s almost as uncomfortable as the germs worming their way into my skin, into hers too. I swallow past the itch I imagine in my throat, clenching my knuckles harder as if it’ll ward them off.

“Cohen,” She breathes out as my head snaps up. That voice... it's the one I remember. Soft, kind and so fucking light. The gentle rasp that fits her so well hasn't changed, not a bit. Her eyes dart down to my fists as she picks up the gloves I flung onto the coffee table, tossing them back into my lap, “Go.”

I take a deep breath, glaring over my shoulder at the older woman, “Make sure she eats. I'll be back down in a moment.”

“Of course, Mr. Bennet, I'll make sure she's taken care of. Remember, you have a conference call with Mr. Munoz at eight.”

I stand abruptly, keeping my hands pinned at my sides as I head for the stairs. Each step seems to scream the same thing.

*She needs you and you're walking away. Again.*

But I'm not. Not this time. I'm not leaving her and I'm sure as fuck not letting her leave me. I've come too far for that. A single accident and three months later, my entire world is in overdrive. Every breath over the past four years has been forced. Every interaction, every success or achievement failed to make me feel half of what I did glued to my computer every other weekend. Eleven thirty on Sunday night when Raymond was out of town and mom could email me without starting a fight. My heart would pound in my chest, like it's doing now as I skimmed past all the ramblings and musing about her days and his. Questions about how I was and what I was up to, ones I'd only ever answered to ensure the communication never stopped. I'd skim over all the things a dutiful son should've cared about until I saw *her* name. Until Lynn updated me about *her*. The girl that's been my entire world since the day I met her, barely sixteen and didn't care about a fucking thing except managing not to off myself and keeping my hands clean. I had never experienced anything that... instantly overwhelming

before. Sometimes she'd even attach pictures of her. Reagan smiling with a group of kids I didn't know. Her covered in some kind of flour in the kitchen we grew up in.

I know Lynn never told Reagan's father she updated me on her. He'd only have tried to stop her. The thought alone makes anger build in my chest as I shoulder the door to my bathroom. Quickly stripping off my clothes before turning on the shower. My chest constricts with each second spent waiting until the room fills with steam. Hiding the evidence of how my feelings have changed for her over the years. How adoration and a desire to see her thriving and safe turned into something that burned so hot in my chest it had fully consumed me long before I ever realized it. I scrub myself watching sun deprived flesh turn bright red as the scalding water rolls over my skin. With every scrub, every pass of soap, my control seems a little tighter. I breathe a little easier until she robs me of my breath again.

*And what a wonderful way to die.*

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## CHAPTER THREE

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## R eagan

Despite the efforts of Gilda to stall, I ate dinner as quickly as possible. Not even giving my first proper meal in months' time to cool or sit on my tongue, trying my best to finish before Cohen sulks back down the stairs. As far as first days as roomies go, this has been pretty awful. I passed out like the main character in some dramatic novella Lynn and dad loved to watch. My weirdly handsome stepbrother swooping in to catch me before I fell.

*Vomit.*

“Reagan dear, is it alright if I speak candidly for a moment?”

I lower the glass of water from my lips before nodding. My auburn-colored hair swept over my shoulder in the hasty braid I jerked it into after he darted up the stairs like the house was on fire. Gilda worries the hem of her apron, her nerves swarming the room like hornets.

“I’m not used to having... staff around. Just speak to me like a normal person, please.”

*Is it rude to refer to her as staff? That seemed rude.*

Her forced smile warms, her eyes darting towards the door as if merely thinking about Cohen might summon him like Voldemort, “Mr. Bennet has employed me since he moved out here. In all that time, I don't think we've had more than a handful of genuine conversations.” She chuckles, glancing again at the angular archway. This time there's something else in her eyes. Mixed among the apprehension, there's love. A love I saw in Lynn's eyes every day, one that never left my dad's. A lump is already forming in my throat, my hand going to the locket hanging around my neck.

“Reagan, when he would speak, it was always about you. Some nights he likes to spend time in the study when I went in there to clean. He'd always have a picture of you sitting close by.”

A flush bleeds up my neck as I grip the locket tighter, my heart completely untethered in my chest, “Why tell me this? I'm sure he wouldn't want you letting people know he has a heart.”

“Mr. Bennet doesn't smile often. When he does, it's forced. All except for you. I... I don't think anyone can be truly happy in isolation. I worry about him. His... quirks- ”

“It's not a quirk, it's a mental disorder. One he's always refused help for.” I interrupt a tinge of annoyance surprising me. He hated it when people didn't take his *aversions* seriously. I can't count the number of times I watched him lose it because someone thought it'd be funny to mess with him. Granted, they never laughed for very long. His anger has always been swift and severe. Judging by the way he reacted to being told *no* earlier, that hasn't changed.

She nods, still plunking at the apron, “It's progressed over the years. It isn't my place, Reagan, but I've come to see Mr. Bennet as a son of sorts. I care for him much like a... mother would. Your arrival here, although

through horrible circumstances, could be beneficial to him. Perhaps to you as well, a chance to-

“That's enough for tonight, Gilda.” Cohen's voice makes me jump, the glass slipping from my hands and sloshing onto the table as I frantically try to rid my cheeks of the tears that had escaped down them. Jolting up from the table, I slam into Cohen in my attempt to dart for the paper towels in the sleek metal dispenser on the counter. His hard chest taking the brunt of our collision. His hands snap up, gripping my shoulders tightly, steadying me. He's still hot from the shower, the skin on his neck red and irritated from scrubbing. The smell of mint on his breath makes goosebumps rise on my skin, exhaling a frustrated breath as I jerk free from him.

“I've got it. It's just a little water.” Gilda assures me as I turn back to her, an apology already formed on my lips.

Cohen doesn't say a word. If I cared enough, I'd be inclined to check if he was breathing at all, standing ramrod straight at my back. A stark contrast to the lazy bad boy posture he usually assumes. Suddenly I'm furious with him again. My chest is aching like I've just run a marathon. That only seems to anger me more. I should be able to ignore him just as effectively as he's ignored me over the years. I really, really thought I could. When I turn, meeting his ice-blue eyes, that million-dollar question is on the tip of my tongue...

*Why did you leave?*

He stares down at me, his white long-sleeved t-shirt catching droplets from his soaked hair. Proof he rushed down here. The idea of Cohen rushing through anything, much less his shower routine it almost makes me laugh. He's frazzled... good.

“Mr. Bennet, there's a plate in the oven for you. Your meeting starts in twenty minutes. I'll finish my cleaning and head out for the night.”

He doesn't respond to her, just as rude as ever. He only stares at me, opening and closing his mouth as if he wanted to say something. I'm grateful when he doesn't. His eyes dip to his mother's locket hanging just at the top of the valley of my breasts. His pupils swallowing the blue of his eyes.

“I'm going to bed. Goodnight Gilda.” I spit out, blinking away more unnecessary tears.

He clears his throat, looking away as he pushes a hand through his wet hair and promptly scowls in response. Wiping his hand off onto his pants, “Are you feeling better? I'd like to set up an appointment—“

“I just need some sleep. I'll make an appointment with my doctor back home.”

“Reagan- “

I don't respond as I brush past him, my eyes trained on my socks as I flee up the stairs like some crappy version of Cinderella.

*Two months. You can handle two months.*

I clench my fists together in front of me after slamming my way into my fake room. The one where he thought of everything I would need. Even clothes I've never seen hang in garment bags in the walk-in closet. A sob breaks free from my chest. It's guttural and burns my already sore throat.

*He thought of everything.*

*Except for the fact that I didn't want to be here.*

*That I feel like I can't breathe with him near me.*

*One.*

*Two.*

### *Three.*

I squeeze my hand, crying harder when nothing happens. When my dad doesn't show up to take me out of the scary new place. He never will again. All I have left is someone I hate. Someone that didn't want me.

*He talked about you. You made him smile.*

But he never answered my calls, never responded to a text or email. What am I supposed to do with that? I drag a shuddering breath through my lungs, my eyes falling to the mirror on the vanity I'm sure he paid someone to buy for me. I'm not even sure if I'm supposed to recognize the person reflected there. Forcing my cheeks up, I smile, the smile I used to always wear. The one dad and Lynn loved. The one Cohen loved once. My stomach churns at the sight of the cheap representation of that girl. The girl who had no idea that one day, the family she gained would be people she couldn't think about without crying.



### **Reagan Age Eleven**

“Cohen, your friend is here!” I yell, knocking loudly on his bedroom door.

“I’ll be out in a minute Rea.” He responds softly, but his voice sounds weird, almost strained.

Andrew scoots in beside me, pressing his ear to the door, “Holy shit, who do you have in there?”

“Fuck off Andrew!”

A girl giggles from behind the door before a loud thud rattles the walls, a gasp leaving her that's nearly as loud.

“What?” I ask, pushing my ear against the door like Andrew. I didn't know he had a friend over, in his room no less! I let my glittery butterfly backpack fall to the ground behind me. Andrew frowns down at me before pushing my forehead away from the door. My chest tightens, that nervous feeling making my stomach feel sick.

“Hey don't push me!”

“This isn't kid shit.” He retorts, “Go somewhere else for a minute.”

I cross my arms, “You don't get to tell me what to do.” I snap at him as the girl cries out from inside.

*That sounded painful.*

“Shut the fuck up.” Cohen growls.

Andrews' hands snap over my ears, making me flinch as he tries to steer me down the hall towards my bedroom. A yelp leaves my throat as panic swells in my chest, “Stop!”

*The man's hands smell gross. They're clamped over my mouth so tight I can't breathe. My heart is beating so fast...*

I claw at Andrew's hands; he wouldn't hurt me... right? I like Andrew, he's Cohen's best friend. I know that, but still panic takes hold of me in an unrelenting, painful kind of way.

“Cohen!” I screech, thrashing hard against Andrew. The sound of a door slamming against a wall fills my ears.

*“Daddy! Let me go!” The words are muffled against his palm. He can't hear me.*

Andrew grunts as Cohen slams into him, knocking his head against the wall as I fall to my knees, “Don't fucking touch her!” He yells, inches from

Andrew's face as I double over, panting. I clutch my chest, my nails dragging painfully across my skin, even through my shirt. Trying to force air into my lungs.

"Dude, I wasn't hurting her, she just freaked out! You know I'd never hurt her!" Andrew yells and I blink past the tears in my eyes, staring in shock as a girl runs from the bedroom wearing only Cohen's missing T-shirt.

"Stop it Cohen!" She yells, jerking hard on his shoulders, as I push to my feet. My chest is still achy and tight. Growing more so each second, but she shouldn't touch him. It's against his rules.

"Don't touch him! He doesn't like to be touched!" I yell at her, my head feeling lighter and lighter the harder my heart pumps. I think I'm hyperventilating.

*The girl doesn't stop.*

*She's going to make him freak out.*

I get to my feet, tears running down my face as I grip his stolen shirt, trying not to look at her bare private parts as she jerks at him.

Cohen balls up his fist at the same time I do, sending it into Andrew's jaw as I punch the girl in the back. His hand slips over Andrew's throat, something scary and dark flashing in his eyes, "She told you to stop!"

"Don't touch him. You're dirty! You'll get germs all over him!" I wail as I pound my balled fists into her with little effect. Trying not to be grossed out when I accidentally touch her butt, "Where are your pants!? Don't touch him!"

Cohen's eyes go wide all the sudden, like he's just catching up with himself. He lets go of Andrew, shoving the girl away from him. I only barely move in time to avoid her knocking into me. He doesn't even bother to look at either of them. His eyes only on me as we both breathe hard. My

own noisy cry startles me as my heart pounds in my chest. Pressing my butt hands to my eyes, I sob, “I got scared!”

Cohen's hands grip me the moment I'm within reach, sending me careening into his chest. The comforting warmth of his skin calms the sharp, piercing edge of my panic, but I still cry, trying my best to keep my tears and snot off of him.

“Both of you get out. Now!” I flinch as he yells.

“Hush Rea, it's alright. I'm sorry.”

“Andrew didn't hurt me.” I hiccup.

He only hushes me again, running his fingers through my hair as he pulls me tighter. Letting us slide down the wall onto the floor as he rocks me in his arms, “I've got you. I've always got you, no matter what. Understand me?” He pulls my face away from his chest, ignoring me as I try to go back.

His blue eyes lock onto mine as I sniffle, “I understand. I got germs on you though, I know, I know you don't like-“

He shushes me, pulling me back into his arms, “It's alright.”

“What the hell is going on?”

I pull free from Cohen's arms, stumbling to my feet as I run down the hall towards dad, “I got scared. A- Andrew covered my ears and it was *him* dad. From Haven Housing.” I sob as he wraps his arms around me, tugging me tightly to him. His arms are every bit as comfortable as Cohen's. They keep me safe, both of them. That alone loosens the knot in my chest.

“Who?”

I turn to look at Cohen, he's still shirtless, his fists balled. An even scarier... Angrier look in his eyes.

“Maybe worry about a shirt and making sure your friends keep their hands off my daughter.” Dad snaps, making me pull back, staring up at the

equally angry look on his face.

“Don't be mad at Cohen.” I hiccup, “I just... panicked.”

Dad nods, but he doesn't look any less upset as he tries to turn back down the hall with me still clinging to him.

“Reagan.”

I stop, looking back at Cohen again, his thick brows furrowed together. The way he's staring at me makes my cheeks pink. Suddenly all the details I missed during my little freak out slip in. Connecting like they hadn't before.

*I've never seen Cohen without a shirt before. That girl wasn't wearing pants...*

*Oh, my god... Ew.*

I snap my head towards the floor, too embarrassed to meet his eyes.

“Do you need me to stay?” He asks softly, in that voice he seems to save for me. I like that, I like knowing he wouldn't talk to the naked girl like that.

When I open my mouth to respond, dad cuts me off, “She's fine.”

“I wasn't asking you.” He bites back and I grip dad's hand, squeezing it.

*One.*

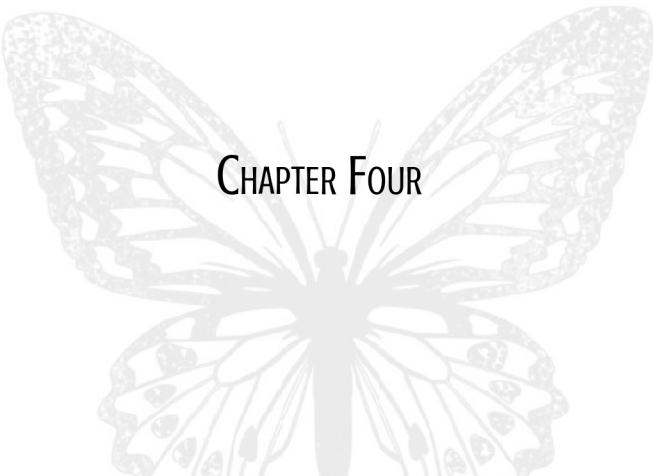
*Two.*

*Three.*

He looks down at me and smiles but there's a coldness... a worry in his eyes that makes my stomach feel unsettled again, “Hot chocolate for your troubles?”

I sniffle and nod, “I need to wash my hands first.”

I shoot Cohen a weak smile he doesn't return. He doesn't even look down at me, only glares at my dad as he steers me away.



## CHAPTER FOUR

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## NECESSARY ADJUSTMENT

The dark gray ceiling only seems to add to my sour mood as I lay back on my bed glaring at it. Increasingly loud growling in my stomach and yummy smells floating in from underneath my door urging me to leave the room. The push of my bladder makes me grip the stupid mauve sheets of my *not* bed, desperate to stay. I do this ritual every morning. Stay in bed as long as possible, holding my pee, ignoring the grumbles of my stomach because the moment I get up, it's really a new day. Another day without them. At home, I would imagine Lynn's laughter and dad's frenzied footsteps as he dashed around looking for his phone and keys, already late for work. The morning news drifting under the door, the way the TV was always a little too loud because dad could only hear from his left side.

The sound of real footsteps makes a very real breath catch in my throat as they stop in front of the door, my eyes slicing towards it to ensure it's locked. He doesn't try to come in, doesn't even knock. His footsteps carry on in their dragged lazy way. Despite that, I hold my breath. I hold it until my fists knot the sheets in earnest, my face growing hot as my lungs strain. I don't release that breath until my body forces me to, letting my head swim

as I reluctantly lift from the warm, probably ridiculously expensive bed. Taking a moment to steady myself as I glare at the butterfly painting that represents a part of me he helped kill. After a few attempts on the floor, I finally wiggle out the box labeled clothes shoved into the back of the closet. One of the movers so graciously placed at the absolute bottom of the stack, my heart flipping as a light knock sounds at the door.

“Yes?” I call out.

“Sorry to disturb you Reagan, but breakfast is ready. Mr. Bennet requested I watch you eat.”

I drag a steady breath through my lungs, “I’m taking a shower and I’ll be down shortly. Please tell Mr. Bennet not to wait around.”

She pauses and for a moment I feel for her. God knows how uncomfortable all this must be when she’s only trying to do her job.

“Of course.”

Gathering my clothes in my arms as I shove back, letting myself lean on the enormous chest at the foot of the bed, ignoring the way its metal latch presses uncomfortably into the middle of my shoulder blades.



*“Smile, lady Rea, there's always a reason to.” Lynn says, pushing a loose strand into her high ponytail as dad lounges against their double sink beside her. Not missing an opportunity to openly admire her in the mirror.*

*“Yeah, you've got super cool parents that buy you cars for your birthday, even though you missed curfew. Twice.” Dad chimes in with a chastising*

*look.*

*Still staring at my feet, I toe the bathroom rug from where I sit on the edge of their tub, “By twenty minutes.” I mumble under my breath. Can't believe I'm being lectured on my birthday.*

*Can't believe dad is lecturing.*

*He clears his throat in a dissatisfied fatherly way, “Twenty minutes of not knowing where you were or if you were okay felt like a lifetime, Reagan.”*

*My chest constricts as I meet his eyes, swallowing hard to clear the lump in my throat that comes every time I disappoint them. Which admittedly isn't often, “I'm sorry. I really didn't mean to. Riley's mom was running late and I-“*

*Lynn's eyes meet mine in the mirror, cutting me off. Her words filtering through my head.*

*Apologies shouldn't come with excuses. Apologize, listen and then explain so everyone feels heard.*

*“I should've called, I'm sorry.”*

*She smiles, fastening her locket around her neck, “Happy sixteenth birthday, Lady Rea.”*



*Okay. Maybe I like the shower here.*

I tilt my head back further, letting the hot water roll over my skin, washing away my anxiety for a moment. The pulse setting pelts against my back like a deep tissue massage. Adjustable water pressure and twenty-three

stream settings in a shower? Life changing. Definitely going to upgrade the one at the house once I get it back. My stomach gurgles, reminding me how hungry I am despite the ridiculous portions I ate last night. A glance down at my pruning hands confirms its more than time to get out, having cleaned myself quickly and admittedly half-assed, using the rest of my time to just enjoy the water.

*A far cry from the recommended hygiene steps in his delusional as all shit email.*

Shutting off the water I step out of the walk-in shower, noting how thick the air is with steam, how heavy it feels in my lungs. Also noting the absence of towels and mats. An exasperated sigh leaves my throat as I drip all over the tiled floor, my auburn hair looking closer to dark brown as it clings to my shoulders and forehead. Making my way around the bathroom, opening every drawer and clawing through every cabinet. Not a single towel, no wash rag... hand towel, nothing. I frown, working out my next move.

*Should I yell for Gilda?*

I could use a blanket or my clothes to dry myself, but I feel like that's weirder than just asking for a damn towel.

*Or you're overthinking again and are about to make things more complicated than they should be.*

I curse under my breath, remembering the door to the bedroom is locked, so either way I'm dragging water everywhere and leaving the comforting steam of the spacious bathroom. A burst of cold air hits me as I swing open the door, hugging myself tightly, shivers already working down my spine as my skin pebbles. Padding over to the door, I purse my lips at the puddles of water marking my chilled path from the bathroom. Pausing for a moment

before turning the lock and poking my head out into the hallway I open my mouth to call for the older woman letting it snap shut so hard my teeth clack together as my eyes meet two wide blue ones at the head of the stairs. My heart launches into my throat as I fling myself from the door like it's a venomous snake. Backtracking until my foot hits a patch of water, my tailbone hitting the grayish hardwood floor with such force I swear it shatters, sending tremors of pain up my spine as I cry out, tears springing to my eyes.

“Reagan!” Cohen darts into the room so fast nothing more than garbled words in the form of a screech can make its way from my throat as I scramble.

“Don't look!”

His hand is already clamped tightly over his eyes as his chest rises and falls quickly, “I'm not fucking looking! Are you ok- “his foot hits a patch of water, making him flail easily the least cool thing I've ever seen him do. His shoulder meets the heavy wooden dresser with a loud thud, rocking it. I rip the spare blanket from the end of the bed covering myself, the cold air and water mess long forgotten as well as any pride I had still retained. He sags against the dresser, grumbling but keeping a hand clasped over his eyes.

“Are you okay?”

“Yes-“ for a moment I'm grateful he can't see the heat rising in my cheeks, “I just wanted a towel.”

“I don't have towels in the bathrooms.”

*He sounds exasperated, like I wanted any of this.*

“Who the hell doesn't have towels?!” I snap, grimacing as I stand, wrapping the blanket tighter around me, “You're good to open your eyes.”

He removes his hand, his eyes dropping to the damp blanket draped around me, his pupils once again eclipsing his eyes. His Addam's apple bobbing in his throat, "It's a dryer."

"What?"

"The shower," He runs his fingers through his hair, "it has a dryer function. HEPA- purified air. It's more sanitary than towels."

Embarrassment floods me again as I glance back into the bathroom, noticing for the first time a small control panel on the outside of the shower. Thinning my lips as I turn back towards him, nodding more to myself than anything.

*You absolute idiot. You looked straight at the thing.*

"Can you show me how to work it?"

He doesn't respond as he moves past me, his eyes darting to the dirty clothes scattered on the bathroom floor. His gloved fingers twitching at his side as I follow him in. Turning towards me he raises his eyebrows, lifting his fingers and curling them in a beckoning gesture, "How am I supposed to show you how to use it if you're all the way back there?"

"I figured I'd just use my eyes and ears." I mutter, it's immature I know, but my embarrassment and frustration won't allow a mature response as I cross my arms in front of me defiantly.

His jaw clenches but he turns back to the panel, "You hit set, then the up or down arrow to control the timer. The left knob controls the blower setting and the right controls the temperature. Once you're ready, hit start, it's the little one at the bottom. It does a beep countdown of five so you can get in place. If you like the setting, it'll pre-save and you can just hit start. You have to stand..."

His dark hair falls into his eyes as I try to listen to him explain in far too much detail how to properly stand underneath the large fan I missed in the ceiling. I hear the words, but my focus is on his lips. On the way his muscles move underneath his shirt as he gestures at things. The veins in his hands and how they stand out like the corded ones on the inside of his toned arms. My lips part as warmth floods my stomach, making me grip the blanket tighter, accidentally pinching myself in the process.

“Got it?”

“Yeah.” I breathe, slamming my eyes to the wet floor. “Sorry for the mess.”

“It's fine. Gilda should've explained it to you.” He grumbles.

“Not you.”

That heat in my belly grows hotter remembering my anger, remembering who he is and not who he was. That I'm standing in here with someone I don't think I ever really knew.

“I... want you to be comfortable here.”

I scoff, “That's why you sent me a list of house rules longer than a CVS receipt? For *my* comfort.” He works his jaw, the leather of his gloves cracking as he mirrors my anger flawlessly.

*Good. It's better if we're both angry.*

He doesn't say anything as he walks out, his eyes on the wet floor and not me. My teeth dig into my inner cheek, willing my tears to stay in place just a minute longer.



The rest of the week and half of the next passes just like that. We fall into an uncomfortable pattern of ignoring each other, mostly me ignoring him. The occasional necessary words often ending in me snapping, which ends in more privately shed tears. As angry as I thought I was at him for everything, not even I realized how deep that resentment went until I had to see his face every day. At least it's not constant exposure as most of his time is spent in his office, work calls, video meetings, gaming, streaming and all that stuff he used to do at home when things took off for him. Back then, I thought it was a lot. Now? I don't think he sleeps. That suspicion is confounded by the darkening circles under his eyes and the less than subtle urging of Gilda that he needs a break.

I'm knee deep in a dungeon, level forty-eight of a new release, *not his*. When a knock sounds from the door, I barely look up from my place on the couch. Knowing it's probably another delivery of papers, groceries or equipment. The things Gilda can't carry from the stores herself. I frown as the hair on the back of my neck stands on end, the way it does when Cohen stares at me for too long. He grumbles something about the graphics as he walks past me. I take silent satisfaction knowing it bothers him that I don't play his games anymore. Even if they are superior in pretty much every way. He makes no attempt to answer the door as he reclines in an armchair across from me, glaring a hole through the screen of my gaming laptop. One of his Christmas gifts through the years that was just too good to let pile in the garage.

“Oh, hello, sir.”

“Hello, I'm detective Dehnert. Is Reagan and Cohen Bennet in?”

I snap my screen closed, discarding my laptop before she has a chance to respond. I'm halfway out of the open floor living room when Cohen's gloved hand snaps around my wrist, pulling me behind him. He passes me on his way to the door with no more than a warning look that screams, *stay here*. I watch his toned form disappear down the small hallway to the outer doors.

“What is this regarding?”

The anxiety building in my chest and the authority in the clipped tone of his voice keep me rooted where he placed me.

“Is Reagan in? This is a conversation that would be best received if everyone was together... and indoors.” The man adds pointedly and I can almost picture Cohen blocking the doorway with his six foot too damn tall frame. A moment of silence passes before Cohen re-emerges. Gilda quietly asks the two men to remove their shoes before entering, offering booties for them in her warm motherly voice that always tugs my frayed heart strings. My eyes are on my stepbrother as he heads towards me, capturing my wrist again, this time with something less aggressive and more... comforting. His thumb making soft electrified passes on the underside of my wrist.

*It only alarms me more.*

“Cohen...” I whisper as he pulls me into the dining room, not allowing me a second to turn around and see the people filing into his house.

I crane my neck to glance behind me before we pass through the archway, not missing the way the first unfamiliar man glimpses down at Cohen's hold on me. The other I think I met before is just openly admiring the house. I'm used to the looks Cohen would get when he grabbed, hovered

or held me like he did before. He always just steered me where he wanted me or commanded me when he felt it was necessary to. Others might've found it odd, I suppose I can see why but to me; it was just *him*. I extract my wrist from his grasp, the feel of the leather sliding off the delicate skin sends a pang deep in my chest as we take our seats. His uncomfortably close to mine as he glares at the men settling across from us.

The thick silence is punctuated by the sound of shuffling chairs and the clearing of throats. My breathing quickly accelerating as I clench my hands under the table.

*One.*

*Two.*

*Three.*

Gilda gives me a comforting smile as she excuses herself to get water for us, leaving a pronounced chill in the room, as if she was the only thing warming it.

“It's nice to meet the both of you. I wish it was under better circumstances.” His light German accent fits perfectly with his dark blue eyes and silvery hair as he smiles one of the emptiest smiles I've ever seen, “As I said before, I'm detective Dehnert. This is my partner, detective Bolton. You might remember him from the night, uhm... of the incident.”

I nod. My eyes flashing to the younger man at his side, his dark eyes holding the same air of empathy they did as our parents' bodies were pulled from the water.

“It's good to see you're holding up, Reagan.” He offers.

*Am I?*

Cohen stiffens at my side, “I'm sure the two of you didn't fly all this way to check on Reagan, so why are you here?”

I turn scowling at him, secondhand embarrassment flooding my cheeks. It took years of painful separation to realize why my dad and Lynn were always so accepting when Cohen refused to go places with us. Why they never made him attend the family picnics and outings, it's because he's so goddamn abrasive.

*And you used to think it was soooooo cool.*

"I wish that were the case. I understand your hesitance to meet with us, why you've been ignoring our calls, but we wouldn't have come this way and interrupted your grieving if it wasn't important." Detective Bolton offers his eyes glued to me. He looks uncomfortable in the suit he wears now; it certainly doesn't suit him as well as the civilian clothes he wore that night. I remember thinking he was kind of cute even, that in a different circumstance, I might have welcomed his respectful appraising eyes in the days following.

*It's funny, the tiny things you remember when your whole life falls apart.*

"As you know, after we retrieved the car from the water, we had a crime scene tech look over it. It's standard procedure when the cause of the accident isn't apparent." Dehnert says blankly, I've heard more personality from people ordering at the McDonald's drive through.

"I thought the cause of the accident was the rain." I interject my head snapping to Cohen when their eyes meet, like there's something obvious I'm missing.

"Cohen?"

"I'm sure your brother didn't want to worry you unnecessarily." Bolton cuts in, bringing my attention back to him as he continues, "There were signs of tampering on the vehicle. Someone had manipulated it in such a way that we have reason to believe it was the main contributing factor in

why the accident occurred.” My heart is pounding so hard in my chest it fills my ears with a loud whooshing sound. One so loud, I didn’t even hear Gilda enter the room with a tray of waters.

“That was my car.” I whisper.

Bolton nods, looking at me sympathetically but not Dehnert. His eyes are glued to Cohen. The tense man at my side breathes deeply as his gloves crack with the tightening of his fists. When he speaks his voice is laced with rage so pure, I’m sure he’ll combust, “You’re saying someone tried to kill Reagan.”

They both nod in unison, Dehnert speaking up before Bolton has a chance to, “We believe so at this time. Reagan, I know this is a lot to take in but please, if you can, remind us why they took your car that night.” I don’t realize I’m trembling until I jolt as Cohen jerks my chair into his, pulling me gently into his chest. He’s trembling too, but not for the same reasons I am. His anger is a physical thing, taking on a life of its own. I don’t dare pull away.

My voice is more like a whimper than I meant for it to be, rapidly blinking tears from my eyes as my grief swallows me whole again. My head slipping past the tar until I’m submerged, there I greet the guilt that’s plagued me since that day, “L-Lynn’s car was in the shop, they were going to take my dad’s truck but took mine so he could put gas in it.” I hiccup my tears now winning the battle and falling in earnest, “I was going to take the truck and meet them there. I-I hate pumping gas and it was pouring-“ I sob, “So he was going to do it for me, like he always did.”

“That’s enough. We can finish this conversation over the phone and at a later-“

Bolton cuts him off, “If we could, we would. I’m sure you can understand, Coh-“

“Mr. Bennet.”

“Mr. Bennet,” he repeats, “that this changes things drastically, that all the current evidence points to the fact that there was an attempt made on her life and it resulted in the death of two people. We are taking it seriously.”

A subtle grumble sounds in his chest as I cling to him, trying to settle the increasing volume of my sobs. His voice set in its usual hard-edge betraying nothing while I’m bursting apart at the seams. Once again, irreversibly damaged while he remains untouched. Even the resentment that thought brings isn’t enough to make me pull away from him. Not right now, not feeling like this.

“Reagan, we know this is hard. We promise to do everything in our power to find the person or people responsible.” Dehnert’s eyes flick to Cohen, “If you need a moment to compose yourself, take it, but we have more questions.”

“I think that would be a good idea. Detectives, let me show you-“ Gilda chimes in, only to be cut off by Cohen.

“They can stay. We’ll step out for a moment.” He pulls me from the table as I clasp my fist around the locket, letting the metal dig into the palm of my hand, trying to control my breathing. Gilda slides the pocket doors closed behind us as he pulls me up the stairs behind him, his gloved hand gripping my free one. I don’t recognize the room he leads me into, but it doesn’t take long to figure out it’s his office. Neon signs and posters of his games are framed decorating the soft black walls. Posters and stills of vintage games make up a collage on the ceiling. I struggle to free myself from his grasp, darting towards the bathroom in the corner before getting

sick in the toilet, relieving myself of the lunch I had eaten an hour before they showed up.

“Reagan...”

“Don't come in.” I bite out before throwing up again. His hands find my back, the leather traveling up my spine in the thin lavender tank I'm wearing. My entire body shakes with the force of my sobs, heaving again as he gathers my hair, holding it out of my way. Once I'm finished and rinse my mouth he closes the lid, flushing it before following me out to where I sink to my knees beside the couch. He sinks with me, ignoring my small gasp as his hand wipes away a tear. Not gloves, his hand. My eyes leave the locket dangling from my neck as I'm hunched forward, straightening to meet his before pulling away.

“You don't have to do that,” I sniffle, “I'm disgusting right now.”

His jaw clenches and unclenches before once again bringing his hand to my face. This time, my heart stills as he cups it gently. His thumb making soft passes at my jaw, “You could never be disgusting to me, Reagan.” The way he looks at me, his words equal parts calming and confusing. I'm not sure how long we stay like that, only returning to the dining room when my sniffing has stopped and he's scrubbed his hands raw and put on new gloves. We're halfway down the stairs when his hand nudges mine the way it used to, my eyes darting to his face, finding it just as unreadable and hard edged as ever. Despite myself, I open my palm, blinking back more tears when he threads his fingers through mine.

### ***Reagan Age Ten***

I laugh at Cohen's poor attempt at tying two daisy stems together, still kind of worried Lynn will be upset about us picking them after she worked so hard landscaping the enormous park that backs their- *our* house.

“Are you making fun of me?” He asks, a rare hint of humor in his voice. It's easier to coax out when he's not in the house. I seem to be the only one that doesn't mind that he's kind of a grump. Still not nearly as hard to crack a smile out of as Miss. Ross, our caseworker. If I can make her smile, I can make anyone smile.

“Not you, your bracelet making skills.”

“Who said I was making a bracelet? And also, I'm only just now finding out it was a required skill when adopting you.” I look up from my own anklet I'm working on to check if he's being grumpy again or not. The hint of a smile makes it hard to hide my own. That and the mention of my adoption. It was finalized yesterday. I'm officially a Bennet, and dad is too. Taking Lynn's last name instead of them taking ours, which, according to Cohen's friends is weird.

*I don't see why.*

“Well, it was. That's why we're out here in the heat, making up for your shortcomings.”

His eyebrows shoot up, “Shortcomings? From you? You can't even reach the kitchen cabinets without standing on your tiptoes.”

I frown, “It's not my fault I'm short. Better than being a giant.”

He smirks, focusing again on his project. I fix the hem of my new skirt before putting my legs over his, careful not to mess up his stuff while brandishing my perfectly made daisy anklet.

“See? That's how it's done.” I mention, stiffening when I realize my mistake. I go to remove my legs when he leans in closer, surveying it, “Hmm, yeah you've got me there. It's pretty great.”

“Are you just saying that?” I whisper, my cheeks flushing.

“Yeah.”

“Jerk!” I yell, tossing my extra daisy stems at him.

A familiar laugh distracts me as his friends approach, whispering among themselves before they reach us. The taller one, Andrew speaks up, “Hey kid.” He half waves at me, smiling as I duck my head lower. “We’re heading to the cliffs. Wanna hang, man?”

A small amount of disappointment fills my chest. I always enjoy the time I get to spend with Cohen, but I know he’s a lot older and only does stuff like this because I like it. He flashes me a weird look after I withdraw my legs from his lap and start to gather the Ziplocs of white and yellow beads I slip between the daisies. They were mixed before Cohen separated them; I don’t really get it, but I rarely get any of the stuff he does.

“Nah, I’m good.” He says flatly, the small smile he saves for me long gone as he stares at his friends.

“Really?” Andrew asks, “Having too much fun with… arts and crafts?” He motions to the project on Cohen’s lap as my cheeks burn hotter, my fists clenching the hem of my skirt before loosening them, not wanting to ruffle the fabric. It’s brand new. I’ve never had clothes that were new before. I want them to last. It’s quiet for so long I look up, my heart speeding up at the harsh way Cohen stares at his friend.

“Fuck man, alright.” Andrew mutters, shifting uncomfortably, the others laughing behind him as they walk away. I thin my lips at the curse word.

“Watch your mouth. She’s a kid.”

“I am not.” I snap, but Cohen ignores me.

Andrew gives a halfhearted chuckle, “Sure, have fun with all that.”

After they’ve disappeared from view, Cohen pats his legs, the spot where I had laid mine before. He doesn’t look at me as I slowly rest mine back over his, holding my breath the entire time. Cohen gets back to work,

slipping into his comfortable silence. Me? I feel so uncomfortable it's making my tummy twist up into knots, "You didn't have to do that." I mumble, "Blow off your friends for me."

He looks up that small smile I like to pretend he saves for me back as he lifts his project pushing my hair behind my ears and sitting the most beautiful, beaded flower crown I've ever seen on my head, "You're cooler than them."

I bite back my smile, trying to play it cool, "I know that."

He laughs... actually laughs and I think my heart does a little dance alongside him.

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## CHAPTER FIVE

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## C ohen

The reason I didn't go to the funeral? Easy. I'm a coward, one that was woefully unwilling to tarnish my imagined version of Rea. I couldn't... be so fucking ecstatic about the turn of events while she mourned them. Her universe bursting apart while mine finally came together. I knew how bad the debt was, offered them money countless times. Mom only ever took it to pay for the things Rea needed, her private school, the car I had shipped there for her sixteenth birthday. It was fine by me. Of course, I grieved for my mother. I just did it years before her actual death. Nearly four years before it would bring Rea back to me.

Now? I feel like a bigger piece of shit than ever. An anger scoring the inner walls of my chest, one I barely managed to contain as she dutifully answered the detective's questions, fighting back soft little cries. She was distraught understandably and me? I was livid.... even then, I couldn't help but entertain my own sick thrill as I held her hand. Her skin is softer than I remember it. Her hand fit perfectly inside mine. Making my gut knot in ways that were far from appropriate considering the circumstances. All their

assurances that they'd *do their best* to catch the person almost made me laugh.

*I didn't know how close of a call it was...*

They won't find shit, because it makes no fucking sense not to them, or her. She has no enemies she knows of. She's a sunshine bright, people pleaser with her whole life ahead of her. My stomach flips, thinking of her in that car. Her struggling for breath as water slowly filled the cab. It's been two days since they interviewed her, two days since I heard the beautiful rasp in her voice. She's only spoken out of necessity and not to me. It makes me want to provoke her. Anything to breathe some life into her evergreen eyes. I'll gladly take her fucking anger if it's the only way I'll get her. I wanted to see her eyes the way I had memorialized them the night I left, grabbing the bare necessities and leaving past midnight like... a coward. It was the night I made a promise to myself that I'd never go back to that house, never see those people again. Although her eyes have changed since then, they look every bit as beautiful red rimmed and spilling over with tears.

*Or maybe they haven't changed at all. Maybe she just looks at you differently.*

My fist tightens on my knee. She's not the sweet, shy kid I left behind and I'm incapable of being the sweet, broody big brother she needed me to be. As much as I fucking hate it, her dad wasn't half wrong to send me away. I couldn't see it at the time, fuck she was a kid. I couldn't recognize how deep my feelings went, how they would change when they forced me away from her. I smirk to myself; he had no idea it was casting me out... making me live away from the only fucking light in my life for years that changed everything.

*Now? I hope he's rolling in his grave.*

“Cohen? Man, are you even fucking listening? I thought that shit was frozen until you smiled like a creep.”

My eyes dart to my computer screen, my face already down set in a glare. It's the only response I give him, but he doesn't expect more from me. He shakes his head, repeating the fifteen-minute lecture I had just tuned out.

### ***Reagan***

Romantic Homicide by d4vd

Time seems to move slower the longer I stare at the clock on my phone. Sleep has been damn near impossible the last few nights, when I do dream it's of shadowed corners and icy, unforgiving water. Even more disconcerting, sweet murmuring and soft touches that mean absolutely nothing to anyone but me. I groan, shoving up from the mattress the dark green silk sleep shorts and camisole sticking to my body as I pull it free. When I make my way in front of the vanity mirror, I don't bother with the light. I never liked the dark before. Never found it comforting the way many do, I still don't. Turns out it's just easier to stay in the dark. That can be said about so much. I'll never have a chance to be that girl again, the naive happy girl that was removed from all the scary things she'd grown accustomed to. The girl that grew up in disarray and constant turbulence, then was gifted everything she had ever prayed for at night, everything she had ever wanted. Perfect happy ending to the perfect sob story, right? No, of course not.

My sob story had only just begun. That girl's grave had been dug so many years ago, on the cold tile floor of a lint clad laundry room in a shelter aptly named Haven. I stifle my bitter laugh, staring at a person who I can't even bring myself to grieve properly. Jerking the ponytail holder from my

wrist, I pile my hair into a messy bun high on my head, sighing at the clump of hair I missed on the left side.

*I don't even have it in me to fix it.*

My eyes catch the light underneath my door pouring in from the lamp in the hall before I can think better of it, I'm moving towards that light. A moth to a dangerous, soul shattering flame. My heart picks up its pace, the first real thing I've felt in days and it's anxiety. A blistering fear of... what? Beats me, but right now I'm less terrified of the person who apparently wants me dead and more terrified of the ghosts lingering underneath my skin. Ghosts of sweet touches and gentle kisses to the top of my head while he hummed out of tune in the dead of night. When I throw open my door, I'm nearly speed walking. Driven on at the prospect of something breaking up this numbing guilt. Tears bud in my eyes as I glance down the left hall, noting his open bedroom door, then the closed and probably locked office he seems to live in. Faint talking comes from the other side as I veer left away from it, my heart already pounding in my chest. Standing in his doorway is like standing in a portal to Hell. Like if I stay here long enough, it'll swallow me up and hand deliver me to him.

*I don't know why I go in. It's his space and I have no reason to be in here, no right to intrude on a place that's so much like a sanctuary to him.*

It doesn't stop me, though. Old Reagan wouldn't have dared, old Regan wouldn't have wanted to... disturb him like I do.

He had no right to make me feel safe, to love me and then leave. He had no right to listen to all my silly dreams, to hold me through nightmares and thunderstorms, only to disappear like a thief in the night.

His room is painted in the same smoky gray tones as the rest of the house. A palate better fitted to a prison or factory than someone's home. His

bed is neatly made as always. The room smells like him, a hint of hand sanitizer, a familiar earthy musk and cleaning astringent he deemed worthy of use far before I met him. The one Lynn still used at home, just in case.

*That's what this room smells like, home.*

I wipe the single wayward tear away before it hits my cheek, remembering the way I'd hug my butterfly pillow tightly to my chest, sneaking down the hall to knock on his door when the nightmares got too bad. A door he eventually gave me a key for, in case I needed him. He never complained, not once when I'd sneak into his bedroom crawling in beside him. Sometimes I would cry then too, but he never said anything. Only pulled my fuzzy glow in the dark blanket tighter around me like a cocoon and run his fingers through my hair. Taking time with each tangle, working it through as gently as he could. He always approached me with the type of gentle ease you use with something precious to you. He could see I needed it when nobody else did. Sure, he was grumpy, but he cared.

*Until he didn't.*

I remove my hands from his pillow with a jolt, knowing he'd hate it if he knew I touched it. Rule number twenty-four, his bedroom is off-limits unless he expressly says otherwise, and proper sanitation has taken place. My eyes dart to the open door, my heart pounding as I jerk it up off the bed, dropping it onto the floor at my feet. Something I immediately feel badly about.

“Fuck me.” I mumble to myself, halfway bent to pick it up when a voice makes me launch straight up so fast my head whirls.

“He's in his office if you're looking for him.” Gilda comments, a disapproving glint in her eyes. It only drives my guilt further. My hands

knot again in front of me, like I've been caught with a hand in the cookie jar. Only there's no cookies, I put my stepbrother's pillow on the floor.

When I open my mouth, my brain is still working out a good excuse. She only nods, huffing at her watch behind silver-rimmed glasses, "Go. I'll take care of this."

More tears bud my eyes as I lower my head, watching my feet as I try to sneak past her. Her cool hand gracing my shoulder to stop me before I can pass, "I'm sorry." I whisper, silently begging her not to be angry with me, not to tell him. I can't handle it right now. I swear I'll burst.

Her warm smile only builds a sob I'm forced to swallow. Her hand slipping up to cup my cheek, "Do not punish him when you've only ever heard one side of things."

"He left in the middle of the night without a word for months. Even when we spoke, he made me work for it. He let me beg him to speak to me and still never called half the time."

She nods, dropping her hand, "He's punished himself every day since."

I shake my head, "Sorry about the pillow." As I move past her, my eyes lock on the door to his office, my trembling hands knotting.

*One.*

*Two.*

*Three.*

*Just ask him. It's been years...*

*It's been four years.*

My heart gives me another unsettling surge of adrenaline when my hand hits the handle of his office door. The silver knob feels like it weighs a ton as I twist it, meeting no resistance where I had expected it. I'm breathing heavily as I shove the door open, Cohen's head snapping away from the

screen of his laptop. His eyebrows raised in an unspoken *why the fuck are you here* and all I can do is stare at him; his bare chest sculpted in ways that should be illegal. His lean, formerly lanky frame bulked and toned. I take an apprehensive step forward before turning to leave again, only to see a very pleased Gilda shutting the door behind me.

*You've got to be kidding me.*

“Do you need something?” His voice is clipped, making the lump in my throat thicken to the point of rendering me mute. So, I stare at the floor like a fucking idiot, my body still half facing the door. Another voice comes from the screen, making my head finally turn towards him, more of my hair breaking free from the stretched-out holder.

Cohen's eyes snap up from where he was staring, color dusting his cheeks, his jaw setting as he holds up a hand to whoever he's video chatting with.

*Was he... checking me out?*

My cheeks heat in turn, hugging my stomach as it'll ward away the unwelcome butterflies that thought gives me, “I didn't realize you were busy.”

“I'm not.”

“Hey asshole!” The man on the other side of the video call protests, “This is important shit!”

*Andrew?*

My lips part as I walk closer to the screen, batting at Cohen as he tries to cover the webcam, “Get-“

“Andrew!” I exclaim, an excited smile filling my face. It feels weird there, like the muscles in my cheeks had atrophied.

Cohen grumbles, finally letting his hand fall free. I don't miss the way he rotates in his chair, making the high back of his seat between me and the screen, blocking me from *him*.

*Don't worry asshole, the last thing I want is to touch you.*

"Holy shit, your socials don't do you justice kid, you're like a whole adult now." Andrew remarks, earning us both more grumbles.

"She's barely eighteen. That's hardly an adult."

We both ignore him, me stepping around his chair twisting the monitor so I can see my asshole stepbrothers' best friend, "You act like you haven't seen me in years." I snip, casting a side eye at Cohen. "When you aren't visiting your mom and coming by the café, you're always liking my Instagram pictures."

"You like her pictures?" Cohen asks, only half visible in the camera now.

Andrew presses his hand dramatically to his chest, "Only in your place. I wouldn't have to if you'd download the app."

"I pay people to run those for me. Stop liking her pictures."

I elbow Cohen hard, making him grunt, "Stop being weird. Andrew is like a big brother to me."

Andrew pulls his lip between his teeth, smirking at Cohen, "Yeah, the best big bro ever."

I suck in a sharp breath as his arm snakes around my waist, just out of view of the camera, squeezing tightly before he jerks me down onto his lap. Andrew is perfectly oblivious as usual, being fully invested in poking at his best friend. My eyes dip to his arm, his muscles flexed with an effort not to tighten further as he holds me in place. When I look back at him, he's glaring at Andrew, his sculpted jaw clenched tightly. I shift forward, trying

to keep up with the conversation while acutely aware of something... growing underneath me.

*It's just a body reaction. He can't help it.*

"So, I heard our very own little miss sunshine worked her way onto a hit list. How the hell did you manage that, kid?"

I empty my lungs, grateful for the sobering distraction, "I really don't know. It's scary, isn't it?"

"Nah, they'll get it worked out. Thankfully you're up there safe and sound in your second favorite big bros—"

Cohen half growls, cutting him off, "We'll talk tomorrow, Andrew."

"Did you just growl at—"

Cohen's finger slams on the end call key a little harder than necessary, his free arm still banded around me, "Fucking insufferable."

I shake my head, "Says you. Andrew has been awesome these past few years. Especially at the funeral. I mean, he handled—"

My hands tighten on the armrests of the chair as his face snaps towards me, his mouth so close I can feel the warmth of his breath on the hollow of my neck, "So he is your favorite then, huh?"

"What Cohen? Mad you didn't get the spot?"

His arm tightens to the point it hurts, straining against my stomach with each breath, his chest rising and falling quickly, "So what if I am?"

I swallow hard, a tingling warmth spreading throughout that place deep inside me. One I've only ever felt in the privacy of my room when the lights were out, slipping exploratory fingers inside my underwear.

"Perhaps I should ask Andrew to take me in. I'm sure he'd be more welcoming." I taunt, I don't know why I do it. I shouldn't. It's not why I

came in here, but... everything is so damn confusing and he... he makes me so fucking angry.

He scoffs, his arm abruptly abandoning my waist, snapping up to capture my chin as he slams my back flush against his chest, his arm nestled between my heaving breasts, “Have I not been fucking welcoming?” He grits out. I can only whimper in response. My skin feels like it's been electrified, every touch is overwhelming my already frayed nerves, “Answer me, Reagan. Have I not bought you everything you could possibly need? Have I not eaten every fucking meal with you despite the fact that you refuse to speak to me? I've put up with your snide comments and bratty attitude.” Anger adds to the heat spreading across my skin, his fingers dragging slowly down my inner arm, leaving goosebumps in their wake.

“You control everything. When I go out, I can't have anyone over. I have no car; lists of rules I have to follow. You're treating me like a fucking child and I never fucking asked to be here!”

I gasp as he forces my head up towards him, those ice-blue eyes boring into mine, “Watch your goddamn mouth.”

“Or what Cohen? Huh? What. The. Fuck. Will. You. Do?”

His hand slips from my chin to my throat, a warning flashing in those turbulent blue eyes, “The same thing that happens to all brats who don't know when to shut the fuck up and listen.”

“You don't get to do this.” Tears bud in my eyes and I'm panting. Everything feels so... tight. The nub between my legs pulses in tune with each thud of my heart. “You can't just force me to do whatever you want. I'm an adult! I'll go to Andrew. I'll call him tomorrow and tell him what you're doing. How you're treating me.”

He laughs. The sound is scathing, humorless, and cold. His free hand stops its strides over my oversensitive skin, lingering on the back of my hand so he can thread our fingers together. He lifts my palm to his cheek, pressing it there before lifting it again and pressing it to his lips.

*He kissed me. He kissed my... hand. With the germs, he's not freaking out. Oh, my God, I can't breathe. Why can't I breathe? Why is he touching me like this...*

“He'd never take you; he'd never go against me like that.”

“He would.” I retort, only half believing it myself.

Andrew has always backed down to Cohen. Everyone has because everyone knows how... unforgiving he is when he doesn't get his way. He's ruthless, it's easier to give in for most. Not me... but I was never expected to.

*Not until now.*

His thumb rolls over my pulse point, teasing the flesh there, “Do you know *why* he wouldn't? He knows if he took you away from me... hid you away from me...” His lips graze my neck featherlight, taunting, “I'd fucking kill him.”

Ice floods my veins as I struggle in his arms, my tears spilling over as I lurch away from him, the throb deepening between my legs despite my repulsion, “What happened to you?”

Another humorless laugh, “Get some sleep, butterfly.”

I glare, wiping roughly at my furious tears, my hair falling into my face as I spin on my heel stomping towards the door, “I don't even like butterflies anymore!” I scream as I hit the hall, slamming the door to punctuate every horrible, confusing thing I'm feeling.

*You want to be an ass, Cohen? Okay. Two people can play that game.*

*You don't get to do this to me, to treat me like the rest of them.*

Halfway back to my room, my tears have already stopped. They dry faster and faster these days. The hollow ache in my chest replaced by spiteful determination and that cursed throbbing between my legs. I jerk my phone from the charger, pulling up the Uber app, a wretched smirk jerking up my tear-stained cheeks.

“Fuck you Cohen.”

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## CHAPTER SIX

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## The Drug In Me Is You by Falling In Reverse

**C**ohen

It takes longer than it should to quell the rage and irritation burning in my chest, the small tinge of guilt I feel for being a fucking dick to her barely takes the edge off the throbbing in my cock. I crossed a line, an obvious one etched in concrete and highlighted with neon paint.

*One I knew I'd cross the moment she stepped out of that car.*

I touched her in a way I shouldn't have. As *wrong* as it is, I can't bring myself to mind. Reagan has always been mine, we've both known it from the moment we met. Although that relationship has changed, those feelings have altered and been polluted, I still *care* for her so deeply it rattles my fucking bones. I clench my fists, glaring at the watch on my wrist.

*Three hours, forty-five minutes and twenty seconds.*

A new record. I keep my eyes planted on the floor as I head into the bathroom, having forced myself to stay at my desk, keeping *her* on my hands as long as I could stand it. A wave of relief rushes me the moment the scalding water hits my skin, bringing with it a cleanliness I can't survive

without. After I've scrubbed them half raw, I jerk my gloves from my back pocket. My mom's blue eyes reflected back to me in the mirror, urging me to do the *right* thing. I lost the ability to do the right thing by Reagan when I lost perspective when it came to her. Being forced to love someone at a distance changes a person in terrible, terrible ways. I've done fucked up shit I can't take back because of it. I shake my head, heading out in search of my frustratingly beautiful butterfly.

Ignoring the way my heart thuds wildly, I lift my hand knocking on her door, "Reagan, open up. I'd like to speak with you."

*No, that sounds rude.*

"Reagan... *please* let me in."

*Silence.*

I take a deep breath, gritting my teeth, "Reagan, I know you're angry with me. I get it, but nothing about that will change until we can at least fucking talk to each other."

*Silence.*

*Fucking brat.*

My frustration builds at her perfectly reasonable response. It makes sense to ignore someone that's hurt you. I know that... but I won't be ignored by her; I don't give a fuck how pissed she is. I won't be separated from her again. Not by thousands of miles or by a single wooden door. Much less in my own fucking house. I twist the knob flinging the door open so hard the handle embeds in the opposite wall. My brows furrow when I'm met with a dark room, a dark *empty* room. With each step I take deeper inside, the frustration evolves into something darker, more disturbing. I glare at the equally dark and empty bathroom. Glancing at the mess scattered around the floor, the toothbrush bristles down on the counter makes my skin crawl.

“Mr. Bennet.”

I whirl around, leveling Gilda with my stare, “Where is she?” My voice seems strained even to my ears, all the fucking germs swarming in here. She's ignored every single rule and even inspired some new ones. She did this to provoke me and now she's hiding like a scared little-

“That's why I knocked earlier sir, she left.”

“She left.” I repeat, as if my brain can't comprehend the words and the meaning behind them. Suddenly I'm less bothered by the state of her room, a brand-new panic filling my chest. An unease that goes soul deep as Gilda worries her hands.

“She was quite upset. It's why I haven't left for the evening. She called for a ride and was... uhm...”

“Gilda.“ I growl, my heart pounding in my chest.

“Dressed... to go out.”

Gilda half stumbles back as I storm from the room, kicking the ajar door to my office back open.



*“I'm sixteen years old Lynn, I hardly think I need a drooling, snot-nosed baby sister.”*

*She smiles, always fucking smiling, “Reagan isn't a baby, she's nine. Old enough to wash her hands and not drool all over herself.”*

*Nine might as well be a baby.*

*I do my best not to flinch, my stomach churning as she pushes my hair from my face, “The two of you have a lot in common. Life has been unfair to both of you. She needs someone to look out for her, to make her feel safe again. Secure. She’s such a bright girl, Cohen. I know you’re growing up; I know you didn’t ask for any of this, but even though you might not need a little sister, Reagan could use a big brother. Someone on her side.”*



The worry mingles with the anger in my chest, making it feel like a chasm of raw nagging bullshit as I pull up the video feed to the house. You think someone is trying to fucking kill you and you leave in the dark of the night like you haven't got a fucking bone in the game. I'm seething as I rewind the tape, watching her waltz out the front door in a skintight rouge colored dress that barely covers her ass.

*It's fucking thirty degrees outside Reagan.*

My hand tightens around the mouse so hard it cracks at the base as I swap cameras zooming in and pulling out the audio as she approaches a car parked outside *my* fucking house, “Code 3-8-0-2?” Her cute little rasp is throatier than usual, probably from crying.

*It'll probably get far worse when I find her.*

The driver nods, giving her a once over, “You old enough to be going to Club Mercy?” He pauses before unlocking the door. Even through the camera I can see how badly she’s shivering a teal puffer coat hugged tightly around her, her long smooth legs exposed from the knee up.

*He could see it too and the fucking ass still makes her stand out in the cold.*

“I’m twenty-one and it’s freezing out here. Will you just let me in?”

He gives her another apprehensive look before she slides into the back seat, disappearing from view.

*Oh Reagan. You have no idea the mistake you've made.*

My pulse whooshes in my ears, as I head into my bedroom, ignoring the questioning look from Gilda as she puts new sheets on my bed which I also ignore, “My keys, where are they?”

“You’re leaving?” She asks, not hiding the shock in her voice, “Mr. Bennet, I know you’re concerned but she’s a young woman she needs—“

“If you say space, so help me Gilda, I will have the locks changed before you return tomorrow morning.” I warn, glaring at her as she straightens.

She doesn’t bat an eye pulling a set of keys from my nightstand, “Then who would take care of you when you run off everyone that tries?” She asks, dropping them in my outstretched hand.

I grumble, hating how much she reminds me of my mom as I head towards my walk-in closet only for her voice to filter underneath the door, “Mr. Bennet, she’s hurting. If you don’t loosen up you—“

She stops as I throw the door open, buttoning my black topcoat over my hoodie, “She’ll what, leave?” A sharp laugh leaves my throat, “She’s only got me left.” The look in her eyes on any other day might give me pause, it’s the concerned motherly look I’ve always hated. She says nothing more, only hands me a small bottle of hand sanitizer before I walk out of the room towards the bathroom vanity. Throwing it open, trying to ignore the needling in my chest as I jerk out the small orange bottle inside, popping

two pills in my mouth. I'm halfway out of the front door when I pull out my phone calling Andrew. I don't bother responding to his groggy hello.

“Submit the paperwork.”

“Man what? She's only been there a little over a week.”

My boots pound against the dark stained concrete steps outside my house, “Do it.”

“That was supposed to be a last-“

“Do it!” I slam the car door, docking my phone as the engine of my matte black Shelby roars to life.

“Are you in a car?”

“Andrew for fuck's sake, just tell me you'll do it.”

“I'm not doing shit until you tell me what's going on.”

I take a deep breath, my meds not kicking in quick enough to make leaving my house for the first time in months even remotely fucking bearable, “We had a fight. She left for some sleazy club.”

The silence on the other end of the phone is broken by his long drawn-out sigh, “Should I send a team to get her or can you deal?”

“I'm solid.” I lie. We both know I'm not. The last time I left my house to go anywhere there were people was when marketing had all but forced me to make an appearance at a gaming convention. Thousands of fans in a large warehouse, an hour in the air conditioning gave out. I almost made it out the back door when a fan spotted me. My brain seized as he slung a sweat drenched arm around my shoulders, hauling me into him for a hug. Apparently I'd slammed him so hard into the convention center's floor it'd fractured his shoulder.

*So ensued an expensive personal relations nightmare for Astro Gaming.*

“Cohen-“

“She's my responsibility. I'm solid.” I snap. My gloved hands tightening on the steering wheel.

“I'll call your attorney first thing in the morning. Tell them we need an emergency-“

“Tonight.”

“Cohen, it's nearly midnight. Not everyone is a fucking vampire like you.” He grits out, “She'll be fine. Let me know when you get her home and don't freak the fuck out.”

I take a deep breath, ending the call. Knowing everything that happens next will probably make her hate me if she doesn't already. The trees blur with the lines on the road as I merge onto the freeway, “This was always the plan.”

To keep her. No matter what. Just long enough to make her understand everything, to make her need me again... *want* me again. I flex my hands on the wheel, my heart doing everything in my chest except slowing despite the warmth flooding my limbs from my meds.



## Reagan

SugarCrash by Otto

It's surprising how intoxicated you can get when you've got a simple goal in mind and a reasonably believable fake ID. Annabelle Bennet fits me well, I think. She's newly twenty-one. Annabelle has her whole life ahead

of her. Annabelle has options, unlimited resources and friends to fall back on.

*A family.*

Tonight, I'm Annabelle, not Reagan. Reagan doesn't have any of those things and is less than half as interesting as Annabelle could be on any given day.

"Anna! Keep up!" Gene yells over the thumping music before their head pops up in front of me again, "You gotta throw elbows in here babe, club rats are brutal."

"If your glittered ass doesn't stop hovering around the new girl, I am going to scuff all your Prada bags." His friend snaps, her scowl dipping to me the way it has all night. Gene locked onto me the moment I hit the bar two hours ago, claiming me as theirs when an older man wouldn't stop brushing against me. Even in the packed club, it was unnecessary touching that made my chest tighten. I'm beyond grateful. I was already preparing myself for the ride of shame back to that cold stone house.

"Stop being so bitchy." Gene retorts, "Can't take her anywhere."

I laugh to myself as she snags three shots from a waiter walking by, handing them to us. Her angry disposition bothered me at first, until I realized it wasn't reserved for just me.

*She and Cohen would get along just fine. They could sit around all day and glare at each other.*

I down mine, letting the burn of alcohol distract me from the unwarranted flare of jealousy in my chest at the thought. Tugging the hem of my dress down for the hundredth time. The empty, bright, glowing shot glass tucked under my arm as they tug me back onto the overflowing dance floor. My skin is already slicked with shared sweat. I smirk, thinking of how

disgusted he'd be by it and push myself closer to the stranger dancing at my back. His hands waste no time blazing a trail to my hips, slowly but surely working over the tops of my thighs as I grind against him. My eyes are on my self-proclaimed club buddies, who seem entirely enraptured by one another. The first *more than friends* vibe I've gotten from them all night.

"I think we're making her blush." Gene yells over the music again, embarrassment flooding my cheeks as I look down at the sticky floor, my white knee-high boots falling out of place. They laugh before the girl lets go of the hold she had on Gene, dancing the few steps it takes to get to me. Her sharp pointed fingernail poking the delicate skin underneath my chin to lift it to her eyes.

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean to—"

"Shhh, just dance with us, Angel." Her eyes flash with amusement before they harden again, shooting daggers at the guy behind me. His hands leave my hips as if they were on fire and I roll my eyes. Guessing Angel from her isn't a term of endearment. Gene takes the guy's place, their hands landing on the hips of their friend as they embrace around me, continuing the sensual private moment from before with me in the middle. My skin feels flush from the attention, the proximity, but that core deep need I felt earlier is long forgotten.

"Now she's blushing."

Gene laughs. It's a lighthearted, unheated sound that chips away at the uncomfortable feeling I've been desperately trying to rid myself of since I called that Uber. The girl who I still don't know the name of lays her forehead to mine, forcing my hips to stay on beat despite the sharp pain in my stomach begging me to slow down.

"You're so stiff." She snarls, pulling away to shake her head at me, "God you need to chill. It's not that deep. I met Gene three days ago. It's not a thing. We aren't a thing. Nothing matters, not in here at least."

I huff, "Easy for you to say."

I gasp when she leans back in quickly, pressing her forehead back to mine with a gentle thump, making me go rigid against Gene, "We've all got shit Angel. Leave it at the door."

"Deep breath in." Gene coaxed.

I take one, breathing in so deep my lungs ache.

"Hold it."

*I do.*

"Let it out and go have fun."

I smile as they both part laughing as the music changes to something more upbeat and rowdy mingling with the nearby crowd seamlessly. Alcohol makes my head feel hot and light, as my ankle twists in my boot. I've never been this drunk before. So drunk things feel like a blur of sluggish movements. Several more songs and shots pass before I'm tugged from the crowd. Gene and the scowl bearing girl latched onto both of my arms. I cast her a questioning look. She rolls her eyes, leaning in so I can hear her instead of yelling over the top of everything, "Piss break. Club buddies stick together."

I nod, ignoring their laughter at my expense as I stumble. I only hold out for a few minutes before joining in. We're still laughing so hard we let go of one another to hold our stomachs when we hit the bathroom. Wrist bands and stickers litter the black and white tiled floor as the smell of stale piss churns my gut. A blonde applying her lipstick drunkenly in the mirror

openly scowls at Gene entering the girls' room, quickly capping it and stalking out.

Gene rolls their bright hazel eyes. Eyes I can now see are lined in bright orange and adorned expertly with matching blood orange rhinestones, “How long do you guess we have before staff shows up?”

I frown, casting a confused look at the girl. She just glares at the place the blonde was standing, “I've had just enough liquor that a fight doesn't sound too bad.”

“Why would the staff show up?” I ask, nervously picking at the bracelet on my wrist, my eyes dipping to my chest where my fake ID is tucked snugly into my bra.

“Portland isn't as progressive as you think Angel, close-minded bimbos are constantly getting their Victoria Secret panties in a knot because Gene needs to piss like the rest of the world.” She eyes me carefully as I fidget, before thinning her lips and heading into a stall. A wave of understanding calms my nerves, pursued by a tinge of guilt and sympathy. I shouldn't be feeling relieved, but I am. A visible shudder runs through me at the thought of Cohen having to pick me up from jail.

Gene hikes an eyebrow, “What was that?”

“People just suck, I'm sorry you have to deal with that.”

“Uh huh.” His friend remarks from inside the stall, the sound of plastic hitting the floor as she curses underneath her breath, “I dropped my last fucking tampon.”

I grimace at the thought of having a club bathroom tampon lodged inside me, “You aren't putting that in, are you?”

“You aren't trying to distract us from why you're acting so damn shady all the sudden, are you?”

I swallow hard, leaning against the wall as my head swims. The tile feels cool against my slick, heated skin. The plastic applicator clatters back to the floor as she stands, the sound of a high heel clacking loudly with the lid of a toilet. Gene's eyes never leave me as I tuck a sweaty strand of hair behind my ear, "I- I'm not twenty-one."

Gene's eyes widen before they both burst out laughing. The sound of a toilet flushing fills the muggy room as she steps out, "Shocker. Why do you think savior complex here adopted you for the night? It was like watching a goldfish throw themselves into the ocean with sharks."

I bite down on my lip, fighting a smile, "Thanks for that, by the way. I've had fun."

"Oh, Angel, we're only just getting started." She remarks as she turns on the shallow bowl sink, stepping back with a loud shriek when the water splashes out with the force of a fire hose. In a matter of seconds, it drenched the front of her red top.

"That's where that poor attitude of yours will get you." Gene remarks before quickly slamming into a stall to avoid the slash of water directed at him. I flinch as the cold liquid catches me instead, making her and I burst again into uncontrolled drunken laughter. We're still laughing at pretty much nothing when the door to the bathroom opens, a woman dressed in a hoodie entering, her hair braided tightly over her shoulder, almost the same auburn color as mine. She glances at me as she walks to the sink directly in front of me, my reflection behind hers in the mirror.

I shift uncomfortably, my throat growing thicker. The awkwardness is nearly palatable as Gene steps out going to the sink beside her. Her head lifts, her dark bagged eyes meet mine. For some reason, it makes my chest

constrict. Gene's voice breaks the uncomfortable exchange as she continues to watch me, "Holy shit, you guys could be twins."

The girl smiles at me in the mirror but it's a shaky, broken thing, one I've come to recognize well, "You think?"

*I can't bring myself to return it.*

My unnamed club buddy scoffs, "I don't see it. Let's get back to the party. I'm feeling far too sober."

*Fucking how?*

My heart pounds so hard I feel it pulsing in my head as I sway, following them back out of the bathroom. The hair on the back of my neck standing on end as I glance behind me Gene staring questioningly at his friend as we make our way to the bar, "That was anti-social even for you."

She scoffs, "Chick looked one hard blow away from a breakdown, and I'm not trying to fuck with all that tonight." I tug down the hem of my dress again, forcing a laugh that I hope matches theirs, knowing damn well how accurately she just described me. It wouldn't take much at all, I think... to send me past the point of no return, assuming I'm not already there. It takes more effort than it should for me to properly clamber onto the brightly glowing high back barstool, doing my best to play it off when I stumble again on the third try.

*Fuck, this outfit was a terrible choice.*

I'm nearly positive I've flashed everyone by the time I finally get adjusted, gripping the counter for added stability as I sit a little too high up. A dangerous feat when the room is wobbling like it is. The uncharacteristic silence from my companions pulls my eyes away from my lap. Shooting them a small smile when I meet their raised eyebrows and amused eyes.

Gene shakes their head, turning back towards the bartender, “Two shots of tequila, no lime wedges and a glass of water, please.”

“Wait no-“

“Yes. You're fucked, Angel. Time to sober you up so you can get home.”

“It's the dress. It's awkward to...” The argument dies on my tongue as my words slur to the point it sounds like a garbled mess of vowels, “Okay, I'm drunk.” They laugh, her pushing the unopened bottle towards me. After they are overly thorough, making sure I've drunk the entire thing and ate some stale saltine crackers provided by the bartender, we make our way back to the other dancing patrons. I'm singing along loudly to the song playing when the vibe in our little carved out space of the dance floor shifts, plummeting to an irredeemable level of discomfort. Instead of chilling... my skin heats, my nerves reverting to their fried state from before. In an instant Annabelle dies, Reagan once again taking her miserable place.

“Reagan.” His voice is laced with liquid nitrogen and venom as my two friends still in front of me. I don't turn around, half out of shock that he's here in the middle of a club. Knowing what that means to him. I grit my teeth, fighting against the instinct to pull him outside, to get him away from something I know will hurt him.

Gloved hands band around my wrist as I go to step away, jerking me towards him, my chest rising and falling rapidly as Gene and his friend jump to my defense, “Don't fucking touch her!”

“Hands off creeper!” Gene adds venomously.

I keep my eyes trained on his lips, those full... soft lips. Not because I want to, but because I can't look away. When my eyes finally break free, slipping up to his, I immediately regret it. How could they still be that vivid in a dark place like this? Filled with neon flashing lights that do nothing to

dampen their effect on me. An effect that slicks the space between my thighs in a disgusting way.

“Outside now.” Cohen growls, glowering down at me before someone rubs against him, making him go rigid.

“Oh, hell no.” Gene snaps, his hand gripping my shoulder to pull me back. The moment our skin touches, I watch those vivid eyes turn nuclear, exploding with something dark, something dangerously possessive. Cohen moves too quickly, capturing Gene by the wrist.

“Stop! I'll go. Just stop please, Cohen. They didn't do anything wrong.”

I turn around towards my friends, all while working myself between Cohen and them. Pressing my back into his chest the way I used to when he got that look in his eyes, one that bleeds violence. I suck my bottom lip between my teeth as I face them. Understanding I'll never see them again, knowing they'll never have a clue how much tonight meant to me, “It's okay. Really.”

Her eyes study Cohen as he stands ramrod straight at my back, his fingers tightening with a bruising hold on me, “You don't need to do that. Your boyfriend can fuck-“

My eyes widen as I try drunkenly to take back ownership of my body, “He's not my boyfriend. He's my brother.” I snap, words slurring. She frowns as his hand grips my waist, tugging me back towards him.

Gene stays back holding their wrist but glares at Cohen, “I don't feel right about this.”

“It's fine really.” I offer them a small sympathetic smile, “Thanks for watching out for me tonight.”

They hesitate, not even getting halfway through a proper goodbye when he rips me away from them. Pulling me through the crowd, his head

lowered, shoulders heaving. Tears bud in my eyes, threatening to spill over as he jerks my coat and bag from my locker. I don't bother asking how he got my combination or locker number. I ball my fists, mortified as people watch us. Not a single person comes to my defense as Cohen tugs my coat around me. Before I can form words in protest, I'm pulled outside, the cold air making me gasp. The shock of it is sobering for as long as it takes for him to usher me into the passenger seat of his stupid, fancy car. My heart flutters as he reaches over me, his warm breath tickling my neck, his broad chest pressed into me as he buckles me in.

*Like a fucking child.*

I cross my legs, warding away the tension there as my fists ball, my knuckles whitening. Pretending as he rounds the car that the tingling warmth in my belly is a result of alcohol and anger. He jerks his car door open so hard I expect it to fly dramatically off the hinges, screeching down the road like they do in superhero movies.

*Only he's not the hero. He's the villain.*

I watch him from underneath my eyelashes, my resentment and heady buzz dissolving rapidly as he inhales sharply, shedding his black overcoat and hoodie like they were on fire. My heart clenches tightly as he discards them on the side of the road, slamming into the car hard enough to rock it. I flinch as he breathes heavily, glaring down at his own hands like they've done something terrible to him. Knowing this is my fault.

*Cohen...*

My teeth capture my bottom lip to stop its incessant trembling as I snatch up the bottle of hand sanitizer he's always kept in his glove box. He doesn't react when I tug his large hands from the wheel, letting me place them on the center console as I empty generous helpings of the strong-smelling

liquid into his palms. As strong as it is... it reminds me of him in a way that makes me feel weird but not entirely uncomfortable... a good weird, I guess. His eyes dart to mine for a moment before I look down. It's everything I have not to wilt underneath that stare. I lift his left hand, working the liquid into it diligently, adding more and working slowly up his arm. His muscles are toned and rigid underneath his pale skin. He lets me continue, but I wish he'd make me stop. Yell at me for touching him, for getting him even dirtier.

*“You could never be disgusting to me, Reagan.”*

*Could he have meant that?*

His breathing becomes steadier as I move onto the right hand and by the time I'm finished, he's glaring again. The panicked look in his eyes gone.

*Never thought I'd be grateful to be glared at by anyone.*

“Just until we get back to the house.” I assure him, not missing the spark of something else beneath the glare. Something that makes me swallow hard, butterflies filling my stomach. Alcohol wreaks havoc on my better judgement. I pretend he doesn't watch me as I shrug out of my coat, dumping more hand sanitizer into my shaky palms. My mind is far beyond muddied as he watches me work it up my own arms. Squirting it onto my chest, some of it drips down between my cleavage, making me curse going in after it. I take longer than I need to rubbing it in, running my hands deeper than I need to underneath the already low neckline of my dress.

*It's wrong, I don't know why I can't stop.*

“Enough.” He breathes out, his voice throaty.

My eyes meet his, the blue again reduced to a ring around inky black, “I was just being thorough.” I whisper, leaning back... letting him stare.

Wanting his eyes on me... places I shouldn't. Places I've held out, kept private for the right person.

For-

My mind forces closed as his hand snaps out capturing my sanitized wrist before he takes the bottle of sanitizer I hadn't realized I was still gripping. We sit in tense silence, the faint sound of the music from the stereo doing nothing to make the silence a comfortable one. Or even a remotely bearable one. We sit there as he retrieves sanitizing wipes, thoroughly going over the steering wheel and everything else that might have possibly gotten dirty. I do my best to ignore his chiseled chest and muscular arms as he jerks the car into drive, peeling away from the curb.

*Something is wrong with me. With us, and this was all far too sobering.*

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## CHAPTER SEVEN

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## THE FALLOUT

Cohen's hand is fused to my lower back, unflinching despite the stiff wind against his exposed skin as he ushers me back towards the stairs of his house. Not so much as a grunt passed between the two of us. I bite down on my lower lip as I stumble up the last step, trying to remind myself why silence is the best weapon against my stepbrother, why it always has been. Cohen could never stand my silence, so I rarely forced him to endure it, but right now? He deserves it, but my head is swimming and all I want to do is talk. I yelp, falling forward when his arm bands around my waist, jerking me up off my feet before we're blasted with blessedly warm air. He hikes me higher, carrying me through the threshold like a wet coat draped over his arm.

"Thank you for sticking around so late, Gilda. You're free to go." He mumbles, already heading up the stairs.

"I don't mind staying—"

"Goodnight Gilda." His voice is flat and commanding as I struggle past the curtain of my hair to plead with the older woman not to leave me at his

mercy. The second our eyes meet; I know there's little hope of her coming to my rescue.

*Shit.*

My heart beats harder as we raise higher, the stupid organ fluttering in my chest when he pivots at the top, his socked feet thumping towards my room. Another yelp and some giggles worm past my silence when he tosses me unceremoniously onto my bed, glaring down at me. He's towering above me like some vengeful sentient being. An unpredictable force of nature in his own right, "I hardly think you're in the position to be laughing, Reagan."

My lips part as I lay there on my back. The ruffled sheets feel softer... more decadent than ever before. My knees pitched together to hide my underwear underneath the short dress. My core pulsing as he glares. A necklace he's worn since he was a teen dangles around his neck between two sculpted pecks.

"I didn't do anything wrong." I finally manage, cursing when my words slur.

His eyes darken, leaving mine as they slip down towards my chest, my coat hanging haphazardly off my exposed shoulders half trapping my arms underneath me, "I told you to watch your mouth."

"I told you—" My heart flips as he jerks my legs apart, my hands fumbling to cover my underwear.

"What the fuck, Cohen? Stop it!"

His chest meets mine in one fluid motion, his hand has long captured my chin the way he likes to these days. His mouth is moving, but I can feel something... hard pressing into my core.

"I told you... to watch your mouth. You keep pushing me, Reagan, trying to walk all over me like you used to. Fuck, I'm even tempted to let you, but

you keep forgetting where you are. Who you belong to now.”

*Full control. That's what he wants from me.*

“I don't belong to you.” I want to yell it at the top of my lungs, to scream it in his face so hard my voice becomes a visible, painful thing, but I can't. The words leave my lips in betraying whispers. The sound of the zipper on my boot makes me wince underneath him as he discards it on the floor, “You need to get out of my room.”

“Agreed. It's disgusting in here. Unfortunately, you've proved you can't be trusted to your own devices, so here I am. *Babysitting.*”

“I haven't needed a babysitter in years, but you wouldn't know that, would you? Because you fucking left!” I push my shoulder up, shoving it against his chest, glaring so hard I could implode the world and cosmos when it doesn't so much as budge him a fraction of an inch. The sound of my other shoe hitting the ground sounds like a gunshot in the silent house, our twin breaths coming out heavier than they should be, warming each other.

“Does yelling at me make you feel better, butterfly...? Huh? Does it take away the emptiness in your chest?”

He doesn't give me a second to respond before he pulls away abruptly, jerking me with him, spinning me to face the bed, “If it helps you to hate me, hate me, Reagan. Scream, cry, curse the air I breathe, plead with any higher power you choose for my death, but you will stay. Your hatred I can take, your absence... I refuse to endure again.”

My breath hitches in my throat, my hand blindly snapping out to stop his as he begins undoing the side zipper on my dress, “What are you doing?”

His lips find my neck, I don't miss the way he shudders, “You're dirty butterfly, I'm taking care of you. You let... everyone at that club tonight

make you dirty.”

“I just wanted some space, I wanted to *feel* something good.”

He removes my hand from where it was pinned across my chest as he works my zipper down. His knuckles grazing the tender skin as he goes, “Did you... *feel* something, Reagan? Huh? How many men touched you tonight? How many men ground their chubbed cocks across your ass while you danced?”

“I...”

“Too many to count?”

“N-no-“

“N-no.” He mocks, gathering my hair at the base of my neck, my arm remains pinned to my chest, clutching my dress where he left it. Desperately trying to keep my flushed skin covered as my arousal leaks into my underwear. Embarrassment and shame for a crime I didn't commit coloring my cheeks. I shouldn't feel bad. Not a bit.

*So why do I feel like I've betrayed him?*

“See, that's your problem butterfly, you get mad and lose sight of even the most obvious fucking things. You never thought to ask me for help. I was right here. Willing... If you wanted to *feel* something, all you had to do was ask.”

Again, my anger flares back to life acting like a beacon in the darkest, muddiest waters I've ever trudged through, “I will never... never ask you for anything. Not when you broke the only promise that ever mattered.”

The moment his hands leave me, it feels every bit like the abandonment that it did the night he walked out of my life. My head swims as memories of that naïve little girl using her special key to her big brother's room in the middle of the night after a nightmare, only to find the room barren, devoid

of everything that ever made it his. Rejection of that caliber is a palatable, tangible thing. A thing that can walk and taunt just as effectively as the person who inflicted it on you.

“What choice did I have, Reagan?”

“You could've stayed. I know things were hard between you and my dad... I just-“

“Right. You don't understand, and now isn't the time to talk about the things you don't understand. Come on, you need a shower and something in your stomach.”

My cheeks brighten as I grip the dress, my hair falling into my face as my head drops forward, glaring at my own feet. Letting him lead me into my bathroom. The anger in my chest is slightly abated by my pride in the mess I've created here. Not following a single one of his rules and trying to keep Gilda from cleaning it as much as possible. He shoves my hands away, setting the shower how he wants before gesturing me in. I just stand there staring at him like he's grown two heads. I mean, my vision is a little wonky right now...

“Reagan, get in.”

“Cohen, get out.”

He crosses his arms, leaning his back against the wall, a dark eyebrow arching in challenge, “And why should I do that? We've established you need a babysitter.”

“No, *you* said that. I vehemently disagreed also, I don't want you to see me... you know, naked.”

The steam from the shower, running high on its sanitation setting beckons me despite my reservations keeping me glued to the spot. My skin breaks out in goosebumps at the prospect of the warmth it's offering.

He clenches his jaw tighter, “Why not?”

My eyes widen in a gawk, my heart and the space between my legs clenching.

*Do I want him to see me?*

*Yeah, I think I do.*

*I'm also drunk.*

“Because you're my brother!”

The anger that flashes in his glacier eyes makes me clench the dress tighter, backing up until I wince, recoiling as I hit the hot water. He moves quickly, quicker than my inebriated mind can keep up with, and all the sudden he's there with me.

*He's close, so impossibly close.*

*Cohen* is in the shower with *me*. My wide eyes are glued to the water rolling down his bare chest as he reaches up, jerking the dress down and out of my arms. The fabric makes a ghastly tearing noise. I can't bring myself to grieve it as anger and exhaustion strips what's left of my energy.

“Cohen, stop it.” It's not a yell, not an order, but a plea. A request for mercy as my heart throbs in my chest.

“I am not your fucking brother, Reagan.” He growls the words between clenched teeth, as if the mere idea of being my brother is disgusting to him. Those forced words inject ice water straight into my veins. Water so frigid it could've put tonight's wind to shame. Tears bud in my eyes, spilling over quickly as my mottled heart bounces off the shower floor. My eyes snap towards his, wanting him to see the pain he put there, only to find them closed.

*It only makes me cry harder.*

“Why? Why won’t you be my big brother?” I sob. No longer bothering to cover myself as he kneels, his hands trailing across my outer hips. He doesn’t answer right away, his eyes still shut tightly, still oblivious to what he’s done to me. What he keeps doing to me.

*Or maybe the entire point is to wound.*

I clench my tights together tighter, desperate for *something*. Even though my tears cascade down my cheeks in rivets as he works my lacy underwear down my thighs, letting me brace myself on him as I step out. His skin is wet and hot beneath mine, and I don’t want to let go.

*I want... I want to touch him. I want him to touch me in a place he shouldn’t.*

I rub my thighs together, embarrassed by my perverse thoughts by the way it makes my heart crack just a little deeper. What would he say if he knew?

“The moment you stepped out of that car butterfly... I knew you could never be my little sister again.”

That was all it took, a few words strung together to make me burst, my sobs leaving me so loudly they turn guttural echoing off the walls of the slower. My head goes hot, my legs unsteady seconds before my knees crash against the hard tiled floor in front of him. Bowing over with the force of my cries. His hands trail down my spine, working the water into it gently... lovingly. Reminding me of the way he used to braid my hair.

*How he learned just for me. Dad was never good at it, but I had always loved the way they looked, even if they weren’t as good as the other girls in class.*

When I lift my head, those blue eyes look so much like they did before. A little less cold, a little less jaded, but *he* isn’t. He said so himself. I stare up

at him as his hand knots in my hair, forcing my head up further to look at him. Gone are the gentle touches from a few moments ago. I don't bother trying to hide my breasts as I sob under the weight of him.

“Ask me to stay, Reagan. Ask me to take it away and I will. I swear to you I will. I won't eat, sleep, I won't fucking breathe until-”

“I don't understand what you're talking about?!” I sob, clenching my stomach tighter, “I'm so fucking confused, Cohen. I feel so... so messed up.”

“You know exactly what I'm talking about, butterfly. You're mine. Let me be there for you the *only* way I can.” I wish I could say the pain in his eyes made mine lessen, that it felt good seeing him hurting the way I was. Seeing him as conflicted and confused as I am.

*It didn't.*

I didn't ask him for anything. Just like I said I wouldn't and when his lips met my forehead, my heart fluttered before shattering all over again.

### **Cohen**

*God, she's fucking beautiful. Seeing her there naked, wet on the floor, her evergreen eyes rimmed red from her tears was bound to be my undoing. Fuck, she was bound to be my undoing since that very first day. Since the very first time I realized she meant more to me than... anything else. That everything paled in comparison to what her small smiles did to me.*

None of that dampens the way my skin crawls, my chest heaving as I enter my shower, clothes sitting in the wastebasket beside the toilet. If I had time, I'd incinerate them myself. Having to leave her there feels the same as being gored. I flinch, slipping under the water, shoving forward and bracing myself on the bathroom wall, holding myself underneath the scalding water. My cock angry and throbbing, standing at attention even though I'm two

beats away from flipping my fucking lid. I jerk out my antibacterial cleanser and pour a heap into my hands, starting the process of scrubbing it into my skin with my nails, leaving angry red scores and raw sensitive skin behind.

*“Why won’t you be my big brother?”*

*Fuck me.*

I hurry through the rest of my process as best I can before gripping the base of my cock tightly, groaning into the steam as I rock into my hand, picturing her there underneath me again. Teary-eyed and needy. The way she kept clenching and unclenching her thighs.

“Fuck Reagan.” I groan, stroking myself quickly, rolling my hips in tune with the waves of pleasure coursing through me. Letting my mind go to sick... deliriously perverse places as I pretend it’s the first time I’ve thought these things.

*Reagan’s hand snakes between her thighs, already grinding against nothing, desperate for friction as I pump my cock above her. Her pretty green eyes wide and innocent, her bottom lip popping free from her teeth as her plump lips open in a perfect little “o”. Her inexperienced fingers finding her throbbing bundle of nerves.*

“Are you going to swallow me like a good girl, butterfly? You want my cock down your throat, don’t you baby?”

*She nods, her eyes needy.*

I lean forward, bracing myself on the shower wall, fucking my hand as if it were her perfect wet mouth.

*“Tell me. Tell me you want it.” I order her as she rises, slipping a single small finger into her cunt. She moans as she lowers herself, riding it.*

*“I want to suck my stepbrother’s cock, please.”*

*My length pulses as I jerk it forward, shoving it into her hot mouth, making her gag around me, “Watch it or I'll fill up your pretty little throat.”*

*Her eyes widen before going half lidded with lust as she sucks hard, her lip dragging the length of my cock like the perfect girl she is.*

Her name leaves my lips like a prayer as I moan, erupting and letting loose ropes of come across the shower wall as my climax runs me dry. I take my time under the water, gathering myself to go back to her after that.

*Not that it's the first time.*

*Or the last.*

After I've scrubbed myself thoroughly a second time in the shower, I finally step out from underneath the dryer, forcing my still half hard cock into some clean boxers and sleep pants. My chest feeling a little lighter now that I'm not covered in the sweat and fluids of fuck knows how many people. I frown at the bathroom door that now sits half open, knowing I didn't leave it like that. My heart pounds harder, wondering what Reagan could've heard... wondering if she liked it. I swallow hard past unprecedented nerves as I push the door open. My eyes landing on the delicate form curled up on my bed, her face buried in my pillow that she's hugging tightly to her chest. I wish I had the proper words to describe how it feels seeing her like this, curled up in my bed. It's almost the same warm, loved feeling she gave me back then, but with a harder edge and more annoying flutters in my stomach. I run my hand through my wet hair, immediately frowning and wiping it on my pants as I make my way to her. She doesn't move a muscle as I sit down beside her, pushing her hair away from her face. Her skin is paler than it should be, her slight frame swallowed by the large T-shirt she's wearing. Her hair is still damp, cold between my fingers as I absent mindedly play with it.

“Reagan, I’m sorry I left you alone in there. I shouldn’t have.” I tell her, my frown deepening when she doesn’t respond. My eyes dip to her chest, her breaths come in stunted pants. My hand snaps to her forehead, the chilled clammy skin there sending waves of alarm over me as I get to my feet, rolling her onto her back.

“Reagan!”

*Nothing.*

Familiar panic sears the edges of my chest.

*No.*

“Reagan!” I shake her harder, her head flopping and rolling uncontrolled with each attempt to wake her.

My eyes dart back to the bathroom, to the open vanity mirror inside. My heart somehow stops and pounds at the same time as I barrel towards it, jerking the half-opened bottle of pills out.

*No.*

I run back towards her, jerking her up from the bed into the bathroom, letting us collapse there on the floor. I gently open her eyelids, her pupils are pinpoint, her eyes unseeing, “Reagan, did you take my meds?”

She groans, chest heaving with a gag as her breath comes in soft, short spurts.

*No.*

“For fuck’s sake, no. Reagan.” My voice breaks as I lean her gently against the bathtub I’ve never used, running into my bedroom, searching frantically for my phone.

“Fuck fucking fuck!” I roar as I tear through my room, searching for it. Screaming at Gilda to help me find it before remembering I sent her home.

*Fuck.*

Dipping back into the bathroom, I press my ear to her chest where she's still slumped, trying to still my own breathing enough to hear the slow beats of her own heart.

*Too slow.*

*Fuck Reagan.*

Running from the bathroom I enter her room, jerking her phone from the dresser where I laid it earlier and dialing 9-1-1 as I run back to her, my heart raging in my chest. As soon as I hit the bathroom again, I drop to my knees, letting myself skid to a stop as I gather her in my arms, pulling her tightly against my chest.

“It's okay, it's okay.” My voice cracks, “I can fix it.” I assure her, or myself stroking her hair frantically.

“9-1-1 what is the nature of your emergency?”

“Someone is having an overdose. They took Valium, and she had a lot of alcohol in her system. I need an ambulance now!”

“Sir, calm down. What is the address?”

“275 Glenside Road in uh...” Reagan makes a strained sound as her eyes flutter open, trying to get a full breath.

“Sir!”

“Tualatin.”

“Okay good. Is she breathing? Responsive?”

My stomach churns, “She's struggling to breathe, and she's not responding. Reagan, come on. Tell me how much you took, baby.”

“Sir!”

“Just fucking get someone here to help her!”

Her green eyes flutter open again, unfocused as she gasps.

“Reagan!”

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## CHAPTER EIGHT

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## Cohen Eight Years Old

“Don't forget dad wanted help in the shop today.” Mom mutters the high heels that she always complains about having to wear clacking loudly against the tiled floor of the kitchen as I shovel another spoonful of yogurt into my mouth. A glob slips from the spoon, falling onto the counter. She makes a face when I swoop it up with my finger, popping it into my mouth.

“Okay.” I grumble. Dad always wants help in his shop. Working on those stupid computers people can't fix themselves. It was fun at first, maybe.

*Maybe not.*

*He tries to make it fun at least, unlike shopping with mom. Which I'm getting out of today to help dad.*

“I'm serious don't keep him waiting and you two have fun.” She remarks, placing a soft kiss on my forehead before she heads out of the kitchen towards the front door, “Love you!”

“Love you too, mom.” I mumble, shoving the last bite of yogurt into my mouth. I leave the bowl there, promising myself I'll remember to rinse it

later.

*Even though I probably won't.*

I head for the back door, hugging my jacket tighter to me as the cool spring air whips around, wet from all the rain. The same rain that's made the team miss three practices so far this season. No way we're making it to the Clarkswood school tournament... again. I roll my eyes jerking open the door to dad's old shed turned computer workshop. The smell of aged musty wood and his aftershave mixes with burning plastic from something he probably soldered or melted recently. I smell that burned plastic everywhere; it sticks in your nose like skunk spray long after you've left the shop. I don't really mind it *that* much. Mom swears it gives her migraines.

“Mom left. She said she'd be back by dinner so not to order out.”

I frown, weaving my way through towering unsteady piles of computer junk, “Dad, are you-“

My heart slams to a stop as I stare at his desk, trying to understand what I'm seeing. Trying to... I bow over, bracing myself on my knees as I vomit. Stumbling through my sick to him. It's him, right? The... the mess... is that his favorite sweater? It's all gross now.

My hands tremble as frantic weird sounds leave my mouth as I try to grip the pieces of his head. The shotgun laid between his legs makes my stomach churn and sweat bead on my brow.

*He's... everywhere.*

*His face... I can't tell...*

“Why do you have the gun in here, dad?” I ask him, frowning when he doesn't answer.

“I- it's okay, dad. Don't worry about this.” I gather up the sludge and bits in my hands, pressing them into the wide-open spots of his head. “I can fix

it. We won't have to tell mom about the mess because I'll fix it. You know how she is, but she'll be gone all day." I mumble to him, but the more I push and press, the more he falls apart. I don't know how long I try to fix him, how long I stand there frantically pushing and pressing when Mom's scream jolts me into one of my own. The sight of *him* on my hands only makes me scream louder. It stretches on like several lifetimes. I don't know when I stop screaming or when I stop trying to scrape his blood from my hands.

*If I ever do.*



My hand tightens around her cool one as the door to the hospital room slides open, my eyes trained on the wide band eclipsing her wrist, "Out."

I don't bother looking at who has come in. They don't matter. My eyes pull up, gearing myself to flip my shit as Andrew comes into view. Dark circles and bloodshot eyes tell me he hasn't been to bed either, despite leaving hours ago to do just that. I watch him as he sits on the bed beside her, his usual playboy funny guy style pocketed as he stares at her, "Fuck man." He whispers.

My only response comes in the form of a nod. Gritting my teeth as he brushes a stray strand from her cheek, working it free from underneath the tube in her nose. Dragging a deep breath through my lungs feels like a chore, doing my best to focus on her and not the overabundance of bacteria and disease spores living their best germ lives in the stale air in the hospital room.

“She's going to be fine.” The words are meant for myself, but I say them out loud anyway.

Andrew nods his ashy blonde hair pulled up high on the top of his head, “She is. We'll make sure of it.”

A moment of understanding passes between us. Although he would've done what I asked him either way, it's good knowing he's finally understanding the situation. Bad things are sometimes necessary. That's what my father understood the day he blew his brains across his shed. He wrote as much in the note he typed out on the computer in front of him. That was the day I met Andrew, kicking the shit out of the vending machine outside his mom's office. His mom being my emergency state appointed psychiatrist. My dad knew he was holding mom back. His inflexibility... his aversion to anything that even remotely resembled change kept her stagnant. Kept me bound to the small, no opportunity crime filled city we lived in, even though they'd worked hard to make sure we could move away years before he took his own life. He just... couldn't.

“Today?” I ask, my stomach knotting together for so many different reasons, excitement, dread, worry and, above all else... the unyielding and more times than not painful hold my little butterfly has on me. She's going to hate me for this. My mother would hate me for this. I almost smile thinking of how her father would flip if he could.

*Blowing his cool, nice guy facade, he'd convinced them all of.*

“At nine, it should be in and out. All the paperwork is there and the lab technician is-“

He's cut off as another nurse walks in, my eyes darting to her as my skin prickles. Her eyes widen slightly behind her mask before they darken in a smile, “I'm just here to check-“

“Gloves.” I growl, irritated she'd misinterpret my reason for staring. As if she could hold a candle to Reagan. I'd spent the past two years trying to recreate everything that made her perfect. Made her *mine*, and even Vanessa was a poor imitation.

“I'm sorry?” She asks, still reaching for her, my stomach already teetering on a cliff's edge, ready for the inevitable drop. The white clinical walls feel far tighter and abrasive than they are.

I stand abruptly stepping between her and Reagan as she takes a hesitant step back, my fists clenched tightly, “You don't touch a fucking hair on her head without gloves you atrophied brained—“

“Ooooookay,” Andrew chuckles uncomfortably, “I am so sorry about him.” He slips between us, making the space feel even smaller, even more restrictive. My lungs are tightening, my fingers digging into the palm of my hand. His wide people appeasing smile slipped flawlessly back into place. I'm sure it's reassuring to her. I'm sure it even makes her chest tingle. Only I can tell how it doesn't touch his coffee-colored eyes. That's Andrew's thing.

### *Control.*

He can't breathe without it, the way I can't breathe in filth. He needs it to exist. That's why we work. He gets it. It's why he listens to me like he does, not because he has to, but because I give him things to *control*. Aspects of my life, aspects of my job I find too tedious and time consuming... he handles. Me and about three hundred of the world's wealthiest men. Their finances, business deals, everything. Underneath all that painted on golden retriever personality is an absolute powerhouse who is damn good at his job.

“He will not speak to me that way. I will have him removed.”

Andrew shoots me a loaded look, making me roll my eyes and take my seat by her, grabbing her hand again. Frowning at how cold the tips of her fingers are, I cup them between my hands, holding them tightly to warm them.

“I understand. Really, he can be abrasive, as he's not used to dealing with people.” I can hear him behind me, leading her away, letting me breathe deeply again.

*He'd better be leading her to a fucking pair of gloves.*

“My friend has a bit of a... aversion to germs and well, people.”

I glance up at them dispassionately, glaring when she meets my gaze. Andrew stands a little taller, straightening his back, stepping just an inch closer. Taking her space, her attention. His control. I'm nearly positive he'll fuck her later.

“You can understand that his sister's suicide attempt is distressing for him. He's feeling overly protective, and I know you're... more than competent. Please, for their sakes, edge on the side of caution when it comes to cleanliness. Gloves... would simply put him more at ease.” She exhales deeply. The sound of gloves being pulled from the box on the wall comes moments before her footsteps are nearing us again.

“You're a saint.” Andrew appeases her, taking his spot back on the other side of the bed. The nurse only scoffs, her eyes again darkening in a nauseatingly flirtatious way. At least this time it's directed at him. Reagan stirs as the nurse begins her checks, making my heart jolt.

*I'm not ready yet.*

Noting my discomfort she peaks down at me, disapproval still shining brightly in her eyes, “Your sister won't wake up for a while. She's still got a

lot in her system. Has the counselor been in to speak with you yet? The hospital has an obligation to hold individuals who are a danger to-“

“She will be coming home as soon as she's able. I have an on-call doctor that can tend to her mental wellbeing.” I snap, leveling her with my eyes. They most certainly will not be keeping her here in this fucking petri dish.

“Sir, all due respect your sister-“

“Is in excellent hands.” Andrew chimes in, “I promise. But on that note, you're going to be late if you don't head out now.”

I take a deep breath, fishing my anxiety meds from my hoodie pocket and dumping two straight from the bottle into my mouth, ignoring yet another judgmental look from the nurse before she fucks off out of the room.

“Might want to put on something a little more... professional than an Astro Gaming hoodie. I have an extra suit in my-“

I drag my eyes from Reagan to my friend, glaring at all six foot eight inches of him. A solid head taller than most men. Including me at my six foot three.

“Yes, because I'm sure the court would appreciate me showing up wearing my dad's suit.”

“It wouldn't be that big, son.” He taunts.

I ignore it, shaking my head, “What I'm wearing is fine. It's my company anyway.”

“Cohen, this isn't a parking ticket. It's for an emergency conservatorship. Full legal and physical custody of another human being, you have to look serious about it. I'm sure Gilda brought you something more... respectable.” A sick thrill spreads through my gut. It's what I've worked for since my sweet broken butterfly called to tell me they were dead. Since she

made it very clear she would not stay, her sampling of my pills only made the process easier.

“I pay my lawyer well enough to make sure our case is solid.”

He grumbles, dragging his hands down his face.

*Gross.*

“This is still fucking illegal, Cohen,” he whisper shouts. “We both know damn well she didn't try to kill herself. Just because we didn't have to lie more doesn't mean we didn't still *lie*. How the fuck am I supposed to twist you faking your sister's suicide attempt if this gets out? You need to look the fucking part of the mentally stable concerned older brother that desperately wants to save his sister from herself.” His chest heaves as he glances again at the clock in exasperation.

I bolt up from my chair, “None of this would be a fucking problem if you'd have paid the fucking judge like I asked you to!”

“Why do shit the shady way when she gave us the perfect opportunity to do it right!?”

Someone from the door clears their throat. I whirl around, meeting Gilda's shocked expression. A bagged suit held tightly in her arms, “Mr. Bennet...”

“Thank you, Gilda.” I mumble, stepping forward, my jaw clenching when she moves the suit from my grasp.

“I don't have time for this.” I grit out. My skin crawls again, my nerves prickling with too much awareness.

*Too much everything. Too tight chest, too bright fucking walls. Too many people crammed inside a stupid, tiny room.*

“You plan to place her in a conservatorship?”

“Gilda.” I warn.

“Mr. Bennet, I will not stand idly by and allow you to strip the autonomy from a young girl who is grieving the loss of her entire life.” She snaps her wrinkled hands tightening, crackling the bag on my suit. My eyes widen. Andrew is also uncharacteristically silent behind me. Probably just as content to let my employee have a go at me.

*A pang of something hits me. I rarely refer to her as an employee. It feels... like I'm taking something away from her, like she hasn't held me and my home together for years.*

“That doesn't really matter now, does it?” I ask, doing my best to be indifferent despite how fucking close I am to snapping.

“Of course it matters! You cannot exert some primitive ownership over her simply because you are scared she will live a life happy without you.”

Her words snap through me like an iced blade as I step forward. Closer, close enough to tower over her despite my chest throbbing, “Should I allow her to go then? Allow whoever tried to take her life to have it? Let her be alone in the fucking world out of some stupid vendetta she has against me for shit-“

“You should treat her like a human being!”

My rage boils over, the sound of Andrew shoving up from his chair barely registers before his arms lock around me, making the gnawing awareness in my chest detonate like an atomic bomb. My breath leaves my lungs all at once as red bleeds into my vision, “Let go.” I growl, trying to turn on him.

“You have an appointment you're going to be late for. Take a moment, wash yourself up and get changed. It's not her you're mad at.” He reasons. It makes sense logically, but does nothing to quell the rage I'm feeling. Gilda

hasn't so much as blinked, staring me down like a cowboy in an old western shootout.

"I will not be a part of this." She warns me before shoving my suit into a nearby chair, stomping from the room.

As I shove Andrew off, our eyes darting to Reagan as she shifts, a small whimper leaving her throat making my heart constrict in my chest. I suck in a deep breath, further polluting myself in an attempt to regain an inch of clarity. Quickly walking to her, gripping her hand like the life preserver she is.

*I know this is wrong. I fucking know that. Before I heard her voice, her sobs that day she told me about the accident it would've mattered. Maybe someone could've changed my mind. Now? It only makes my perverse compulsion to own her more justified. Before? It was for me. A twisted fantasy I only gave credence to late at night, staring at pictures of the person I gave my heart to years ago. The only person I ever trusted with it. It was a fantasy and nothing more... until she stepped out of the car, and I realized I could do it.*

*That I would do anything to take back what was robbed of us both.*

*And there was no one left to stop me.*



## CHAPTER NINE

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## R eagan

*The washer and dryer rooms are always dark at this time of night. The machines long gone to bed, the steady electrical hum from the room never seems to stop though. Not that I mind much, it's warm here. The people are nice, and it beats dad's car, a car that was towed for illegal parking three days ago. I clutch my soiled nightgown and blanket, too embarrassed to wake dad up and tell him I had another accident. I know I'm too old for this. I'm a big girl, but it just... keeps happening. Daddy never gets mad, but I can tell he's tired. He never smiles like he used to. There's something different about him. Something that suddenly feels so old.*

*Seven years old is too old to have nighttime accidents. It's happened a few times lately and I don't think I've ever been this embarrassed in my entire life.*

*I pull a chair over from the wall, standing on my tippy toes to check the high up dryer towering over the washer to make sure it's empty too.*

*Why would they stack it all the way on top?*

*Seems silly.*

*“Need some help?”*

*I jolt, nearly losing my footing as the chair underneath me pitches, strong warm arms that smell like the shop outside the towing company locks around me, keeping me in place. My heart thuds a little harder as the man laughs, trying to keep his tone hushed, “Got to be careful. Wouldn’t want you to get hurt.”*

*I let my eyes drop to the tightly clutched bundle in my arms as he steps closer, so close I can smell his breath, “T-thank you.” I mumble.*

*Daddy says not to talk to strangers, I know better... but he also says not to be rude. I don't want to be rude. He also says never to leave his side, especially at a shelter, but I did.*

*The man tisks, “What happened here?”*

*I clutch the bundle tighter, embarrassment burning the skin on my face. I know he can smell it, but he's asking anyway. Please don't tell my dad. I just want to get it clean and go back to bed. I'm not supposed to be down here.*

*“Hey, it's okay,” He smiles, lifting me down from the chair. “Everyone has accidents sometimes. You're a big girl cleaning it up all by yourself. Very mature, aren't you?” I keep my head down, chewing my lip as he opens the washer and gestures for me to toss the bundle in, so I do. My body goes rigid as he leans down, gripping the hem of the nightgown I'm wearing.*

*“No, this one is clean.”*

*“It's okay, I'm just going to help clean you up.”*

*“No, stop it! This one is clean!” I fumble, trying to get his hands off as he jerks it up, exposing my panties and chest. Tears bud in my eyes as a scream builds in my throat, “Dad-“*

*My heart pitches as his large dirty hand slaps over my mouth and nose, stopping my cry for help. My tears roll over and meet his palm as I flail my*

*arms and kick, trying to twist away from him the way dad told me to.*

*“Hey, hey shut the fuck up. I was just trying to help...”*

*I can't. I can't breathe.*

*“.... can't get in trouble again. Fuck. Fuck!” He curses. He sounds scared too. That only makes me panic more. He cries out as my teeth dig into the flesh of his hand, shoving me forward so hard my head snaps backwards as I fall. I don't have time to put my arms out when a sharp, blinding pain explodes against the back of my head.*



I jolt, dragging air through my burning throat, my heart pounding in my chest. The nightmare lingers violently in the forefront of my mind as I wrench my eyes open, desperately trying to escape a place I haven't been in years.

*Escape a memory. A moment between me and a stranger who never wanted to help me.*

I cough, hands flutter over me, someone yells at my side. I remember that night so clearly... too clearly. My eyes focus against the harsh lights, giving me a clue about where I am and suddenly, I'm that little girl again. The one who woke up in so much pain. Staring down in horror at her own unrecognizable skin. She was crying out for her daddy, surrounded by doctors and more strangers that she didn't think could possibly be there to help her.

*Would anyone ever help me again?*

“Dad?” I croak. My throat feels like I swallowed a fistful of glass. My stomach aching and burning as if it’s in competition with it.

“Oh, sweet girl.” I turn my head towards Gilda’s voice, my chest pitching painfully when reality catches up with my groggy mind.

*I never thought I'd ever want to be that little girl again. One that had a dad to run to when the world got a little too scary.*

Tears mist my vision as I glance around the bright room. It’s jarring after the inky interior of the house I’d started getting used to. A nurse presses a button at my side, raising the bed before meeting my eyes. A knowing, sympathetic look on her face that makes me feel faint.

“Hi, can you tell me your name, please?”

I try to clear my throat wincing, “Reagan Hall.”

“Bennet. Her last name is Ben-“ My eyes snap to Andrew, his long dirty blonde hair is tangled and messy around his shoulders, dark bags underneath his eyes make this chocolate-colored irises seem even darker. I’m not sure who cut him off, but he looks annoyed by it.

*Cohen?*

My heart rate spikes as I search the room for him, the machine at my side egging it on with every rapid beat. The nurse reaches behind me again, raising the back of the bed more. Her warm eyes popping over the edge of her mask, “Hi Reagan, it’s wonderful to finally meet you. Can you tell me what year it is?”

I swallow hard as Gilda strokes around the IV in my hand, calming the skin around the needle, “Uhm twenty twenty-three. Why am I here?”

The nurse smiles. At least I think she does, “That was my next question. Do you remember how you got here?”

The tears budded in my eyes spill over as I look around again for my stepbrother, shaking my head, “Did something happen to me at the club? Did someone-“

“No.” Andrew practically spits out, sounding breathless, “No kid, nothing like that.”

My shaky breath is the only sound among the machines for a fat minute, everyone content to leave me to try and work things out myself. I... *can't*. I remember being carried inside by Cohen, being upset... my hands were fisted in the sheets as I stared up at someone. He looks worried; I remember thinking he needed my help.

Andrew lifts his phone to his ear, probably calling Cohen... I try to ignore how my heart splits down the middle. He didn't even come to the hospital? Gilda is the only one that seems keen to put me out of my misery as she takes a deep breath, opening her mouth to speak before the door to the room slams open my stepbrother's chest heaving like he just ran a mile as he jerks into the room. Those icy blue eyes find mine, loosening the knot of panic in my stomach before he glances at Gilda with pure contempt... a warning flashing in his eyes.

The nurse clears her throat, “Reagan, you had your stomach pumped.”

My head snaps towards her, “Why?”

She looks at Cohen and back at me, seemingly displeased with being the one tasked with telling me what the fuck is going on.

“You overdosed on alcohol and benzodiazepines. We had to intubate you and your stomach was pumped, that's why your throat hurts. I know you're probably feeling a lot right now. You've been out for a while. I'm going to go get you some ice chips and there will be a counselor in to speak to you shortly.”

*Right... I took his medicine.*

“I- I wasn't trying to kill myself.” I whisper. My eyes snap back to Cohen, guilt flashing through me like a hot iron. His eyes tell me everything I need to know, *he* found me. He looks... shaken. Of course, he would be... finding me like that after his dad. A sob builds in my throat. He must've been so scared.

*Cohen...*

The nurse just nods, “I'll be right back.”

I can't look away from him. Andrew stands from the corner of the room, gesturing for Gilda, “Let's give them a moment.” He orders. It's weird hearing him being so... stern and grown up. Even though he's a year older than Cohen. Gilda doesn't move from my side, taking Cohen's eyes from me.

*No, don't look away.*

“Gilda...” He warns as her cool, worn hand finds my cheek stroking it with a reassuring smile that doesn't reach her eyes. It takes a moment for me to realize she's asking if it's okay...

*Why?*

I nod, hundreds upon thousands of thoughts and emotions pulling tears down my face faster than gravity ever could. They're endless as they pour, and I'm afraid they'll never stop. I'm afraid of what's happened. Of what it means.

*I'm afraid.*

I'm afraid until the door closes, and suddenly he's at my side, pulling me into his chest, burying my face in his neck. A shuddering breath leaves me as he lets go, only long enough to jerk the leather gloves from his hands, burying them in my greasy hair.

“Cohen your hands...” I whimper.

He jerks his head to the side, using his shoulder to dislodge his mask, inhaling me deeply, hugging me so tight it hurts, “I don't care. I need to touch you.”

“I'm sorry.” I sob. “ I- I only took a few, I swear I didn't think-“

“Shhh, shhhh butterfly. It's okay, you're okay. Just... don't-“ his voice sounds strained, heavy like he's fighting back tears, that only makes me cry harder. “Don't do that to me again. Don't ever fucking scare me like that again. I won't let you Reagan,” I sniffle, fighting against him as he tugs my head from his chest, forcing his forehead against mine, “I'll fucking hurt you. If you ever...” His voice breaks, “If you ever do something so stupid like that again, I swear I'll hurt you.”

*I've never seen Cohen this upset before... the way he's looking at me makes my chest feel... off.*

You never expect it. There's no sign seconds before something catastrophic happens. Something you can't come back from, life altering moments typically come without warning or remorse as it uproots your everything. My whimper is cut in half as Cohen's lips crash into mine. It's not my first kiss. I've had many before it. Soft quick pecks from my dad and Lynn. Timid, unsure ones from Jake the night I got high with Cohen's friends. Sloppy heavy ones from boys that always came with touches that made my stomach unsteady. This isn't like those.

*It's not even close.*

The scorching burn in my throat is long forgotten as his lips claim mine, consuming them, owning them. I don't kiss him back, but my stomach tightens. A line of heat trails down to my core, going lower and deeper as he

swipes his tongue over my lips. Wetting them. I can taste him, the mint from his mouth. Or maybe it's from mine?

Someone clears their throat as I jerk away from him, meeting the wide eyes of my nurse. A small white cup clasped in her hand. My cheeks burn under his stare. He hasn't looked away from me, but I can't meet his eyes. The machine at my side is chiming loudly. That's not the way a brother is supposed to kiss his sister. Cohen doesn't kiss. Not anyone. We're frozen, the three of us. My chest heaves as I peek at him from underneath my damp lashes, the never-ending tears snuffed out of existence in a moment. The only evidence they were ever here in the first place is drying on my face. His eyes are bright and relentless and in them... is a promise for more. A hunger that shouldn't be there, not when he looks at me. I clench my thighs together, willing away the pulse between them.

*"The moment you stepped out of that car butterfly... I realized you could never be my little sister again."*

*That's what he said last night. He told me then, but I... don't think I understood. I didn't understand, not even close. He didn't... he wasn't saying he didn't want to be my big brother. He meant-*

*No.*

“The counselor is ready when you are.” Suddenly the nurse is at my side, thrusting the cup into my shaky hand. Her voice is hard... angry. The shock has worn off for at least one of us. Although Cohen doesn't look shocked. I just nod as she spins on her heel, glaring down at Cohen, “You'll need to step out.”

His full reddened lips curl up in a snarl, “No.”

I watch as she fists her hands, “I should have called security days ago. Right now, she is the legal responsibility of the hospital. If you cannot or

will not allow us to do our jobs and care for her, then you will be removed from the premises. I don't give a damn what your friend says-“

“She's right.” I whisper, staring at the cup of ice, “You should go.”

“Reagan.” He warns, his body going rigid like he's ready to snatch me up and leap from the window like some shitty agoraphobic supervillain. My hand shakes as I reach out, slipping it over his. His bare skin against mine feels like it always has, warm and special because his touches were precious.

*Something he always reserved for me.*

His kisses should be the same, right? He was just overwhelmed. So am I. I have been since he left. I open my mouth to tell him that when the nurse calls out, “She's ready to see you, Miss. Reese.”

I nod, shooting him a weak smile as he drags air through his lungs and lifts from the bed, adjusting the mask that was barely clinging to his left ear. It's immediately colder in the room, like some vital piece is missing. I hate that I've grown accustomed to the sensation. It's the way the house felt when he left. Lynn said it felt like walking around a Hollywood set, a perfect replica of her home. I remember the way she worried the locket around her neck where pictures of him and my dad rested, staring at his empty bedroom.

*Lynn smiles, but it's not a happy smile, not by a long shot, “It's my home, it's perfect... the pictures are on the walls, everything in its place. Even then, no matter how hard you work at it, an imitation of something will always lack the thing that gave it its soul. That's what grief feels like Rea, life imitating itself and you play along because you have to.” She turns to me, wiping away my tears all while ignoring her own. “Even though it's hollow.”*

*I sniffle, “He's not coming back, is he?”*

*Her lip trembles, “No, sweet girl.”*

I run my tongue over my teeth. There's no grit, no build up from not brushing, but my mouth is dry, really dry... and clean. Nurses don't do that, do they?

“Hello, it's nice to meet you Miss. Bennet. My name is Dharia Reese. I'm a counselor with the hospital. Thank you for taking a moment to speak to me. I know there's a lot going on for you right now.”

I flash her a smile. I don't know why I bother. It doesn't feel as good as it used to even when she answers with one, her hair pulled up high on her head tight in tight braids threaded with a golden shade of blonde. Her fitted suit is a pretty shade of plum Lynn would've loved.

“How are you feeling?” She asks.

I nod to myself, the lie hanging on my lips, “Confused.”

“That's normal, given the circumstances.”

“I didn't try to kill myself.” I offer, knowing where this is going as I pop a piece of ice in my mouth. The relief is immediate and short-lived.

She tilts her head, “Reagan, sometimes people feel like life isn't worth living, and that's normal. Especially in times of distress.”

“Okay, and that's fine, but I didn't want to die.”

She nods, writing something down. Crunching my ice, I fight the impulse to crane my neck to see what it is.

“I'm not here to get you in trouble. I'm here to help you. I can't do that if you won't be honest with me.”

My mouth opens but nothing comes out of my throat burning. Why couldn't they just give me a cup of water?

*I didn't mean to.*

She sighs, “Reagan, you left a note. I have it here. It seems like you were in a lot of pain. It says you felt guilty... like a burden.”

My lips part as I stare at the folder in her lap, “I didn't write anything. I was drunk, I... I just wanted the buzz to last.”

She ruffles through the folder before reaching out to me, a creased piece of paper in her slender fingers as she urges me to take it. I don't want to, but I do anyway... my stomach knotting when my eyes scan the unfamiliar words. It's my handwriting, at least something close to it.

*You were drunk...*

*No. I don't want to die...*

I shake my head, dread pooling in my chest, “I didn't write this, I swear. Please, you need to listen to me. I didn't want to die.”

“And your other attempts? Did you want to die then?”

Panic rises in my chest, “What other attempts?”

“Your chart shows one in two thousand sixteen... after losing your stepbrother.”

I gawk, “He moved away. He didn't die, and I certainly didn't try to fucking off myself. Why aren't you listening to me? I didn't do this!” I yell, my voice coming out harsh and scratchy, the stupid monitor pitching up again.

“Like you are upset now. Like you were upset last night, angry with him for making you come home, right?”

“Stop it!” I lurch onto my knees, shoving at the machine as it beeps rapidly, anger burning in my chest. She flinches as it tumbles to the ground with a loud crash. Seconds later, the door flies open, Cohen and Andrew barreling inside the room just in time for me to turn my anger to the wires

connected to me, the IV on my hand. I rip it out, wincing before Cohen's hands are on me, pinning my arms to my chest.

"Tell her I didn't mean to do this!" I plead with him, "I didn't write that note Cohen, you know that!"

Something flutters through his icy blue eyes before he tugs me to his chest, Andrew glaring at the woman, "I think you have everything you need."

It's not a question, but she nods anyway, unaffected by my outburst and the dangerous look in their eyes as she rises from her seat. Nodding dismissively to me before addressing Cohen, "Aftercare will be essential, especially given the recent losses in your family. You have my contact information and I would happily email you some referrals—"

"She has a psychiatrist. Your assistance won't be needed." He responds bluntly, still holding me hostage as I try to wiggle free. His arms tighten further, making me wince as I watch her leave the room.

*They won't even let me speak.*

"Hey, loosen up." Andrew jerks his chin in our direction, a burst of air leaving my strained lungs as Cohen lets go, my blood mottling the white sheets as it drips steadily from my hand.

"I didn't write that note, Cohen."

He looks at me, twisting my hair around his gloved fingers. Ignoring me when I swat him away and the nurse when she enters, still glaring at him, "We'll talk about it at home, butterfly."

I shake my head, letting myself fall back against the bed again, my heart racing as I pick through all the pieces of last night.

*I didn't want to die. I didn't write it.... I didn't.*

"The hospital has the right to keep her here for—"

“I’m her legal guardian and she’s being discharged into my care.” He snaps, standing up from the bed and towering over the woman. *No, you aren’t I’m an adult.* I feel bad for her, but I’m too busy trying to figure out what the fuck is going on to speak up. My head is throbbing now like cracks of thunder in my skull, painful enough to almost rival my throat and stomach. I don’t care why he lies as long as I can leave here. I don’t even care if it’s to go back to that stupid fake house. I let her lift my hand as she dresses it, avoiding her worried gaze.

Just as Cohen said, the discharge happens quickly; I assume some amount of money was thrown around in order to make that happen. I’ve never had an exit from a hospital take less than an hour or two. My arms are wrapped around my stomach, the tires of his car creeping up the long road up to his house. I just stare at him. Watching his muscles move, wondering how they are still so pronounced even underneath his hoodie. We haven’t spoken. All my insisting and pleading fell on deaf ears.

*Nobody would listen... not even him.*

My blood chills as we pull up in front of the house, turning into the circle drive, “What if that person tried to kill me again?” I whisper. “It could’ve been them. Maybe they gave me more pills after I passed out, wrote that note.”

His hands tighten on the wheel, “We were the only ones in the house Reagan. Detective Whatever called yesterday while you were-“ He takes a deep breath, parking the car, “He said they think it was a shitty prank that went too far. Random stupid kids, it was senior skip day and he thinks-“

“They died... because of a stupid prank.” The words leave my lips and sound even more like a lie than they did coming from his.

*No.*

*No!*

He reaches out for me, clenching his jaw when I pull away, “They are still looking for the people but yeah, butterfly. A stupid prank.”

Tears fill my eyes as I stare ahead, not really seeing anything as the muted colors of winter blend and blur, “I didn’t write that note.” I say it again. This time there’s a tilt to the words I hadn’t meant. A silence filling the cab as my watery eyes fall to his.

“It was only us in the house.” He repeats. His own eyes darken, darker than I’ve ever seen them, and it sends a chill up my spine.

I swallow hard, “I. Didn’t. Do. It.” There it is again... that tilt. The heavy weight of an accusation hanging in the air.

He nods slowly, reaching over to clasp my hand as I move for the seat belt, “And what motive do I have to try to kill you? That’s what you’re saying, right? Why would I do that?”

I shake my head, my hand trembling under his, that disgusting heat returning to my belly despite everything, “I took the pills. I remember taking them, but I didn’t take that many and I didn’t write a fucking note.”

“And my motive?” His lips pull up. Just for a second and for the second that follows, I’m horrified by what I’m seeing. The fear slipping through my skin adds to the throbbing between my legs.

“Maybe you hate me.”

I flinch as he releases the seat belt, leaning over me abruptly and throwing my door open. The cold air hits me as my lips part. His warmth still leaned over me, looming like a sword of Damocles.

“How could you ever think that?”

I lower my eyes, dragging more painful cold air through my lungs, “Because they loved me more than you. I was their perfect little girl. The

*good kid. The kid they wanted to keep around.”* My words slice through the air, zeroing in on my target and I hate myself for them already. Even as vindication warms my chest.

He doesn't move, doesn't lash out and that makes me even angrier, my nails biting into my palms, “That's why you left, right?” I let out a cold bitter laugh that strains my throat, “Because you were jealous. The forgotten... problematic older kid couldn't take seeing his mommy coo over his baby sister anonym-“

I yelp as his hand grips the back of my head, shoving me forward. Into his space, his *personal* space. A place that's always been forbidden. Out of bounds for everyone but me on very rare occasions, his lips run the length of my ear, “You want to know why I left? Huh? Can my sweet, perfect baby sister handle it, or will she run upstairs and swallow more of my meds? If you were that desperate for attention, you could've just joined me in the shower, you know.”

My breath hitches in my throat as I try to pull back. Memories of his groans from last night as I snuck past him make me tighten my legs. I'm still trying to escape him. Of course he doesn't let me. I'm his right now, too far in his orbit, “Let go.”

“It was him, butterfly. Not me. Your beloved father forced me to leave and my bitch of a mother stood by and cried while he did it. It was them that took you from me Reagan, I never wanted to go.”

“You're lying.”

“Am I?”

I jerk again, gasping as he releases me letting me fall backwards out of the car, landing roughly on my ass in the gravel. My chest heaves as he steps out, slamming his door and rounding the car quickly. I ignore his

outstretched leather clad hand as I get to unsteady legs. I don't help him carry anything in, don't bother offering as I storm inside with him on my heels.

*Why are you so fast?*

My throat burns as I head for the kitchen, throwing open the freezer door in search of anything to ease the pain in my throat when cool hands grip my shoulders, "Have a seat, I'll make you some honey tea." Gilda says softly, steering me towards the small kitchen table. I nod, wetting my lips before she stills.

My head snaps to hers, following her line of sight as Cohen stands in the archway glaring, "Gilda, a moment?"

I frown, they seem... tense ever since I woke up in the hospital. Despite the sharp look on her face, she nods obeying him just as she always does, "Sure, Mr. Bennet. I'll meet you in your office when I finish getting Reagan's tea. I'm sure you wouldn't want her waiting while she's hurting." He snaps his mouth closed so hard his teeth clank together before stalking out of the room. I look up at her questioningly, half tempted to roll my eyes when she ignores it. A soft reassuring smile on her lips like I'm some child that can't read a room.

*Like a child.*

I clasp my shaky hands together underneath the table, squeezing them tightly.

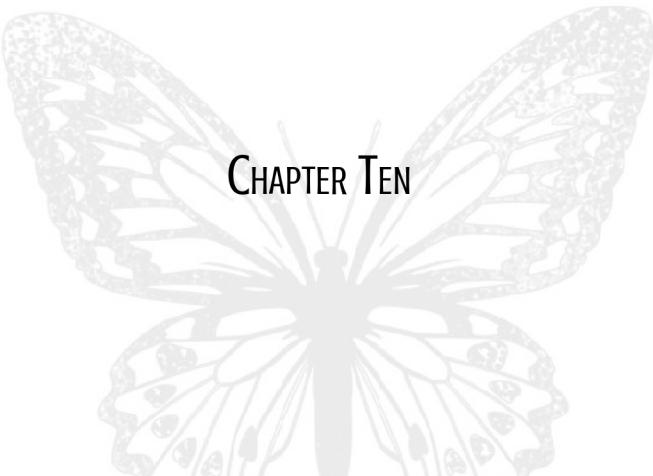
*One.*

*Two.*

*Three.*

*Just like a child.*

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## CHAPTER TEN

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## C ohen

I wince as I jerk a clean shirt on, the fabric rubbing over the raw skin on my shoulders, when a small knock comes from the other side. My heart stills, moving a little too quickly to make it there because it might be *her*. The air from the hall is uncomfortably cold against my heated skin. My face drops into a scowl when I meet aged, wrinkled eyes, narrowed and gazing at me pointedly.

“I was coming.”

“I've been waiting. For an hour.”

I ignore her remark, walking past the older woman into the hall, my eyes fluttering everywhere before landing on Reagan's closed door, light filtering from underneath.

*So, we're back to square one.*

I fight the impulse to taste my own lips, the pressure from the kiss lingering even after I scrubbed them clean. She didn't kiss me back, as much as that made the spiteful hollow organ in my chest ache... she didn't pull away either. Rather from shock or because maybe... she just didn't

want to. It doesn't matter. I will have her in all the ways I shouldn't want her. Something about her that day, the first day I met her... the way she held herself so small and nervous before ordering me to remember her food allergies... it altered my brain chemistry. In a few short weeks she'd rewritten everything about me until it was all *her*. Suddenly, my first thought in the morning wasn't about cleaning or germs or how much I hated my life.

*How did Reagan sleep? Is she up? Did she have another bad dream? What happened to her to make her cry out like that at night? What can I do to make it stop?*

I hike an eyebrow up, crossing my arms as I lean against the far wall. Watching Gilda, a woman who had been indispensable to me for the past few years and ready to throw her out like garbage if it means her not getting in my way. She closes the door, her hands balling before resting gently on her wide hips, “Mr. Bennet-“

“You're fired.”

Her lips quirk up slightly, she's never been bothered by me. My... social weirdness never seemed to affect her in the slightest. That fact annoys me more now than ever. Her eyes stay trained on the ground, like she's preparing herself for something big. Something we won't come back from.

“Mr. Bennet, what you are doing to Reagan... among other things is disgusting as much as it is illegal.”

I roll my eyes, “I'm keeping her safe. I don't care how it looks or what your thoughts are on it. I won't stop. I won't take it back.”

She nods, sucking her teeth before lifting her eyes to mine, “And that's why I'm here. To ensure you don't rip the wings off a butterfly.”

I curl my fingers, the already prominent burn in my chest flaring at her use of my old nickname for Reagan, “I don’t need you.”

She scoffs, “I’m here for her. My duties remain the same, my salary, my access. Nothing changes but my perception of you, Mr. Bennet.”

I feel my voice drop an octave, my eyes darkening along with it. My fist grips the desk beside me as if it might help me hold on to the last strand of sanity I’m clinging to, “Leave. Now.”

She sighs, taking a step towards the door, “If you remove me, I will tell her everything. I’ll tell her how *you* wrote that note. How you planned to lie, bribe and threaten people to get guardianship of her. How *you* stripped her of her plans the second you opened your eyes enough to realize they didn’t include *you*.” She opens the door and I’m barely containing the need to crush her skull, “I will stay and take care of you, take care of her the way I have because I cannot stop you. I cannot save either of you from the crash course you’ve set yourself on. I can only hope to minimize the damage you inflict.”

I just stare at her, squeezing the desk so hard I hear it creak, the hard lip underneath biting into my fingers. The pain is a reminder I don’t really want to hurt her, that at one point she might’ve been important to me. Essential.

“I’ll tell her about Vanessa. About what you did—“

“Enough!”

She flinches only a little before nodding and turning to leave. The ringer on my phone blaring to life as she glances back over her shoulder for a moment. I pause, the phone already pulled halfway to my ear as she speaks, “Hurt people, hurt people Mr. Bennet but Reagan doesn’t deserve to pay for what they took from you.” My eyes drop away from hers as I release the

desk, my palm wet with blood as she steps into the hall, closing the door softly behind her.

“Hello.”

The sound of ruffling comes from the other end, heavy deep breathing following it. I frown, a sob filtering through the line. It sounds quieter than the breathing did, like they pulled the phone away from their face.

“Who is th-“

I don't get to finish the sentence before the sobbing turns wild, high pitched and guttural. Like something you'd hear in the darkest patches of the forest at night. It only drags on a few more seconds before the line disconnects. My brows pinch together as I stare at the unfamiliar phone number on my screen. The blood from my palm dripping onto the hardwood makes me cringe.

*I drag my nails down my arms. Trying to wipe off the blood. So much blood.*

*Why did he do that?*

*Why would he want to do that?*

A chill rolls up my spine, a growl escaping my throat as my phone rings again. I jerk it to my ear so hard it nearly hurts, smacking it against my face, “Who is this?”

A man clears his throat, “Uh um, M-Mr. Bennet, it's Stan. Sorry if this is a bad time.”

I release a breath, stalking towards the bathroom, “What is it?”

“I just wanted to congratulate you personally. You are officially the owner of the lakeside property in St. Louis. Title work came back today. The bank was eager to accept your... generous offer. The additional funds from the sale have been disbursed, as you requested.”

My mother's blue eyes stare back at me in the mirror, the corner of my mouth twitching up, "If they were eager to accept, why did it take so long for things to finalize? I paid well above the market value of the property."

"Well, off-the-record sir... there was a bit of legal red tape to sift through as I had mentioned before. The daughter of the previous owners was quite... attached. She had plans to purchase the property back, drug her feet allowing the appraisals of the assets in the property."

I grit my teeth past the burn as steaming water splashes onto the shallow gash in my hand, "I assume the bank will notify her of the sale."

"Out of courtesy Mr. Bennet. I assure you that your anonymity will be maintained."

The antibacterial soap feels like acid in the wound. I breathe deeper, leaning into the pain. Letting it ground me, remind me why these things were necessary... letting it distract me from the tinge of guilt worming its way in, "Give me two days before she's notified."

"Yes sir. I had assumed there was relation-"

"There isn't."

"Of course, sir. Congratulations on your new home. Please enjoy the rest of your day."

I end the call staring at the blood-tinged porcelain white sink, imagining every spore and bacteria that lives on its surface until the need to vomit becomes so pressing heat flushes my face, sweat beating my hairline.

*It's worth it. There's no crevasse or cavern... no depth too deep... no line I wouldn't cross for you, butterfly.*

### **Reagan**

*I'm avoiding him, and he's letting me... I can't figure out why that annoys me so much.*

Dinners are silent... uncomfortable things. My nights spent twisting and turning, waking up with teary eyes and, of course, my throat still hurts. He watches me carefully... like he's waiting for something. His hands clenching, jaw set every time I pick up my phone.

*He lets me ignore him... but he lingers.*

He's missed meetings, streams and video appointments the last two days. This I only know because of the tense growled threats he spit into the phone at Andrew as his best friend chastised him for not *having his shit together*. I hadn't realized he had so many responsibilities. I'd always just kind of assumed the owner of a company could more or less work when they wanted, delegating most everything to employees. Gilda mentioned he still develops almost every concept alone.

*It made me want to cry. Which made me mad, so I cried.*

My phone chirps, pulling my attention as I veer left straight off the map in a new RPG I was testing out. It's hard, unnecessarily hard. I've only managed to unlock two sights of grace and I've been at this for a while. Anything to make time pass a little quicker, anything to numb my brain for a little longer. My heart leaps into my throat when I see the email from Heartland Bank bolting forward off the back of the couch, "Breathe." I coach myself, readying as much as I can for whatever is inside.

Miss. Bennet,

We regret to inform you of the sale of the property at 98 North Lake County. We understand this news might not be what you had wanted as you wished to acquire the property back from the bank. Our thoughts are with you and your family. Thank you for being a loyal customer of Heartland Bank.

Our condolences, Stanley Mitchell

P.S. I have transferred the remaining balance from the sale to your checking account ending in 1482.

My mind is blank as I close the email, loading up my banking app. The cheesy Heartland Bank logo mocking me as I wait for it to load. The longer I stare at the blinking circle, the larger the lump in my throat grows.

*Fifty-eight dollars and seventy-six cents...*

That's all that's left of my home, the only thing they'd let me have. Not even sixty fucking dollars. Tears well in my eyes, the excessively sized windows and dull sleek stone walls of my brother's house closing in on me. I stare at the dial pad, pulling up my recent calls with unsteady hands. I squeeze my eyes closed so tightly colors bleed behind my lids as it rings. Clasping the locket around my neck like an anchor while I rub my thumb over the gentle grooves sculpted into the ornate golden face.

*You can still go. Just not home.*

I assure myself over and over, but I feel like I'm falling again. My head goes light as an upbeat music plays behind the monotone automated system indicating I'm waiting for an agent. I don't think as I type the extension number, still barreling at breakneck speeds towards nothing at the end of a very long, inky tunnel. There's no light at the bottom and my chest feels like that. The door to his office opens and I can feel his eyes... just as well as I can still feel his lips on mine. A single forbidden kiss will be etched into my skin for a lifetime. My chest pitches as I exhale, using the wall for support. I hadn't even realized I was pacing until my head grows too light to continue.

“Mr. Brown speaking.”

“Uh hi, it's Reagan Bennet. You handled my parents' life insurance policy.”

“Ah yes. We spoke a few weeks ago regarding your inquiry.”

I rub my palm against the rough corner of the wall, my eyes burning from so many unshed tears.

*I want to go home.*

“I-“ I start to say it. I don't know why. This isn't his problem. I didn't call to sniffle on the phone to a stranger. Cohen's footsteps hit the stairs and my pulse thuds quicker in response. I feel it the second he decides to break this distance between us, the way a rabbit feels when she's caught the eyes of a fox.

“I wanted to know what the progress is on the payout of their policy.”

There's silence on the other end. Gut wrenching *telling* silence, it doesn't last more than a few seconds, but those seconds drag on like a lifetime.

*You hold everything in your hands. I'll break here. I know it. I can't... breathe with him around. I can't breathe without him either. I'm drowning and there's no fucking way out.*

“Ma'am, we were made aware of the pending homicide investigation regarding the death of Mr. and Mrs. Bennet.”

*My parents. Call them my parents.*

“Unfortunately, the policy only covers accidental or natural death...” My breath leaves my lungs all at once, my eyes blurring on the dark green tufted rug at my feet. “... unless there is a change in the manner of death, my hands are tied.”

“P- please.” It slips out and I don't even know if I'm talking to him or not. If I'm talking to Cohen who stands at my side, watching me intently, to the room or God.

“I'm sorry-“

My tears burst free, falling on already red puffy skin, “I'm... I'm begging you. Pleas-“

My head snaps up as Cohen jerks the phone from my hand, ending the call before locking it and tossing it back onto the couch. I don't even have it in me to be angry with him as I drag my eyes to his, hating every bit of what I see there. How can eyes that look so much like her warm, kind ones be so cold? So cruel.

“Why?” I breathe out.

He works his jaw, “I won't listen to you beg some other fucking man for money.”

*I hang my head again, feeling so many things. Too many things, but shame isn't among them. I don't care. I don't care; I want to go home.*

*But my home is gone and so are they.*

“If you need something butterfly, all you have to do is say the word. You have a card for my accounts, take anything you-“

“Why did you write that note?”

He exhales sharply, running his hand through his hair, “I didn't.”

*You had to; I wouldn't do that...*

*I don't want to die.*

*I don't...*

*I...*

For the first time since waking up in the hospital, I'm not sure. For the first time... I almost believe him. That thought is heavy enough to make my knees give out from underneath me, his strong arms banding around my shoulders as he pulls me into him. I haven't showered since I got home, but he doesn't hesitate.

*Not even a little.*

But it's his fault. All of this is his fault. His fault he couldn't stay, he couldn't fight to stay with me, so he forgot. He stopped calling because he stopped caring. He stopped being my big brother, my best friend, because it was easier to say goodbye.

*It was easy for him, but it destroyed me... and her. Her last few years were filled with tears and missing him.*

I shove against his chest hard, ignoring him when he grabs for me, those hands promising purple flesh. My mind goes blank, or maybe not. Maybe it's just filled with so many things it can't focus on any of it as my hand strikes his cheek, hard. The sound is loud and in any other situation it would've been satisfying, I'm sure. His face jerks to the side as I pant in front of him, silent tears streaking down my face.

*For the life of me, I can't make sense of why exactly they're falling anymore.*

He works his jaw before those eyes find mine and my heart stills. He's beautiful... and furious. So fucking furious, but for the first time since he didn't respond to my calls, the first time since I waited by the doors of the funeral home looking for him. Holding my breath with every car that pulled in. I'm not... angry at him. We stare at each other as the emptiness works its way to my chest, stopping my tears as I lean back not looking away from him.

“Did that make you feel better, Reagan?” He spits out, straightening his back, towering over me. I just stare, nothing left to say.

*Nothing left at all, actually.*

Not of my big brother, the bond we had, nothing of my parents, my life. It's gone. In a matter of fifteen minutes, the last shred of me slipped away

like it never existed. The last thing that made us a family sold because of stupid debt I never knew they had.

“Answer me, Reagan.” He growls, stepping closer and I can smell him, hand sanitizer and earthy musk, but it doesn't make my chest any tighter this time. There's no space left for upsetting things. There's no space left for me. I move past him, wincing as his hand snaps out, gripping my elbow in a bruising hold. My eyes falling on a raw irritated patch of skin on his inner forearm. The bandage wrapped around his hand.

*He's scrubbing himself raw again.*

*.... I don't care.*

My evergreen eyes latch onto his and I hope they're as empty as this feels. He doesn't deserve my tears. He wasn't there. When I needed him, he chose not to be there. Maybe I did write that note... Seems a reasonable response to your entire life imploding.

“Stop that.” He growls again, jerking me to him, cupping my face in his hands. There are no gloves this time. No electrified feeling. Only the warmth of his skin and the roughness left by the bandage.

*I don't react.*

“Reagan, stop fucking around.”

His blue eyes flare, something that looks a lot like malice there. I decide I'm fine with it as he lets out a frustrated cry, forcing his forehead against mine, “Where did you go, baby?”

The lump is back in my throat, but it doesn't last. I'm grateful for it, I'm too tired... I don't want to cry anymore.

“Hit me again. Come on. I know you want to. Just scream at me, trash my fucking house. Call me a piece of shit.” He urges, the malice melting

down into something else as I stare. Cold air rushes my heated cheeks as he drops his hands, stepping away from me, “Don’t shut down. Please.”

I just... stare. I can see him coming apart, his manicured seams unraveling. He spins on his heel, sending his fist into the stone wall. Again and again. I watch the blood seep from his knuckles, pressing into the grooves of the stone as he loses it. I bite back a flinch as he rounds on me again, manic and still unraveling. Unraveling the way I did. He grips my chin; I grit my teeth against the pain, the brutal force of his hold, the brutal force that makes him... *him*. He breathes heavily, his blood smearing onto my face.

“Get mad.” He orders, his dark hair hanging in his face thinly veiling those ice-blue eyes, “I didn’t come to the funeral because I didn’t fucking care. I didn’t call you back because I didn’t fucking care! I let them drop into debt because I didn’t. Fucking. Care.”

He’s trying to provoke me. It almost works. God, it almost works and I try... gripping his face in my hands, the light stubble tickling my palm. I can feel the heat from his skin, the light sheen of sweat there and his eyes widen with relief, just a little. My brow furrows as nothing comes. No anger, not even pain, but I know the things he said were intended to hurt. They should’ve. Yesterday they might’ve killed me. Today... I’m not even sure I believe them. Cohen lashes out because he cares, because he can’t handle caring. He didn’t show up because he didn’t feel wanted. Because my dad shoved him out and his mom, the only family he had left, let him.

*For the first time I’m seeing the bigger picture, and I can’t bring myself to care.*

I drop my hands from his face, letting them fall limply to my side before pulling from his grasp. Cool air wrapping around my flushed skin, invading

me far beyond the surface level, “I believe you.”

His lips part as if he's going to say something else. He doesn't. And I don't either and just like that, we're strangers again. Cohen pulls back as I snatch my phone off the couch, wiping his blood off my mouth as I head up the stairs.

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## CHAPTER ELEVEN

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## All the Things You Said by t.A.T.u.

The subtle knock at my door pulls my eyes away from my phone screen, leaving a weird greenish blue blob in my vision for a few seconds.

"Reagan, I brought lunch up. I'll just leave it outside the door for you, sweetheart."

I don't respond. My stomach, on the other hand growls loudly, hunger gnawing at my insides again. I haven't eaten since breakfast yesterday, that's fine with me. Turning my attention back to flight times I pick one that leaves tonight. It's a red eye, but I don't really care. I have enough in my account for a one-way trip, maybe a cheap motel for the night. Everything else I can figure out when I get there. The sound of her footsteps tread lightly away as I let Google autofill my payment information, typing in that three-digit code on the back.

*Declined.*

Chewing my lip I enter it again, and again... and again, each time coming back as declined. My head is light, my messy bun that was piled

high on it this morning is hanging limply on the back of my neck. Defeating the purpose of having it pulled up in the first place. My hair no doubt knotted around the band. I don't fix it; I don't try to work the band free from my hair. Something that would've driven me crazy before. I'm avoiding my reflection as I call my bank, pressing the phone to my ear, holding it between my shoulder and head as I twirl my debit card between my fingers. Staring at the succulents on the card, a design dad picked out for me. He called it *understated girly*. When he asked if I liked it, I said yes. Even though it was a lie. He looked so proud of himself. Lynn cast me a knowing look, chuckling in the warm beige living room. Several minutes later that numbness is wearing off, frustration ruining the blissful nothing for me. A nothing I hated yesterday, but then it allowed sleep that has evaded me for weeks. It let me think about things with a different perspective. Cohen made his choice, my dad made his choice. Lynn let my dad make hers for her.

*I need to make mine. I am making mine. Choosing self-preservation just like they all did.*

When my hazy mind comes back to the conversation I'd only half been a part of it's not a gradual thing, but a snap. Like being flicked with a rubber band you tried to shoot across the room. Sudden, unexpected and jarring, “The account shouldn't be locked. I haven't gotten any calls from fraud detection. I haven't even used it in almost two weeks.” My eyes dip to my open wallet, my fake ID poking out from behind the real one. My happy smiling face staring back at me, my hair pulled up high in the perfect ponytail.

“I understand your frustration,” *don't they all*, “the account was locked by an account administrator, and I can't unlock it without their permission.”

“The account administrators are dead, so I doubt that. They left the account to me. That makes *me* the owner. I signed everything weeks ago.” I argue, jerking my eyes from the IDs. I didn’t even want to get a fake one. Everyone else in my friend group did so... I did too. Never even used it before I came here.

*Never wanted to.*

“Ma’am, the administrator on the account is listed as a... Mr. Cohen Bennet as of three days ago. Perhaps you should speak with him.”

*What?*

I hang up the phone, letting it fall onto my bed, my eyes lifting to the door I haven’t opened since yesterday, a soured feeling wiping away my hunger.

*Why would Cohen have administrative access to their bank account?  
Better fucking yet, why would he shut it down?*

That sick feeling grows, forcing me out of the comfort of my bedroom and into the hall. I nearly step in the cold bowl of fancy looking pasta, stumbling into the railing in order to miss it. My footsteps are light, but each one pounds louder than the next, my heartbeat whooshing in my ears. A brutal swift from the person I was this morning. The stranger I was when I went to bed last night. The doorknob to his office is almost a being itself, a taunting one that speaks to the warning flags my subconscious is waving frantically. I swing open the heavy door anyway, again surprised when I find it unlocked. The office is perfect, just as he likes. It looks more like a Pinterest board for a rich kids gaming room than an office for a multimillionaire.

His head snaps up from his desk, on another video call. The rest of the room is darkened, only the moody accent lighting, save for a ring light

behind the computer screen gives it any illumination at all.

“... the security issue was handled quickly before she did much damage but as you can imagine, Mr. Bennet, the staff was shaken-“

“What did you do?” I ask, interrupting the woman, my chest rising and falling with the force of so much after so little.

His lips twitch up, the smallest hint of a smirk before he turns back to the screen addressing whoever is on the other side, “Thanks for the update. Let the police know I want to be kept in the loop.”

“You locked me out of my account. Why?”

“Mr. Bennet, is now a bad time?” The woman asks and a tinge of something sparks in my chest. Like the wick to a candle connected to the fuse of a bomb. I try to remember the stages of grief, what I'm supposed to be feeling or even if this is a valid reaction, but I can't.

Marching over to the computer I slam myself down over his shoulder, putting my face in front of the screen, my breasts shoved against him, “Yes, it is a bad time.”

Her mouth drops open before I disconnect the call. Turning my attention back to Cohen, an infuriating glint of amusement in his eyes and... something else, something darker, “Any particular reason you just hung up on my head of security?”

“I just got off the phone with my bank.”

He raises his eyebrows, “How exciting.”

“Cut the shit, Cohen and tell me why you locked me out of my bank account.”

His eyes darken further. The blue isn't bright anymore it's obsidian, “Careful butterfly.”

“Tell me.” I insist our faces inches from each other's.

“I was worried about you. Any good big brother would be so... I took steps to ensure your wellbeing until you can do so on your own.” His words are guarded, careful, but he's pleased with himself there's no wall thick enough to hide that. The blood in my veins pumps a little slower as I back away from him. He spins the chair to face me.

*Waiting.*

“What did you do, Cohen?”

“I told you, *Reagan*. I took steps to en-“

A scream leaves my throat as I lash out, swiping a heavy piece of art off the display beside me. I don't bother watching it as it hits the ground, shattering at my feet, “Tell me what you did!”

He sighs like this is just so fucking inconvenient for him. Meanwhile, my blood sits still as stone, boiling in place, “I placed you in an emergency LPS conservatorship after you tried to off yourself. Making me your legal guardian and you... my *ward* in the eyes of the state.”

I feel like I'm going to be sick, “I'm eighteen.”

*I just wanted to leave...*

*I just want to go home.*

“Inconsequential. Until you are feeling... better, I am in control of everything.”

My hands grip my stomach like I'm holding myself together as he stands, “What's everything?”

“Your finances, legal dealings, healthcare decisions, location, who you contact... *everything* Reagan.” I step back, squeezing my stomach so hard the skin screams out in protest. My eyes never leave his as he brushes his hand on my cheek, cupping it gently, “I couldn't stand the thought of you leaving.” He whispers it like it's a secret, like he's saying something he

shouldn't. That fuse that started as the flickering wick of a candle detonates as I shove him, his eyes never faltering from the adoring look he used to wear with me. You'd think I just hung the stars in his sky, not that he just took what little I had left.

*Looking at him, you'd never know he just confessed to ruining my life.*

"That's what this is. Your creepy misogynistic ownership of me. You don't fucking care. You wrote the note! I know you did!"

He smirks, stepping back into my space, "You need me."

"My... my medical records... you faked them."

He cups my face again, pulling my forehead to his, "You broke when I left. You were so torn up you tried to take your own life. I was too. I thought it would kill me."

My breath shudders, "What's wrong with you? You changed... you aren't my Cohen anymore. He'd never do this to me. This is insane! You're fucking insane."

I jerk away from him, but he keeps grabbing me, holding me hostage in his arms. His lips sweeping along my neck, "You couldn't be more wrong, butterfly. I will always be yours and I have always been crazy about you."

A sob hit my chest so suddenly it startles me when it surfaces, "I want to go home."

"You are home."

"No!" I scream, breaking free from him. My hair whips around, slapping me in the face as I turn, jerking more off the shelves. He doesn't stop me. I've never felt... anger like this before. It's painful and it feels like my insides are burning up with it.

I make my way to the TV jerking on it several times before it crashes down from its mount, "This will never be my home!" I whirl back around to

face him, expecting something, some reaction, but he just stands there, chest rising and plummeting. He looks like a monster, a monster that wants to swallow me whole. I step closer, shoving at his chest again, “You will never be my home!”

*There. There's the rage.*

He gains on me quickly, shoving me back so fast I don't have time to regret provoking him, not until my back collides with the wall knocking shelving off to my side and the breath from my lungs, “You're wrong! I have always been your home! I was always there! You didn't go to them when you were scared, you came to me! You have no fucking idea how much those nights meant to me!”

I force my head up despite his grip on my neck tightening, warning me to stay put, “You ruined all of that! Every single thing when you left! None of it matters!”

I flinch as his scuffed fist hits the wall beside my head, “It matters! Loving you is the best thing I ever did! Don't say it didn't matter, Reagan.”

My legs feel shaky and I'm about to either vomit or faint, but that doesn't stop me. We're too far now. This needs to come out. There's nothing left. If he realizes that... I can go home, “Then why did you leave me? Why didn't you come back when I was dying alone inside that house!” The force of my sobs pushes my chest further into him and his hand tightens more, making me work for each breath.

“Because they wouldn't let me. They lied to you Reagan. They were fucking liars!” His voice is pitched so low it's a snarl. I sag as soon as his hand leaves me, my eyes widening as he jerks the locket from my neck, snapping the chain.

“Stop it!” I sob, grappling for the locket, for Lynn's locket.

“I tried calling! I tried to talk to you! Every number blocked, every fucking letter intercepted, every friend request removed by your fucking father!”

I falter for a second, my eyes trained on the necklace gripped in his fist. My heart shatters as he half turns, ignoring me as I reach out for it. *Pleading.* Knowing what he's about to do.

*Please.*

“Please, please give it back.” I whimper. “Cohen, please not that.”

He throws it hard against the ground, followed by a stomp, and my heart shatters. I swear my heart finds a way to break further. I don't move as his hands find my face. He crumples, dragging me down with him. Making me face him, face the boy I loved with every bit of my heart, the teenager I admired, the man I resented. I stare at him as he rubs salt in every wound I have, most of them inflicted by him. He looks beautiful... crazed and... beautiful, tortured... it's all there in those icy blue eyes that eat up my insides. He forces my head closer to his and I can feel his lips brush mine, “Forget about the stupid fucking necklace, Rea. They were liars and I'm glad! For fuck's sake, I'm glad they're fucking dead.”

He lets out a heavy breath like it's something he's wanted to say for a while. His thumbs wipe at the onslaught of tears streaming down my face, “Want to know why I'm glad? Because I'm fucked... for you. I'm fucked in the head, Reagan and selfish. I'm glad they're gone because it brought you back to me.”

“Don't say that.” I whisper, the shock of his words dumping water on my anger.

“It's the truth. A truth I wanted you to know so badly I couldn't sleep at night. Every time I tried to check on you and got a wall... I broke. Every

time I heard your adorable raspy voice, a part of me died because I knew I couldn't have you anymore." I shake my head, trying to pull away only for him to bury his face in my neck, holding me in place. I lean onto him because my own strength is gone, snuffed out, and wiped away like it was never even there. Everything that was *mine* is gone. My eyes stay on the broken locket on the floor. He inhales me deeply, but the breath is strained... shaky, like he's holding so much in.

*How could there be more?*

"I can touch you, Reagan. I can touch you and my skin doesn't crawl. I don't have to watch you clean yourself just for fucking contact. I'm a terrible person, I know that, but I'm not sorry. Not even a little. I don't care if you're miserable baby. Be miserable with me." He pleads, his voice cracking at the end, betraying the depths of his emotions.

My heart is pumping so hard it hurts. My head reeling, "I don't understand."

"I love you. I love you so fucking much. How can you not understand that?" He whispers into my neck, his arms trailing up mine gently, slowly, as he shifts me, keeping his head buried so I'm pulled into his lap, "It's you, it's always been you. Stay with me. Promise."

"I don't have a choice." I whimper. My eyes pitch closed tightly, a yelp leaving my throat as he bites me, his teeth sinking deep into my shoulder, his hand knotting in my hair. The other pressed around my waist, banding me to him.

My hands snap up, gripping his shirt, breathing past the pain. Not to push him away or fight him off. I clutch him back. Both of our lives depend on it. I don't move until he removes his teeth, repeating his request, "Promise you're staying."

“Why?” I cry out, wincing as my shoulder jostles.

“Because I can't lose you again. I need you; I want you so fucking bad, and I'm tired of acting like I don't.”

My breath shakes, mirroring my body, “I don't understand.”

*But I'm lying. I do understand... better than I should.*

His head snaps back, resting his forehead gently against mine, “Yes, you do. You know exactly what I want. You think I haven't noticed Reagan the way you look at me? How you clench your thighs together trying to hide it from me?”

“You're my brother.” I whimper, his lips brushing mine.

“Your stepbrother and I wasn't a very good one. Let me be better at this. Let me fix it.”

My core tightens, my nipples taunt underneath the oversized t-shirt I'm wearing. He shifts me again, forcing me to press against him, my legs on either side of his. My teeth dig into my bottom lip, trying to hide the groan that escapes me when I feel it. He's big... and hard. For *me*... I can feel it pushing through his pants, pressing into my soaked core.

My words spill out quicker than my brain can make sense of them, “You were perfect once, but it didn't last. I adored you Cohen, you were my everything. I would've given you anything. Done anything for you. Then you were gone and now look at us.” A quiet sniffle from me punctuates his silence. When his arms tighten on me, he remains quiet so I continue, “I had to come here. Part of me hoped maybe you'd be him, maybe I'd walk in and you'd grab me. You'd hold me tight and tell me you were sorry and everything would be okay, instead you pushed me away. You played with my head, made my body confused, and you took everything from me. You

were supposed to make it okay again, but you just made things so much worse.”

He pulls back, his thick dark lashes framing his eyes, “Butterfly...”

“I hate butterflies.”

He doesn't fight me as I get to my feet, being careful to step over the carnage in the room. I almost make it too, before his hand finds my wrist, “You're mine, Reagan. Fucking *mine* and you aren't going anywhere.” It's not a threat, it's a declaration. It's truth and his voice is torment personified, but that doesn't stop me. I walk to the door, throwing it open and I leave him there in the mess I made. I leave him there with every empty, painful word. My heart stays behind with him like the locket. There's nothing left to salvage. Even if there was...

*I don't think I want to.*

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## CHAPTER TWELVE

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## Cohen Age Eighteen

*The sound of forced giggling is already getting on my nerves as I head up the steep incline to the cliffs, the reddish-brown dirt tumbling down behind me with every step.*

*I don't even want to be here tonight.*

*Getting high and babysitting Andrew so he doesn't try scaling down the side of the cliff again seems more like a punishment than a fun night out with so-called friends. I'd much rather be... strangely enough, at that cramped small studio that smells like cheap candles and feet watching Rea dance. I check my phone as I hit the top of the landing, half tempted to turn around before anyone sees me.*

*She's probably been home for a while anyway.*

*They always let out lessons early when bad weather is coming. The corners of my lips pull up slightly. She's not very good at dancing, but it makes her happy. I could watch her for hours, as long as she's smiling. Another giggle filters past the rest. This one has a familiar rasp to it. It stops me in my tracks, just beyond the tree line.*

*“He's going to fucking kill us. You know that, right?”*

*My fist tightens so hard my knuckles pop in response.*

*You're right Andrew. You are so right.*

*She coughs. The smell of skunk weed assaults my nose as the sound of a bong ripping fills the muggy night air, “Well, he shouldn't have missed my practice recital. He said he'd be there last week. I looked for him everywhere, so did Lynn and he didn't come.”*

*.... fuck me. I forgot.*

*Guilt builds in my chest, merging with the anger there as I stalk further down the tree line, staying hidden behind the thick foliage. They're all too fucked to hear me, even if I wasn't trying to be quiet.*

*Casey laughs, “You could've invited us. The boys would've loved to come watch you dance Rea.” Some dudes chuckle, catching onto her innuendo and I'm seething.*

*She's fucking twelve.*

*“Next time, you all can come. I don't think I'm very good, to be honest. Dad says I'm the best dancer there, but I know he's just saying that.”*

*I see her adjust on the hood of Jake's car; him sitting just to her left. She's still in her dance uniform. Her head leaned on Andrew's shoulder. I squeeze my eyes shut tight, trying to calm myself before I walk out there.*

*“He's had his head shoved up his ass even more than normal since he started getting bids on that stupid video game of his.” Casey spits, not bothering to hide her anger. She's been giving me the silent treatment for weeks. Still pissed I'm not interested in fucking her anymore. It's almost funny how she hasn't figured out yet that I genuinely couldn't care less. Giving me her silence is far more gift than curse.*

*I go to step out of the woods, my fists balled, my eyes zeroed in on the exact place I plan to punch Jake as his hand rests on her knee.*

*“His game isn't stupid. He's been working hard and it's awesome.” Rea retorts, crossing her arms tightly to her chest. Andrew's eyes flick to her lap before narrowing on Jake, who promptly removes his hand. He clears his throat, taking a long drink of the same disgusting fountain soda cup he always carries at his side. Casey just snorts, and the look Rea gives her almost warms my chest enough to quell the fire burning there.*

*Almost.*

*The first one to notice me is Andrew, his eyes widen as he rubs the back of his neck, “Ah fuck. Incoming.”*

*Rea's head snaps up, looking around everywhere except where I am. When she finds me, she frowns, holding her hand out for the bong again. Casey giggles, handing it over her bright pink tipped nails fawning blindly for a lighter on the hood. It's darker up here than normal. Which makes the steep ledge mere inches from where they're sitting even more dangerous. If anyone slips forward off the car, it's death. Always been something of a morbid tradition to pull the cars up right to the edge of the drop, despite the fact that it's killed two teens already. Well before our time at the cliffs.*

*Jake clears his throat again, slipping off the side of the hood, trying to be as casual as possible. I don't speak to any of them as my hand hooks around the back collar of his shirt, jerking him to the ground, his head half hanging off the ledge. Everyone yells as I right myself bringing my boot down hard in the middle of his stomach the satisfying sound of his ribs cracking almost distracts me from the fact that the back of his shirt was damp with sweat and that I've touched it, “Don't touch her again.”*

*My stomach churns as I whirl around Casey smirking as she lifts the lighter to the forgotten bong in Reagan's hand. Reagan stares at the ground, her round green eyes locked onto Jake in shock.*

*Stop staring at him.*

*A growl leaves my throat as I point at Casey, “If you fucking light that, I won't hesitate to drag you off the hood of that car and do the same to you.”*

*“You can't kick girls.”*

*The crowd from behind the car gathers around. One of them chiming in, “She'd probably like it.”*

*Casey shrugs, her eyes falling on the lighter.*

*“Why would anyone like that?” Rea asks. Her voice is shakier than it should be. She ignores Casey's outstretched hand, sitting the bong down to crawl off the hood. My heart jumps in my chest as she stumbles a bit. Andrew's hand snapping out to grip her upper arm, steadyng her the rest of the way down.*

*One of the guys helping Jake up laughs, “She's a kinky-“*

*I kick out, my boot connecting with his knee, “Shut up.”*

*He curses under his breath as his leg buckles painfully, “This is what happens when you hang out with the weird kids.”*

*My eyes find Reagan's as she shifts, chewing her bottom lip. I can tell his words hurt her. Of course they would. That fact alone makes my thoughts turn from simple uncomplicated murder to crimes against humanity. I step forward pointing at Andrew, my free hand banding around her wrist and jerking her towards me, “What the fuck were you thinking bringing her up here? Getting her high? Have you lost your mind?”*

*He shrugs, “She was coming anyway man. Figured she'd at least be safe with me.”*

*I glare down at her at my side, her eyes glued to the dirt floor. I can see the color dusting her cheeks even in the dark. Thunder rumbles through the sky as the sprinkles pick up their pace, the drops getting bigger and falling quicker. I pull her behind me back down the incline to my car as Andrew falls in step with us.*

*“You know he’s not going to let that slide, right? Jake’s dad is a cop man, just as vindictive and spineless as his son.”*

*“I don’t give a fuck, Andrew. If you hadn’t brought her up here, this wouldn’t be a problem.”*

*I jerk a little as Reagan stops, digging her heels into the dirt, her rain damp wrist sliding free from my grip, “Don’t be mad at Andrew! He asked me not to come!”*

*“He should’ve told your immature fucking ass no!” I yell back at her, my heart lurching as she flinches.*

*Reagan...*

*Her eyes are red. I can’t tell if it’s the pot or tears. I grip her hand tighter this time, glaring at Andrew, not saying half of what I want to because I can’t be mad at him for being a fucking idiot pushover, apparently.*

*“How much did she smoke?”*

*“Not much, man. She hit it twice. Weak shit.”*

*I just nod. He knows this isn’t over, but he doesn’t push it, casting Reagan a sympathetic look before heading back up the incline. Probably to convince Jake not to tell his dad. I couldn’t care less. Let him tell him, it won’t change anything and the next time I see him alone.*

*I plan to do way worse.*

*Reagan doesn’t speak the entire ride home, and it’s probably a good thing. I’ve never yelled at her before. Not really sure how to deal with*

*feeling like a piece of garbage about it, so I'd probably just yell more. I kill the engine of the car, opening my mouth to say something when she practically bolts, running inside like I'm the fucking bad guy. My head hits the seat with a thud as I drag a deep breath through my lungs, gripping the steering wheel. I've never apologized to a girl before, never wanted to. I'm not going to do it right. The ache in my chest demands I at least try, even if it only makes things worse. I'm still pissed... but I made her cry. And I fucking hate that.*

*I just made a million-dollar deal at eighteen and I feel like a piece of shit because I made my stepsister cry.*

*Fucking lovely.*



*She's in the kitchen stuffing her face with ice cream when I get out of the shower. She doesn't look up from the tub when I enter, leaning up against the wall trying to find the right words to say. The only sign she knows I'm here is how she abruptly stands. Her washed hair still wet and braided down her back. She doesn't look at me when she shoves the ice cream back in the fridge. I swallow back an annoyed sound when I see it's my favorite rocky road, and she purposefully didn't use a bowl.*

*I've never seen her spiteful before. It's adorable. Would be even more adorable if it wasn't directed at me.*

*She ignores me as I follow silently behind her. Only looking at me as she plops down on the couch, finally letting me get a good look at her red,*

*angry evergreen eyes. I sigh, sitting down next to her, opening my mouth before she speaks.*

*“What did they mean by she’d like it if you hurt her?”*

*I swallow hard, my pulse picking up a little.*

*God no.*

*“It’s an adult thing.”*

*She makes an indignant noise, “Explain it to me then. I don’t understand why anyone would want to be hurt.” I stare at her lap, willing the universe to stop this, my heart stilling a little when she rubs at the long scar that trails her arm. It bothers her a lot, she rarely touches it since it hurts most of the time.*

*A Keloid scar. Something about the tissue underneath that makes it look so raised and angry.*

*I frown, “Why do you want to know so bad? You never care about grown up shit.”*

*She looks down, pulling her knees up to her chest her butterfly pajama pants matching the blue butterfly t shirt she likes to sleep in, “Because it’s usually really boring but this...” her eyes dart to the scar and something starts the churning in my stomach again. “This I want to understand.”*

*I take a deep breath, “Sometimes when adults are... intimate, they do things like that.”*

*She makes a disgusted face, and I have to bite back a laugh, “That sounds horrible.”*

*“Yeah.”*

*Good answer, kid.*

*“Adults are weird. I... maybe I’m weird. I didn’t like it. I don’t think I was meant to.”*

*I stop breathing. It feels like a bucket of ice water has been thrown on me as I stare at her, waiting for her to continue. Hoping she doesn't.*

*“Who did that?”*

*I don't want to know. I don't think I could handle knowing.*

*She looks up at me and shrugs, tears in her eyes again and I fucking hate it. I've never hated anything more, “I don't really want to talk about it.”*

*I nod. My chest hurts and before I know it, I'm pulling her into my arms. Wishing I could take the weight of every one of her tears. Her cries in the middle of the night hold a far worse meaning than I had ever attributed to them. I hold her for so long my arm tingles where it rests underneath her. She's quiet for so long I think she's fallen asleep when she speaks again, “Do you like Casey more than me?”*

*I scoff, “I don't like Casey at all.”*

*“She's really pretty... and cool. A lot cooler and prettier than me.”*

*I put a finger underneath her chin, tilting her head back, so she has to look at me. Biting my inner cheek to hide my smile, a smile she never fails to force out of me even when it's the last thing I feel capable of giving, “Nobody is prettier or cooler than you.”*

*She rolls her eyes.*

*“And you will always be my absolute favorite girl.”*

*She purses her lips, “You haven't apologized yet.”*

*“I am sorry Regan. I shouldn't have yelled at you.”*

*She bolts up, almost knocking her head into my chin, “Screw yelling at me. You missed my practice recital!”*

*“I'm sorry for that, too.”*

*We just sit there for a moment, her judging my sincerity and me being more sincere than I am with anyone else, because she deserves it. All the*

*honest and good things the world can offer her.*

*I am sorry.*

*Really sorry.*

*“Yeah, well you owe me dinner at IHOP and don't let it happen again.”*

*I chuckle, watching her try to hide hers. Her lips pulled into her mouth. I hold my hand out to her, so she can shake on it, her eyes widening slightly before she looks down, “I can go wash my hands.”*

*Rolling my eyes, I grab her hand, putting it in my palm and mimicking a shake, “IHOP and better behavior.”*

*You're the only thing in this world it doesn't bother me to touch, at least to the point I can't deal. I want to tell you that. I want you to know how wonderful and special, and weird you are, but I know you'd probably just make fun of me for saying it.*

*She leans back into me, her head resting on my chest as I flick on the TV. Lightning and thunder rattle the double-paned windows, the newscaster on screen spewing something about staying weather aware. She's asleep before the first commercial.*



*I'm almost out of Reagan's room, having tucked her into her bed and stayed there for a moment, making sure the thunder wouldn't wake her up. No sooner than the door shuts, the latch clicking into place I'm met by Raymond's glare.*

*“She passed out on the couch.”*

*He only nods, not speaking to me as he often doesn't. I just shake my head, going to walk past him to my room. My fists tightening as his hand juts out inches from my chest. Stopping me.*

*"Heard you got the deal you wanted. That's a lot of money for an eighteen-year-old."*

*"Your point?"*

*He shrugs, something that reminds me so much of her. Only he's a fuck. She's not a fuck like him, "You're a man now, Cohen. Maybe it's time to move on. Stop hanging around your twelve-year-old stepsister and make some real friends. Get a house, you can buy a mansion if you want, get out of St. Louis. Get... a life."*

*I grit my teeth as my eyes move past him, my mom standing there with her umbrella still wet, dripping onto the hardwood. I wait for a moment, just a barely discernible slower step. A few nanoseconds... thinking she'll say something to him. She doesn't. I shove past them both, ignoring her pitiful call for me to come back as I pound down the stairs towards the front door.*

*Fuck both of you.*



## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)



### The Ghost of You by My Chemical Romance

**R**eagan

The cold is bitter and unrelenting, the metal of the roof of his house slowly becoming an icy slip and slide. I have to keep adjusting myself on it to avoid going on a thrilling trip that isn't quite high enough to kill me but definitely high enough to fuck me up a bit. My back arches up as I try to adjust. The icy rain pattering onto my face, the ache from the grooves in the roof making my spine throb even though I haven't been out here for longer than fifteen minutes.

I don't know why I'm out here. I just... I didn't know *where* else to go. Only that I needed to be somewhere away from him, away from it all. As if distance could cure everything. I tug the blanket higher on my shoulders as the sound of heavy footsteps hitting the metal ladder fills the space between the tink of raindrops against the roof.

"How do you feel?" He asks, the shadow of his form obscuring my previously unobstructed view of the gray sky, biting back a gasp as he lifts me up onto my feet. The place where he bit me is still throbbing beneath the

pull of my clothes. A reminder of something I haven't quite worked out yet. His words in his office, the desperate, needy edge in his graveled voice carved into my soul just as effectively as his teeth did in my flesh.

"I'm... not sure."

"Sitting in the freezing rain won't help. Come inside."

"No."

After sitting out here for a bit, I can't imagine many things could be colder than the rain feels against my exposed skin. His eyes are though, but even then.... The way he's standing, the way he's looking at me, makes my stomach knot in ways I don't dare lend credence to.

"Get in the house, Reagan."

I scoff, "Right, I forgot I no longer have the legal right to make decisions for myself."

"Not when your decisions are stupid, no."

My fingertips are red. I barely feel it when I dig them into my flesh, "All so you can keep me safe from myself. Isn't that right... *big brother*?"

*"I'm fucked for you. I'm fucked in the head, Reagan and selfish I'm glad they're gone because it brought you back to me."*

His words send another shiver down my spine, the throbbing reminder of his teeth in my flesh only adding to my body's unhealthy reaction to him.

*He doesn't react, so I continue pushing, always pushing.*

*Pushing.*

*Pushing.*

*Pushing.*

*Until one of us snaps and I end up in tears.*

"You just want what's best for me. You know better than I do what that is, naturally. It pains you to treat me this way, but I just won't listen." I feign a

sweet innocent voice, batting my eyes at him for good measure, “I won’t just sit down and be your good girl, accept your weird compulsion to control everything I do.”

“Get. Inside.”

“It’s just a bonus that I make your cock hard.”

“Reagan!” He snaps, grabbing a bundle of blanket steadyng me as he pulls me back into his orbit. Suffocating me until I forgot how badly I wanted air, “Watch your mouth.”

I look up at him from underneath my lashes, fluttering them at him the way I used to when I wanted something, but I’m not a kid anymore.

*And I have no clue what I want from him.*

“What big brother? Don’t like it when your little sis talks about your big cock?”

His pupils swallow his irises until they are thin slivers of blue around black voids. I gasp as he spins me, righting me when my feet loose purchase and shoving me towards the latter, “Inside. Now.”

I shed the blanket, leaving my frigid skin exposed to the stiff wind and rain. Only the silk camisole and shorts I wore earlier offering protection. I might as well be naked. My hair is greasy and my stomach painfully empty... I’m irritated... I think, confused and hurt for sure, but still I *obey*. Working my way slowly down the latter despite how hard my body is shaking now. I can’t feel the metal in my hands as I lower myself slowly, step by step. Part of me wondering if any relief could be found in the fall. The look on his face in the hospital cuts that line of thinking off short. He holds his breath until I’m safely on the ground and I don’t dare wait for him, climbing the slick stairs to the back wrap around balcony and heading inside.

I had a head start, a good one, but it doesn't matter. By the time I clear the doorway, my body is breaking out in increasingly violent tremors and he's behind me. Then in front of me, cutting me off abruptly. He takes a step forward and I can smell him, thanking the universe I'm too fucking cold to care. I take a step back, and he doesn't like that.

*Of course, he doesn't.*

*Cohen never likes anything that doesn't add to whatever his goal is at the moment.*

Right now, I think that might be me in a way it had never been before. There is a tantalizing violence in his touch, the fire in his eyes terrifies me... all while my skin longs for the flames.

*Cohen likes me... too much.*

I don't fight him. My body is shaking so hard my muscles ache and pinch as he jerks me into him, lifting me and forcing my legs around his waist. He's hard again, and it's pressing against my oversensitive core. My mind rages war on my heart, but my body doesn't care. He's so warm, he's always been so warm.

*So safe.*

His breath hitches in his throat as I lean into him, nestling closer to his warmth, my teeth chattering loudly in my own head. I wonder if it's as loud to him as it is to me. He hooks his chin on my tender shoulder, digging it into the damaged skin a little.

*Reminding me that... I'm his.*

He marked me as such. I didn't realize it then, but the higher he climbs on the stairs, the more he presses into the angry flesh, "You can keep doing these things, butterfly. Things that only prove my point... you need to be cared for by *me*. You need *me* Rea, you're lucky you aren't hypothermic."

*There's that name again.... Butterfly.*

It used to give me... for lack of a better term, butterflies? Now... like everything else, it's confusing. My core brushes his hardened length with each step, making the dull ache there grow sharper. I explore him, my lips brushing his jaw. I explore the feeling of *him*, just for a moment. A forbidden moment because there's no one left to disappoint, nothing left but this gnawing feeling deep inside of me. An itch only he can scratch. A quiet moan slips loose from my lips as he adjusts me, hiking me higher on him, tighter against the evidence of our shared mania. My taunt nipples brushing against the fabric of his hoodie, my silk shirt doing nothing to dampen the sensation.

His body goes rigid against mine, burying his nose in my knotted hair. I haven't showered in a few days; I probably don't smell great. He doesn't seem to mind; *he doesn't mind*. I don't think harder about the significance of that. What it might mean to him. All too soon I'm placed on my feet, ending my exploration as he steps away. Leaving me again without the warmth his body offered me. I watch as he removes his hoodie in one fluid motion, pulling up his shirt again as he does. Giving me a glimpse of perfectly toned abs I had never paid attention to before. His muscles flex underneath pale skin, his dark hair falling into his eyes as he starts the bath. He's still bent over the tall side of the tub when I step forward, banding my arms around him as best I can. Soaking in the warmth of him again while I'm still cold enough not to care about anything aside from that warmth. Not even the fights, the things he's done stop me from holding him.

*The things I'm sure he'll continue to do to me. All because he can, because there's nobody left but him to advocate for me. Not even me.*

“You hate baths. They’re gross pools of self-made bacteria.” I mumble into his back. It takes him a second to continue the task I interrupted.

“We need to get you warmed up.”

“I have a bathtub in my room too, you know.”

He exhales sharply, “Your room is a biohazard.” I groan in protest, my arms still shaking as he peels them off himself, turning to face me, “Undress.”

“Leave.”

“No.”

“Cohen...”

His thick brow cocks, and suddenly my tongue is heavier in my mouth than it was before, “Now, now *little sis*, where is all that talk from the roof? You want to act like a fowl mouthed brat? Fine, but don’t suddenly grow some fucking manners when you get treated like one. Undress.”

Somehow, despite the near deafening chatter of my teeth, a whimper breaks free when his hands fist my silk top. The delicate fabric jerking painfully against my skin as he tears it apart, bearing me to him. The sound of ripping silk is harsh, my hands immediately flying up to cover myself. Pointlessly trying to readjust the torn garment over my breasts.

“Cohen! What the fuck?” I hiss.

He smirks, his eyes dipping to my hardened nipples as he jerks the top the rest of the way off. His other hand gathering my hair at the nape of my neck, steering my head towards the black full-length mirror in the corner. Steam already creeping towards the center, I clench my thighs, my eyes finding his in the reflection. His chest rising and falling almost as hard as mine. He’s coming in closer and my skin prickles in anticipation, tilting my head up and exposing my neck, I’m already bracing for his teeth, “Look at

you... Bare and shivering, my marks on that perfect soft skin of yours. I've wanted to ruin it since you stepped out of that car, looking oh so sad and lost."

"Stop please."

"But why? I haven't seen all of you yet. Take them off."

I shake my head, keeping my thighs clenched as he latches onto the flesh of my breast, "Stop!" I cry out. My voice sounds wrong, heavy, even to myself. He only bites down harder and God, it hurts.

*It hurts so bad.*

*So why am I so wet?*

*It hurts even worse when he releases me, his tongue swiping feather light over the mark.*

*He just licked me.*

*Cohen... the boy I grew up following around everywhere he went. The boy that called me his little sister that always treated me as such.*

My lips part as I watch him, waiting for the impending panic, for the loss of control. Our eyes don't falter from each other's in the mirror. We're both waiting for it, but still it doesn't come. He doesn't look away from me muttering something that sounds a lot like *brat* underneath his breath as he hooks his thumbs in my shorts, jerking them down along with my underwear.

I cry out, catching them halfway. Struggling against him to keep them up, "Not these, please."

*No one has ever seen me there, not like this.*

A growl leaves his mouth as he steps back, ordering me into the tub. It's nearly overflowing now; he doesn't stop it. The water is so warm it's nearly painful on my chilled skin as I slip in, reaching to stop the water only for

him to slap my hand away, thrusting a bottle of soap into it instead. I stare up at him as he leans down, shutting off the water himself. He doesn't speak, and I'm acutely aware of how exposed I am. My white underwear nearly see-through underneath the water.

"This is your soap." I breathe out.

"And?"

"I- I want mine."

"No, use mine."

Shaking my head, I feign indifference as best I can while emptying a generous amount of soap into my palm, lifting my goosebump adorned leg from the water onto the thin side of the tub. I gently work the soap into my foot, making my way up and doing my best to ignore my reflection.

*It doesn't last long.*

Light purple bruises dot my chin from where he squeezed it the other day. His bite mark on my breast is yet to look like anything other than angry raised flesh. The one on my shoulder is far more severe, dried blood still pebbled in the indents. I couldn't bring myself to look at it before, much less clean it.

*Now I don't want to look away.*

My skin warms as I watch Cohen. His lips thinned the way they do when he's focused on something as he globs copious amounts of shampoo into my hair. He cringes, his lips pulling up a little as he works through the tangles as gently as possible. Seems weird to take such care into not pulling my hair when he regularly uses it to steer and wield me to wherever his heart desires. He practically recoils as some strands stick to his hands.

"I'm eighteen years old, perfectly capable of cleaning myself.... just go."

He glares at me, his eyes dipping to my breasts in the mirror. My cheeks heat and I can't tell whose is redder.

*Now you're shy?*

We fall into comfortable silence; him washing my hair several times and me working on my body, for the first time since I arrived obeying every personal hygiene rule, no matter how ridiculous. As uncomfortable and... odd this is, the significance isn't lost on me. What it means for him to touch me like this, to clean me. I chew my bottom lip, averting my eyes to the ceiling as if it's the most interesting thing in the world. My fingers tremble slightly as I snake my hand between my legs, slipping underneath my underwear. Gently washing the sensitive flesh there, my cheeks burning. My finger slips between my folds, hitting the bundle of nerves there and my hips jerk in response.

*I repeat the motion, so many times.*

*I'm clean, I know that.*

*I should stop.*

I make another pass, telling myself I'm just being thorough, but my finger prods my opening. My breasts heaving as the warm water laps at my skin. He's watching me now. His eyes are like lightning on my flesh. It should make me shudder. *I should* want to turn away and hide myself from him, but it emboldens me instead. My breath hitches in my throat as I spread my legs further, my underwear feeling far too constricting. Slipping my finger just a little way into my opening, I pull it back out when it doesn't feel as good as rubbing. It never does. Trailing my fingers back to the bundle of nerves, a moan fills the bathroom. It's loud and breathy. He's not washing my hair anymore, his sudsy hands hanging limp over my shoulders. I nearly stop when I glimpse myself in the mirror... I don't look like... me. Not a

version of me I've ever seen before. I look like a... woman. My cheeks are pink, the flush working down my neck. My green eyes are bright and half lidded as I make another pass. It feels good.

*Too good.*

My auburn-colored hair is wet, draped over my shoulders, flowing around me in the water. And he's watching me so intently it hurts, but I don't stop. I don't want to. It's not like I haven't done this before, but never in front of anyone. Much less in front of Cohen. That alone should end it right now. I swirl my finger around my clit instead, my head falling back into him. His chest is heaving like he's in some form of respiratory distress, and I can feel his heartbeat pounding. My lips fall open and it's not enough. My hips are rocking against my hand without my permission. I want to be filled but my hand isn't enough. I want more. To be stretched so badly it hurts. That thought always scared me, someone making it hurt when I was with them. I even looked up videos, trying to understand. I only walked away from it more traumatized than I was before... until Cohen. I had never... imagined pain and pleasure could go hand in hand. I didn't understand when he bit me and my core pulsed.

His hands leave my shoulders, slipping into the water over my chest, I push up wanting his touch. Needing his hands there. Needing them everywhere. I think I hate him, but right now, it doesn't matter. Nothing matters apart from this. His fingers brush my nipples gently. I can't hold back my breathy plea for more. He doesn't hesitate; he gives me exactly what I asked for, like he always has.

*More. I want more.*

I rock into my hand, feeling myself tighten blissfully knowing the build and what will follow until he speaks, "Remove your hands."

“What?” I breathe, rubbing harder.

“Take. Your. Hands... off your pretty little cunt baby.”

I shake my head, chasing the climax I need. Knowing what disobeying him will mean... a part of me wanting his anger. When his hands leave my breasts, stopping their expert musings on my sensitive flesh to capture my wrists, I groan biting back the impulse to beg him. My hips haven't stopped rocking into nothing now. I clench my thighs together, working for release. For friction I can't find as he pulls my arms up to his neck, hooking them there.

I comply. I obey him because I suddenly want to be *good* for him right now. I want to show him I'm not a child. That I can listen. The sudden shift would alarm me if my brain wasn't diluted by a haze of need. My nails score the back of his neck, and his answering groan only makes me dig them in harder as his hands land on my breasts again.

“No lower.”

His lips are on my cheek, “Trust me.”

I shake my head, “I don't want to trust you. I want you to make me come. Please.”

“Fuck, Reagan.” He groans, swallowing hard, “Don't worry, I'll make you come. Just not the way you want. You can't walk around here throwing fits and acting like a fucking brat, then expect me to just give you your way in every little thing.”

A desperate, frustrated sound leaves me and I decide I definitely hate him, I hate him so fucking much it burns my chest but he's rolling my nipples between his fingers again. The pressure between my legs feels like too much. It's too intense. I both want it to stop and never end.

“I can't,” I moan, “You can't make me come like that, please. It hurts. You said all I had to do was tell you. I'm telling you.”

“Watch me.”

My eyes snap open, finding his smirk in the mirror my back arches pushing my breasts harder into his eager palms, tears budding in my eyes. It's not enough and too much. In the reflection of the smokey mirror I can barely see his erection pressed against his sweatpants, the steam from the bath leaving him with at least a semblance of deniability.

*Me?*

*I couldn't be more exposed.*

“See baby, I knew you could listen.”

Liquid fire floods my belly, lowering deep into my core. Something between a moan and his name leaves my lips as he pinches my nipples, hard. Setting my orgasm off without warning. It takes me several minutes to come down from the high, but when I do the water is no longer warm. It's tepid and we've just done something we can never come back from. My chest is still heaving, my sex still achy and pulsing as a lump lodges in my throat, guilt and shame pushing me up from the water.

“Reagan...”

“No.” I gasp, ignoring the mess of water that sloshes over the rim of the tub as I scramble out, my sudden sense of urgency making my stomach churn. My core is still tight and wanting more, so fucking much more, but now? All I can see is them, their disgusted, shocked faces that were usually etched in kindness. How disappointed they would be with me, with us both. I slip, crashing down hard on the floor as I make it to the hall, thrashing against the strong arms that band tightly around me as I'm hauled upwards into a hard chest. His hands, those hands...

My chest is tight and no matter how hard I pull air from my lungs, enough never comes. He drags me back into his bedroom, tossing my soaked body onto his bed. Heat flushes me and I feel like I'm going to be sick as he jerks me towards the headboard.

*Please.*

*Stop.*

But his touch is different now, unfamiliar but somehow the same as it's always been. A strangled sound leaves me as he pulls me into his chest. He keeps me held there as he crawls onto the bed, laying up against the headboard, holding me.

*Just holding me.*

My tears burst free; I forgot how badly I wanted to be held. How badly I wanted to experience something that felt *familiar*. Like home. Despite everything, the distance, the betrayal and hate ...his arms still feel like that.

*Like home.*

“I got you.” He promises, kissing the top of my head.

*I cry even harder.*



## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

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When my eyes open to a new day it isn't the graceful fluttering open type of waking, it's the one where your heart jolts you into sudden consciousness making your neck ache as you jerk upright. Your tongue feels heavy in your mouth and dryer than dry, despite the tidbit of crusty drool on the corner of your lips.

*So in short, entirely unsexy.*

*Entirely.*

It takes my mind a few drawn-out moments to catch up to what time period I'm in, or to the fact that I am most certainly not in my own cluttered bedroom. The morning light is no more than slivers of rays fighting for dominance behind thick, blackout curtains. I exhale sharply, letting myself fall back onto Cohen's bed as all the tiny tawdry details of yesterday come filtering back through, setting off every hairpin nerve and a heady mixture of shame, need and confusion. The air in the room still smells like him, like a freshly showered version. For a moment, I almost bolt from the bed, hiding away again in my room until I'm pissed off enough to come out.

*But what's the point?*

Continuing this ridiculous cycle of confusing bullshit indefinitely seems like a poor choice, albeit not the *worst* choice. I know enough about myself, about him, that a pattern like that won't sustain. Cohen has made it abundantly clear he has no plans to be ignored or shut out by me. I know better now than ever why you shouldn't provoke him and still the space between my thighs dampens at the thought of doing just that. My fingers brush the soft skin of my bare chest, ignoring the way my skin pulls around his marks on my breasts and neck. A bone deep compulsion to prod at the mark takes a backseat when my hand drifts higher, searching for something that isn't there.

*My locket... her locket.*

I'm floating through space with a volatile, unpredictable tether. This is dangerous uncharted territory, and there's a spark, something burning in my chest that... likes it, I think. Feeding off the uncertainty, the chaos of it all. They say you shouldn't bite the hand that feeds you, especially when that hand has stripped you of several human rights. Rights and freedoms you'd always taken for granted. You shouldn't bite the hand that feeds you... but my mouth is watering and all I want is him between my teeth.



I never thought it was possible to feel such varying emotions all at once without your chest and brain self-destructing. There's the basics, the ones I had prepared myself for in the weeks before I made the journey to the house that would become my gray scale cage. Grief, guilt, soul shattering sadness

and anger. Instead of dealing with those in a healthy, reasonable way, I'm leaning into the new emotions, the ones I wouldn't have dared to predict even in my wildest dreams. Shame is among the highest on the list as I make my way down the stairs properly dressed and showered for the first time in days. I make the mistake of catching my reflection in the ridiculously large floor to ceiling mirror, surprised to see the same girl from yesterday. The one whose green eyes were both hollow and fire lit with desire in the bathroom, the one that bucked, moaned and whimpered underneath the skillful musings of someone that should never touch her like that. The girl is dressed like the old me, a light pink cropped long-sleeved shirt and high-waisted throwback nineties jeans adorned with bleached flowers. Her auburn hair falling in damp waves around her shoulders. It's like watching a memorialized version of myself. The piano backed montage of videos they'd play at my funeral. The sweet soft girl vibe I once assigned to myself is a vulgar misrepresentation of the damaged, vile thing that lives underneath the shiny exterior. A sickness he infected me with, one far more damaging than any germ.

I don't look at him when the weight of his eyes settles on me. My brightening cheeks are the only thing to give me away. Ignoring his presence in the formerly unused living room, I veer towards the kitchen; the light sounds of Gilda prattling about inside acting like a haven from him in his own home. It's a low blow, but I am more than prepared to use the kind older woman as a human shield, if I must. I nearly scoff at myself when strong fingers dig into my elbow, stopping my poorly masked attempt at fleeing a situation I have no clue how to navigate.

“We're going out.”

I turn towards him, those blue eyes just as they would be on any other given day, no trace of even a tidbit of the swirling emotions battering my chest.

*Of course not.*

“You never leave the house.” I retort, trying to pull my elbow free. He only digs his fingers in deeper, his eyes darkening on the bite mark I've left on display for him. If you want to act like you didn't just implode what was left of my life, fine. If you want to pretend you didn't alter our relationship beyond any pipedream of normalcy, fine.

*But I won't be making it easy on you.*

My skin heats as he steps closer, invading my space and more significantly letting me invade his, “Get your shoes on.”

“I'd rather stay in.”

“That's lovely Reagan, now get your shoes on or I'll dress your insolent ass myself and drag us both off the property.”

*Fuck the way my heart shudders in my chest, the promise of violence in his eyes doing everything but frightening me.*

“If you're so scared to leave, why do it at all? You have enough money, pay someone to go out for you.”

He drags a deep breath through his lungs. His patience always seems to walk on a wire thin edge, “We need... groceries and I have some errands to run.”

I hike my eyebrow at him, “You're a shut in Cohen.”

“And you're testing my fucking patience.”

Part of me wants to push just a little further, argue just a little more, but I don't. The larger part of me is curious what's so important he's willing to leave the house with me in tow.

*I highly doubt it has anything to do with groceries.*



### Loser by Sueco

His gloved hands tighten against the handle, icy blue eyes focused ahead. If I could see his lips behind the black structured mask he's wearing, I have no doubt they would be pulled into a taunt line. Watching Cohen walk through a grocery store is like watching the abominable snowman apply for a membership at a ski resort. We've been at this for nearly twenty minutes now, and he's still yet to find half of what's on the list Gilda provided me on our way out of the door. A half amused and half foreboding look in her eyes.

A groan slips past my lips as I walk ahead of him, the cart nipping dangerously at my heels. I ignore it... and him. Mostly. Making a sudden beeline for a wine display in the back.

“Reagan.”

“Reagan.” I mock under my breath, smirking at myself at the accuracy of my moody, broody tone.

He stops for a second, tossing something else from the list haphazardly into the cart as I bend over, looking at the seemingly endless options of wines and spirits, as if things like dry, sweet, Moscato or Chianti mean anything to me. He silently wards behind me, and I know him not immediately gripping my arm and steering me away is his best attempt at a peace offering.

*Fuck you and your peace offering. I'm choosing violence.*

I find the prettiest, most expensive bottle, pulling it carefully from the rack.

“No.”

I look back at him over my shoulder, then down at the ornately designed bottle of red wine in my hands, held with all the care one would hold a newborn baby. A slithering, deceptive and utterly dangerous thrill runs the length of my spine as I turn on my heel, plopping it down in the cart anyway. The flash in his eyes forces a chill from me. Everything in my body saying turning my back to any creature that looks homicidal is a poorly formed plan, but I force myself to face the wine. Two more expensive bottles later and Cohen is vibrating. His patience is as threadbare as the uniforms I'm used to seeing at the place Lynn and dad used to shop at. A far cry from the expertly pressed, all black uniforms of the staff here. Not a bottle on the rack that costs less than fifty dollars. I'm still engrossed in wines that I don't really want when a strong, warm hand clasps around my mouth, jerking my head upwards as the weight of my mistake presses into my back. He's hard and pissed. My core flutters at the thought. Our cart is long forgotten, abandoned there by the rack as he less than gently shoves me through two flapping double doors labeled employees only. The large room is a solid ten degrees colder than the store. The chill in any normal situation would've been uncomfortable, but my skin is on fire. My chest heaving as his fingers dig into my hip, keeping me secure.

*Under his control.*

*For a moment, despite the irritation budding in my chest, there's nowhere else I'd rather be.*

I wince as tiny strands of my hair pull free from my scalp, getting tangled in the scarf he jerks from my neck. His hands skillfully looping it around both my wrists before securing it to an overflowing metal stock shelf, a tinge of apprehension filling me, “Cohen...”

“Shut up.” He growls, “I was trying to be fucking nice.”

My lips part but nothing comes out, not a single thing as his fingers hook in the waistband of my jeans, not bothering to unbutton or zip as he forces them down over my hips, baring my ass.

“Stop, we can’t,” I jerk up, cursing as I’m caught by the tie on my wrists, keeping me bent low. His hand braces on the center of my back forcing me down even lower, my inner thighs burning as the muscles strain. I try and fail to stifle the gasp that leaves my parted lips as he kicks my feet, forcing me to spread them further apart than my pants will allow me to, “Cohen, someone will-“

The sound of his palm connecting with my bared flesh rings off the concrete walls. I can’t tell if it’s the sound or the sharp burn that stops my words in my throat, his lips finding my cheek, “Keep talking and I’ll shove my cock down your throat in the middle of the store. Let everyone see what a cock hungry little brat you are.”

My stomach warms, a tingle growing between my thighs despite the burning on my ass and the chill of the warehouse room. A tingle that’s abruptly cut off by another brutal slap. I cry out, leaning forward in a feeble attempt to get away from him as he fists the tender flesh in his hand, smoothing and kneading the burn away. That tingle builds again, wetness leaking into my underwear, my cheeks heating when I think of his view of me when he sees how wet he’s making me. Another slap rings out and this time I don’t move away. I push into it, whimpering.

*Slap!*

*Slap!*

*Slap!*

I moan loudly, bucking against nothing, for more and less as the last brutal hit lands on my soaked core, the thin strap of my underwear no doubt betraying the wetness there. His lips are soft in stark contrast to the sharp lethality of his words, “Make another sound like that where someone can hear you and I'll stop making it feel good, butterfly.”

His thumb punctuates his threat as it presses into the throbbing bundle of nerves, making small tight circles as I bury my face in the sleeve of my coat, my arms screaming with strain.

“Apologize for your behavior, now.”

I groan quietly, bucking against his hand on the edge of release already.

“I..”

“You....” He leads.

“I-I'm sorr-“ Another slap lands on my core, sending me careening over the edge, barreling at a breakneck pace towards the abyss. I'm still coming down from the high he tortured from me as he frees my hands, wrenching me up to stand on gelatin legs. I lean against him, letting him steady me as he straightens my clothes, discarding my white scarf on the ground.

“I want my scarf back.”

He pauses, adjusting my mask. My heart skipping a beat as he gently pulls it back behind my ears. His eyebrows are raised, his own mask back perfectly in place, not a hair looking over intentionally disheveled. Suddenly I'm grateful he still insists upon wearing them because if I saw his lips right now...

“Please.” I whisper.

“I'll buy you a new one. One without a hole in it.”

I roll my eyes, “I've had it for years, Cohen.”

“It's touched all this dusty shelving; I'm not letting you wrap it around your fucking neck again.”

His eyes snap to mine as I push away from him, biting back the impulse to groan as my ass aches, hugged tightly by jeans that feel way too tight and abrasive now. His dark hair falls into his face as he half shakes his head, glaring at his now gloved hands before swooping down and jerking the old scarf from the floor and shoving it into his back pocket, leaving the bulk to hang out. I don't thank him or say much of anything as he steers me back out into the store. My cheeks flushing bright at the gaggle of employees waiting impatiently by the doors to enter.

*God...*

My heart pounds relentlessly in my chest for the rest of the shopping trip. Cohen doesn't try to hide his amusement, allowing me to fill the cart with whatever I want. He doesn't grumble or complain at all the nonsensical things I fill it with until our cart is packed to the brim and our list is filled three times over. I can't even hide my gawk as he pays no attention to the ever-growing price as the cashier rings up item after item. Cohen's eyes are glued to me as he swipes his shiny black card, the total well over five grand. I almost feel bad, insisting we put some back despite knowing its pocket change to him at this point. He speaks in near monotone voice to the cashier instructing them to deliver the bags to his house when a flash of auburn hair a similar deep shade as mine draws my attention. A wide pair of pained, hollow eyes stare blankly at me in a way that makes me want to purge my skin. Something about the girl looks familiar. The way she's staring at me speaks volumes.

*Recognition and... disdain.*

She steps closer, still far away at the end of an aisle, brushing her hair behind her ear, her bandaged wrist peeking out from behind the sleeve of her hoodie. I can hear my heart now over the nondescript music coming from the overhead speakers, thudding loudly in my ears.

I barely register Cohen in my peripheral as he loops his own scarf off, wrapping it around my neck, “Hey...”

My eyes find his for a moment before darting back to the ghost of the girl. She's gone from the aisle, but her foreboding presence lingers there like cigarette smoke.

The back of his gloved hand lifts my chin, forcing my eyes back to his, “Butterfly?”

I clear my throat, tugging his scarf closer to me as if it will ward off the unsettled feeling in my stomach before nodding, “Can we go home now?”

His eyes narrow as he leads me out of the store, glancing behind us like he's looking for something, like my discomfort somehow rubbed off on him, “Not yet, baby.”

Baby. Butterfly. There're those names again, things that he shouldn't be calling me, names that shouldn't make flutters erupt deep in my belly. Another thing he shouldn't do to me, the fact is compounded when my tender abused flesh meets the leather seat of his car screaming in protest.

\*\*\*\*

That unsettled feeling in my stomach hasn't faded, not by a long shot. The hollow look in the girl's eyes sticking with me in a way that makes it hard to focus on anything else as I watch Cohen. He makes another pass at the table with sanitizing wipes, ignoring every judgmental look from the sickeningly rich business men seated at the round table next to us. They'd

given up on their business meeting the moment we walked in. Cohen's hoodie, jacket and messy hair mixed with my casual attire sticks out like a sore thumb even though he muttered less than three words to the waitress that greeted us at the door before we were ushered back to one of the best tables in the restaurant. Staff popping their heads out of the kitchen to look at us.

“I'm assuming they know you here.”

He barely looks up from the fork he's inspecting, *my* fork despite the fact that I genuinely couldn't care less, “They cater all the staff meetings at Astro but I've never actually been here.”

“I'm so sorry for your wait Mr. Bennet, it's such a pleasure to finally—“

“We'll both have water and the house specials.” He interrupts, still staring at the fork like one would an adversary.

The waitress' eyes widen, her smile slipping by mere millimeters before she nods dutifully, probably used to dealing with mannerless assholes. I brighten my forced smile, turning it towards her, “Thank you.”

Cohen practically vibrates with displeasure as he tugs down his mask, stowing it in his hoodie pocket. His leg bobs rapidly underneath the table, slightly shaking it. He hasn't stopped messing with stuff since we got here. The people surrounding us are slowly but surely taking notice. My body acts before I expressly give it permission to my hand snapping out and removing the fork, sitting it down on the bare table which only aggravates him more, “Let's just get it to go.”

“No.”

I exhale sharply, “Why are you doing this? What's the fucking point in all of it?”

His eyes slide to mine, heating my cheeks, “Have you not learned your lesson yet, Reagan? Should we make a scene? Imagine what the people would say if they knew what a fucking brat you were?”

I slip my hands down my face, forgetting I'd actually applied makeup today as the waitress reappears with our drinks, wordlessly this time. I wonder if she heard. Why do I hope she did?

“Don't touch your face.” He orders.

“I want to go back to the house.”

I don't look up from the condensation forming on the outside of my glass until the silence stretches on a little too long. When I finally muster the courage to pull my eyes up, my heart does something funny and off-putting in my chest. Glancing away from the velvety black box he's sat in the middle of the table and up at him, the light flush on his cheeks only builds up the tension in my stomach, “I'm trying to be nice, Rea. Would you just fucking let me?” He shoves at the box with his elbow, making it skid across the tabletop in front of me, “Open it.”

“What is it?”

“My god you are infuriating.”

My hands are shaking as I reach for the box, running my fingers over the soft velvet surface... this place... even this little box all screams opulence, something I'm not used to.

Something I never really wanted to get used to. I've never really cared about having the coolest toys or the prettiest house. I just wanted... *them*. My lip wedges between my teeth as I flip open the hinged lid of the box. A soft gasp escapes any way as tears spring into my eyes.

*Cohen...*

“Open it butterfly.” He breathes out, his leg still bouncing underneath the table as if it’ll ease some of his nerves. He carefully rests his chin on his hands, his broad shoulders tense, a beautiful dark strand of hair hanging in his eyes. The shining gold metal of Lynn’s locket is cool in my fingers as I gently remove it from the box, popping it open only for a larger-than-life lump to form in my throat. The pictures that she’d placed there are gone, replaced with a photo I hadn’t seen in years. Cohen towers behind me, even leaned down to match my modest height, my wrists, head and neck adorned with flower jewelry he made for me. A poorly constructed flower crown I made sitting on top of his dark, wavy locks. We’re smiling, authentic smiles, ones that wrinkle our eyes and show our teeth. Lynn shrieked with joy when she found us in the backyard. I laughed so hard, watching her through the kitchen window as she dashed around in search of her camera she could never find when she needed it. I remember how Cohen rolled his eyes, but he never stopped smiling.

When she finally returned with it I stayed seated, keeping my distance from him like I’m supposed to until he plucked me from the grass standing me up right in front of him. I didn’t know it then, none of us did... how important those moments were.

I blink rapidly, trying to dispel the mist that formed in my eyes before I look at him. My heart thundering in my chest long before those icy blue eyes meet mine, “You had it fixed.”

“I shouldn’t have broken it. I know how much it means to you.”

The way he’s looking at me feels so much like that day, so much unyielding adoration in his eyes you’d think I hung the sun. He stands leaning across the table, his soft fingers brushing my cheek, the smell of him filling my nose as he gathers my hair, pulling it to the side. The metal

of the locket is cold on my flushed skin, his breath tickling the top of my head as he buckles the locket, slipping his fingers back down the chain.

My chest unknots a little, having it back in place as I stare down at the opposite picture, “Why did you put a QR code on the other side?” The words leave my drying mouth in a whisper. The chatter from the restaurant, the soft clanging from the kitchen has long faded to a comfortable background hum because he’s taking up everything.

*The air, the light, me.*

His lips brush the tip of my nose before he sits back down, “Look for yourself.”

My hands haven’t stopped trembling as I dig my unused phone from my bag, awkwardly lifting it to the still opened necklace to get a better aim with the camera. I pause when the link pops up, knowing whatever is on the other side could ruin this moment. Ruin something already so badly fractured its hanging on by a single frayed strand. My phone loads quickly, but it might as well have been taking a lifetime. Rows and rows of code, text, and documents scroll rapidly across my screen. Unending PDF files worth of information, all with the Astro Gaming logo at the bottom, “What’s this?”

“Everything.”

My mouth opens to ask him what the hell that means when the waitress appears, two steaming plates of food balanced on her arm, a pitcher of water in the other. Her smile falters, sensing the tension radiating off both of us. Neither of us really look at her, Cohen downright ignoring her questions and existence all together until she leaves.

“Everything...” I breathe out, watching him.

The sound of raised panicked voices pulls his attention from me. It's a loss I pretend not to feel but do... deeply. My heart is still thudding wildly as the smell of smoke invades my nose. The sound of panicked voices soon snuffed out by the blaring of a shrill alarm. I turn behind me, other guests rushing from their seats as a fiery light engulfs the entrance of the restaurant.

*Oh, my god.*

The flames lick up the walls, catching the drapes quickly as his hand bands around my arm, jerking me towards the back of the restaurant, smoke quickly filling the room. A man dressed in an apron shoves past Cohen, running from the back, "It's lit up like a tinderbox back there. The exits are fucking done, man." His brown eyes are wide with fear as other members of the staff run forward with pots and buckets of water. The flames roar higher when the first pot of water hits it like it had only fueled it further. My eyes begin to burn and water as wails fill the front room, people dashing every which way in search of an exit. Staff and customers bleed together in a group that rages around like a swarm of wasps.

"Vanessa..." Cohen growls, jerking me towards him, tucking me underneath his arm as he shoves his way through the group that seems much larger now than it did before.

*Who?*

I stumble over something trying to see through the crowd and smoke, my knees connecting roughly with the ground. A yelp leaves my throat as someone tramples over the backs of my legs, making a bone deep pain erupt from my left leg. A half sob, half cough adds to my fear and desperation as I reach out for Cohen, the man who stomped over me neck grasped in his free hand as he hauls me to my feet. The glint of malevolence

in his eyes darkens the striking shade of blue as he discards the man, “I got you, baby.” His words are strained with a cough of his own as he pulls me behind him. It's not the gentle soft gripped hand around the wrist you see in movies but a bruising one that better fits him, “Close your eyes and duck behind me.”

I don't question him as he lifts the metal legged stool beside him, sending it crashing into the large pane of glass that lines the front of the high-end restaurant. My heart pounds as I look up at the dry sprinkler system overhead... why isn't it going off?

*Slam!*

*Slam!*

*Slam!*

*Slam!*

He's cursing under his breath. The glass isn't breaking.

*God, it isn't breaking...*

I cough again. This one feels deeper, harsher against my already sensitive throat, but other men are joining him now, slamming against the glass frantically until finally it splinters, not shatters. Coming apart in a sheet that still won't allow anyone to escape. My head swims as I stumble, my chest heaving. It burns, it's fucking hot... sweat slicks my skin as I grip his hoodie. Hanging on for dear life as he rages against the glass until it finally gives way, the sound of sirens mixes with the blare of the fire alarms as I'm jerked underneath his arm again, half pulled limply outside my feet unable to keep up with him. He doesn't release me when we make it out. Gaggles of people cry out as they rush past us, flooding the parking lot. I try to follow them further away from the building, but he won't let me.

“Cohen, we need to-“

“Mr. Bennet...”

My eyes are watery as I look up at the ghostly shell of the girl stares down at us... no at *him*. She's shaking, dressed far too lightly in the cold. Her hair whipping in the wind looks half as wild as the smile on her face, “I... I want to come back now.”

Something about the way she's speaking runs a chill through me. A rasp that seems to come and go, like it's being forced out. A rasp... like my voice.

“You were at the club.” I say through cough.

She doesn't even look at me. All of her attention is on Cohen at my side, all of his on her.

“You started the fire, didn't you Vanessa? Fucking pathetic little bitch needed my goddamn attention that badly?”

My eyes widen despite the burn, my heart plummeting into my stomach, “Cohen?”

“Y-yes.” Her voice trembles as Cohen leans to his full height. I can only see the side of his face, but what I see there makes me feel like I'm going to vomit. “You stopped calling. I- I tried so many times to get your attention you wouldn't listen. I- kept the hair-“

“Reagan, go to the car.” He mumbles under his breath, but I don't.

*I...*

He wants me to leave while he's here with her... talking to her like that?

*She looks like me, so much like me.*

“Who is she?” I whisper. My head feels light on my shoulders as firefighters rush around us, pushing us away from the building. It does nothing to dispel the tension.

Only now the girl is looking at me, her wild manic smile slipping, “Reagan. You... you shouldn't be here.”

“What is going on, Cohen?” I demand flinching as she takes a step closer, no fluidity to her motions at all.

“Knees Vanessa.” He orders and she falters, fighting to keep her attention on me. Like it's a physical compulsion to stare at him. To bend to his will.

She drops to her knees, staring at me. I'm vaguely aware of the police edging closer to us as she trembles, “It should've been you.” She laughs, wildly. I barely hear the growl that slips from his throat.

“What did you say to me?” I step beside him, closer to her, fighting past the sobs in my throat and whooshing in my ears.

“Reagan.” He warns.

“What did you mean by that?!” I scream and suddenly his arms band around me, “What did you mean?!”

He cages me in, spinning us as she lurches to her feet, still laughing but it's not a happy sound. It's a tormented one, full of hate and misery. That laugh abruptly turns to screams as she's tackled to the ground, an officer warding over her yelling commands she's not listening to.

“Don't touch me! You'll get me dirty! Mr. Bennet I'm clean I swear!” She wails so loud her voice cracks and strains as vomit rolls up my throat. I hit him, kicking, punching and biting at him anywhere I can as he carries me away, taking every hit, every bite holding me to him like someone might take me away.

“You killed them! You killed them, didn't you?” I scream over his shoulder, desperately trying to pry myself from his arms. My own voice is cracking now, dissolving into frantic sobs, “You fucking did it, you fucking bitch! You fucking bitch!”

Cohen slams me down on the hood of his car, checking me over for injuries as I scream at the woman they are leading away. My hand connects with his face, hard enough to stop him, his icy blue eyes turn frigid as I dart around him, an unfamiliar set of arms jerking mine behind me so hard pain bursts through my shoulder.

“Don't fucking touch her!” Cohen roars, shoving hard at the officer, sending a dozen more running our way. Everything else that happens is a blur of sobs and screams. Cohen's chin meets the concrete of the parking lot quickly, my screams redirecting at him. For him maybe.

“Tell me how you know her! Don't touch him, please let him up!” I wail until I taste copper in my mouth, “This is your fault! Oh god it's your fault!”

*Things can always get worse, and they... they just got so much worse.*

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## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

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## C ohen The Night He Left

The world has a habit of seeming perfectly normal before everything spirals entirely out of control. Eating a midday snack of yogurt before finding your dad slumped in his chair after he sucked off a shotgun. Moments like that, sitting there with that bowl of vanilla yogurt and the kiss from mom still planted on my temple are perfectly mundane until something comes after that changes them. The smile he gave us, looking brighter than it had in a while before he headed out to the shop for the day, a piece of rye toast with extra butter the way he liked it in his large hand.

*It was all so... normal. My life, my dad, my mom, that day.... Me.*

*Until the exact moment it wasn't and I would never be normal again.*

My phone buzzes rapidly in my pocket. I don't need to look to know it's mom calling. She always gets panicked when I don't answer, which I don't get because me not answering is nothing out of the ordinary. My phone slips easily out of my pocket. I don't bother looking at the screen as I shut it off. I'm sure Rea will tell her I'm home. They often conspire together to keep tabs on my comings and goings. Mom knows I usually tell Rea my

plans for the day, so it seems an easy place to get information instead of bothering me with questions I rarely feel compelled to answer. My eyes burn after hours sitting at Andrews, coding and running software until my hands cramped. Something I'd much rather do at home, but I can never focus for long with Reagan in the house. Spending time with her always seems more appealing than anything else under the sun. I watch her darkened figure moving behind the light purple curtains of her bedroom, dancing.

*Poorly, I'm sure.*

I bite back my smile, not really sure why. Somewhere along the way, I stopped being a kid, stopped being happy, then shortly after that... shortly after we tore down the shed dad popped his head in and sold the house. I stopped allowing myself to be happy. Smiles and laughs that were once treasured rare moments started to feel like betrayals of myself. My therapist has no shortage of answers for me, reasons why I am the way I am.

*Comorbid PTSD and suspected bipolar disorder.*

At least that's the current working theory. Whatever floats their boats, I guess. I don't think therapy was required to figure out finding my dad less than an hour after he ate buckshot altered me a little. Sometimes I miss not caring about germs, I miss not spending hours of my day and night scrubbing everything in sight before I can go to sleep. Mom says she's scared that I'm worrying her. Despite spending thousands of dollars she can't afford on trying to fix me, I'm getting worse. She knows, Raymond knows and Reagan knows too. Everyone can see the gradual decent, the only one brave enough to bring it up at this point is the fucking child. I used to feel bad about it too until I exhausted myself so thoroughly I couldn't even muster guilt anymore.

I don't scare Reagan; she doesn't get... frustrated with me like they do. She waits, lets me do my thing and just... waits until I feel better. She's never tried to stop it. She's endlessly patient and kind for a teenager. She's everything I'm not, everything I'll never be.

*It's part of why I love her more with every beat of my heart. She's... good.*

My eyes have long unfocused on her dancing silhouette until a new movement catches my eye, a shadow adjusting just beyond the window of her bedroom. The side she always leaves opened a little, since it faces the woods beyond the house. My fists tighten on the steering wheel, watching for a moment. So much time passes with nothing I've nearly convinced myself I imagined it until it happens again. The guy peeks up higher, some of the light from her bedroom illuminating his profile.

“What the fuck?”

My mind seems to skip straight over confusion and anger, going straight to unbridled rage so potent it pushes me from my car long before I realize I've gotten out. My vision falters for a moment as I gain on him, my body vibrating with it. Closing the distance so quickly my feet scrape the gravel of the driveway. If he wasn't so caught up in watching a little kid dance, he'd have heard me. Her recital music filters in from the cracked window. I can hear the punchy beat alongside my heartbeat in my ears.

*Did he open it?*

He notices me finally, his eyes widening as he falls back onto his ass on the slanted roof of the second-story window. I jump high, barely getting my grip on the low slant before hauling myself halfway up beside him. He's half to a stand when I grab the back of his shirt from where I'm hanging, jerking him off the roof. Jake's breath leaves him all at once as he hits the ground. His still half erect cock flapped out of his jeans.

“You’re fucking dead.” The words leave my mouth as I kick off the side of the house, jumping down on top of him, my boots crunching his already cracked ribs further. His pathetic attempt at getting up and making it into the woods only pisses me off more. My heart stops as I haul him to me. I hadn’t even noticed her music stop, the sound of her window sliding open further filling the night air. I squeeze as hard as I can on his throat as I jerk us underneath the overhang of the roof, pressing myself just out of sight.

“Hello? ...Cohen?”

My lips peel back in disgust as I lean closer into him, the slick of his sweat making vomit rise in my throat. I barely bite the bile back enough to manage a whisper. If I wasn’t fucking livid, I would’ve puked on him, “Make a sound and I cut your dick off.”

He’s in a panic, struggling against me as I fight to keep him quiet. He can’t breathe... his arms flinging around wildly trying to find purchase on me. That moment presses on forever until she closes her window again. His cock flapping around now completely flaccid.

*Good... sick fuck.*

He sucks in a sharp breath as I release him, only enough to jerk my arm around his throat, “You have no idea how badly you fucked up.” Jerking down I let us fall, bracing myself against the outer wall of the house as he kicks and twist between my legs. Pain splays across my back the moment he stops freaking out enough to get purchase on the ground. My breath half leaves my lungs as he braces his tennis shoes in the mud, using all his weight to slam against me. Desperately trying to loosen my arm around his throat. The siding bites into my back, rubbing against raw bits of skin from my shower this morning. He grunts. It’s a weird, strained sound before slumping limp in my hold. A new, more concerning sound of tires turning

onto the road that leads to our house jolts me into action as I haul his colossal frame over my shoulders, groaning as I stumble to my feet.

*Motherfucker.*

My lungs strain as I make my way to my car, letting him fall off my back in a heap so I can lean through my opened window and pop the trunk. Headlights hit the surrounding trees, illuminating us for a fraction of a second as they peek out between the thin, poorly maintained greenery that lines the drive, “Fuck, fuck, fuck.”

As soon as I get the bulk of him in the truck, Jake's wide panicked eyes snap open, a half scream leaving his throat. He's already trying to fling himself from my shallow trunk when I slam the lid, snapping it down hard against his head, rendering him silent. I grimace as Raymond's truck rolls to a stop on the opposite side of the garage. My palm slips down onto Jake's bloodied face as I shove his bowling ball sized head in the rest of the way. My trunk and Raymond's truck door slamming closed in unison.

“Dad! I nailed my solo, come watch!” Rea's voice only edges my rage and panic as she paddles across the small walkaway stopping just before her feet hit the gravel. She won't walk all the way out here without shoes. “Oh, hey Cohen, I thought I heard you get home earlier; you can come watch too.” I can't slow my breathing, can't even begin to mask my strained panting or hide the fact that I'm covered in dirt and sweat. Not an entirely concerning thing for the average eighteen-year-old boy, but me? I might as well be wearing a giant red flag with a bullhorn strapped to my ass.

I lean against the trunk, willing Jake to stay out for a little longer as Raymond walks closer. His gait, posture and the small smile he always wears for her screams casual, relaxed even. His eyes are everything but. I

shove my hands deep in the back pockets of my jeans, trying not to think about my bloody palm.

*I'm dirty.*

*Dirty.*

*Dirty.*

*Dirty.*

*I need to get it off. I can't. It won't come off.*

“Why are you so sweaty?” He asks, his eyes narrowing on me.

“The neighbor's dogs wondered over here again; I ran them off.”

Believable enough... they always crowd and bark at Rea. She hates it.

“Those dogs are so mean. What did I ever do to them?” She asks from the sidewalk, blissfully ignorant of the tension between us as always.

Raymond chuckles, but his eyes harden even more, “They're just excited.”

“Well, it's scary.” She states indignantly, crossing her arms over her chest. Her dislike of those dogs hasn't faltered since they first visited, the first time one of the bigger ones jumped on her, knocking her into the mud. Smearing it from its giant paws down the front of a new t-shirt. Reagan was beside herself. I never understood why, aside from getting dirty, which never bothered her before. Until mom explained she'd never owned anything new, not that she could remember, anyway. All her other clothes came from whatever churches and shelters could provide. Even years later, with all new clothes, shoes and toys, she's still anal about keeping them in good shape. Like one day they'll go back, and she'll lose everything she gained. Raymond and mom don't know about the trash and things she hoards in boxes deep in her closet, or the old useless stuff she shoves under

her bed. Toys she hasn't played with in years, clothes that she snuck from donation boxes. A little something for all of us, just in case.

"Coming, Cohen?" Raymond asks as he steps towards her, away from me, away from the unconscious guy in my trunk.

"No, I have plans."

Reagan makes a displeased sound, "You just got home."

I flash her a tight smile, wishing it appeared warm as I meant for it to be. It never does, "Sorry butterfly."

"Just stopped by to chase off some dogs and roll around in the mud then? You're just going to stay dirty like that?" Raymond asks, our eyes locked in a stalemate from hell. Usually his smartass bullshit would annoy me. I can't think of anything other than getting Jake as far away from her as possible.

"Sure."

"There's no school tomorrow, I'll stay up and wait—"

"No, I'll be out late." I cut her off, my eyes on the ground. Too fucking weak to look at the hurt I know flashed across her face. I tear my eyes up just in time to see Raymond glowering at me, shaking his head as he steers her towards the house.

"Well, be safe Cohen. I'll see you tomorrow, right?" She smiles the saddest of smiles over her shoulder and all I want is to do whatever she wants me to; go wherever she wants me to go. Be whatever she needs me to be instead of who I am.

"Tomorrow."

"Promise?"

"I Promise."

He's already ushered her inside when she spins on her heel, "I love you!" She shouts. My heart jumps at the sight of her bright evergreen eyes, a

smile working its way onto my face before a thud from my trunk wipes it away.

“Love you-“ My rage flares as Raymond cuts me off by closing the door, another louder thud from inside my trunk gives me the perfect place to channel that rage as I wipe my hands on my jeans, slipping into my car and peeling out of the driveway.

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## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

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## R eagan

The ride back from the police station is suffocating. Andrew's hands keep flexing on the steering wheel. Like he's trying to think of something to say.

*What is there to say?*

I'm sorry your brother's crazy ex-girlfriend that looks like you to an uncomfortable degree tried to kill you but accidentally killed your parents instead. I'm sorry she's been stalking the both of you and set a restaurant on fire with you inside of it. I'm sorry you're attracted to your stepbrother and that he's made you come twice now. I'm sorry he manipulated and lied to everyone and now you're legally stuck with him because the world thinks you're fucking crazy and there's absolutely nothing that you or anyone else can do about it?

*Doesn't roll off the tongue.*

"Did you know?" I breathe out, my body aching all over for... so many fucking reasons.

He clears his throat, adjusting in his seat as we pull down the gravel drive, “About which part?”

I scoff, nodding. “Okay... what didn't you know?”

His silence is as good an answer as any, I suppose.

“Has he always wanted to fuck me?”

My hands fly out to brace myself as he slams his foot down on the brake abruptly, coughing and looking forward at nothing. At least two shades paler than his usual tanned complexion, “Jesus Christ.”

“What the hell Andrew?” I yell before that funny feeling deep in my gut rises again, a specific breed of helpless anger I've come to know well since the day they died.

*The day they were murdered.*

He's stills staring at me and suddenly it's too much. The closeness... the tightness of the cab is a threat just as well as she was. I don't ask again, already regretting letting the words out to begin with. The dark, moonless night doesn't stop me from unlocking the door and jumping out of the tall cab.

“Rea come on, I'm sorry!”

I ignore him and the bitter cold as I stomp down the long drive, my fists balling when the sound of his door opening follows, “I'm not judging Rea. Come on, it's not that big of a deal. There's an entire category of that shit on Pornhub. It's a thing!”

*Not helping.*

“Go away Andrew.”

A frustrated string of curses leaves his mouth as he jogs back to his truck. My heart stills for a moment, my steps faltering. He won't really leave, will he? I keep my eyes ahead as the truck moves forward, trailing behind me.

Now that he's in the cab and not driving away, I allow myself a relieved breath. Nothing about walking down the dark gravel road alone at night feels like a good time. Beats being stuck at the jail still, going over every single detail of the two worst days of my life so far. Not knowing if Cohen was okay, if they had hurt him when they slammed him into the ground... if they're letting him get clean. He doesn't even have his medication, I don't think; we weren't supposed to be gone that long. The truck speeds up, speeding past to pull ahead of me. I swallow hard; the exhaust looks too much like the smoke from earlier as it billows in the night air. Sending more than one unsettled shiver down my spine, I can still smell it on my clothes like she seeped into my skin.

Andrew pulls the truck longways across the narrow road, shoving my door open wide from inside, "Get in the goddamn truck Reagan. Now."

I frown, forcing neutrality to my face as I reluctantly lift myself into the cab, "Why did your voice get all low like that? It was weird."

He laughs, not his warm, melodic one. He sounds exhausted, "You're infuriating."

I nod, swallowing past the lump in my throat, "Cohen said the same thing."

Once he's straightened the truck and we're back on our way up the drive, he looks over at me, just barely, "He's going to be okay. His lawyers will have him out before midnight."

I nod, slowly losing the will to appear like I don't care. I do. I have always cared so much it felt like I couldn't breathe, "He saved me today."

"Not the first time. I promise you Rea, he doesn't regret either."

My head snaps towards him as he pulls into the small circle drive, "Not the first time?"

Andrew takes a deep breath, “I think it's time you asked him why he left.”

“My dad kicked him out, he told me.”

Another short, exhausted laugh, “You know things would be so much easier if the two of you would get off your fucking dumb shit and have an actual conversation.”

“I am not on some dumb shit! He's ruined my life; *he* is the reason our parents are dead, Andrew. He lied and had me put in a conservatorship. Am I the one that's wrong here? Have you lost your mind?”

“Rea, I know what he's done is-“

Shaking my head, I don't stay around long enough to listen to the rest of what he has to say, slamming his truck door behind me and stomping towards the house. That helpless anger burning brighter again. This time I cling to it. It makes more sense to be angry with him, way more sense than all the other confusing things I feel. Throwing open the front door, I nearly slam into Gilda, “Sorry.”

I can feel Andrew behind me already, “Don't worry, I'll carry your stuff.” He deadpans, “Good evening, Gilda.”

“Hello Andrew, will someone please explain to me what is going on?”

My shoes are already off as I whirl around my smokey hair slapping me in the face having fallen free from its braid hours ago, “Cohen's crazy ex tried to burn down the restaurant we were eating in, and she was apparently the one that killed our parents. Oh, and he attacked a cop, so he was arrested.”

Gilda's face turns from concern to downright horror as she turns back to Andrew, worrying the hem of her apron, “Vanessa?”

He nods before holding up his hand, stopping her next question, a warning look in his eyes.

“Ah yes, more secrets. Why the fuck not!?” I scream at Andrew, his face etched with worry. I don't enjoy yelling. I never really did it before I came here.

“Rea, it's not our story-“

A frustrated cry leaves my throat as I fist my hands, “I don't care. I just don't care.”

“And there's your problem Reagan, when did you decide you weren't allowed to care? Fuck, he's made some mistakes, but there's not one person alive in this world that loves or cares about you more than he does!”

I recoil as he yells, those warm brown eyes darkening... zeroing in on me with an intensity I've never seen before. I swallow past the lump in my throat. “Fuck off. You didn't have to be an asshole.” I mumble as I head up the stairs to scrub the grime of the day from my skin.

*He's never raised his voice at me before...*

Andrew huffs the sound of my bag that was only barely saved from the fire hitting the hall table, “Now I've fucking done it.” The sound of him shrugging out of his coat and unloading his pockets tells me I won't be left alone tonight. “Food?” he asks Gilda, and I don't have to turn around to know she's glaring at him.



Cohen still isn't back by the time I'm out of the shower, I must stare at my locked phone screen for ten minutes before I open it, my heart fluttering when it's still opened to rows of information and documents from the QR code.

“Andrew, what is this?”

He's knee deep in his third bowl of artisan turkey chili. I think this is the first time he's stopped long enough to take a proper breath. Reluctantly sitting down his spoon he reaches out for my phone, his eyes widening before narrowing on me.

“What?”

“How do you have this?”

I pop open my locket, “A QR code Cohen put it in here. It's what we were talking about when all hell broke loose.”

“Fucking hell.” He murmurs, scrolling furiously on my phone.

“You're freaking me out.”

“It's his whole life Rea, deeds, his signature fucking code for his games. Finances, access codes to the servers at Astro Gaming.” He lets out a quick expulsion of air, “It's complete unmitigated access to him. His company... all of it. You have all of it.”

“Delete it off my phone.” My voice trembles.

“Yeah, probably a safe bet. Don't lose that necklace.”

*Wasn't planning on it.*

“Why? Why would he do that?”

Andrew just shakes his head, “He's on his way home. Ask him yourself.”

“Like right now?”

“Yup.”

I sit back in my seat, my hand clutching my locket, “Gilda, did those groceries show up today?”

“Yes.”

“The wine?”

She pauses, “In the wine cellar.”

My chair screeches as I turn to stare at her, “There's a wine cellar? He didn't tell me.”

Andrew chuckles, tugging his long hair high into a bun on his head, “Can't imagine why.”



“Hey!” I yell as Andrew plucks the wine glass from my hand. It's only my third glass... *in an hour*. I insisted on opening the four most expensive bottles to try them.

He takes a deep swig, leaning into my space. His breath is warm against my cheek as he gets closer, leaning over me now to reach the counter. I wait for the warm tingle deep in my belly, my lips parted... ready for it. He spins the bottle, making the label face me, “It's strawberry wine dummy.”

I glance down at the bottle, pursing my lips, “Oh”

“Oh.” He repeats, rolling his eyes before flicking the tip of my nose. That warm feeling still nowhere in sight as I grab down another glass from the cabinet, pouring from my favorite bottle so far. My heart lurches in my chest when the sound of the front door slamming open drifts over our loud music. Our eyes meet, sharing a mutual *oh shit* look between us before Andrew downs the rest of the glass, shifting towards his coat.

“Don't you fucking dare.”

He fakes a wide yawn, lifting it from the hanger, “My would you look at the time.”

“Andrew... Andrew please.”

Cohen's dominating form darkens the space behind him, his cold blue eyes locking onto mine and for a moment I think he feels the same amount of relief as I do, “Andrew please what?

“Oh, baby sis here was just needing help with her math homework. I said if she asked very nicely-“

He's cut off as a gloved hand smacks the back of his head. “Goodnight Andrew.” Cohen growls.

Andrew winces as his eyes glint at the prospect of stirring the pot. I just gesture vaguely at him. His only response is a shrug before his coat is on and he's halfway out the door. He turns another shit stirring glint in his eyes when Cohen promptly slams it in his face. His eyes dip to the wineglass in my shaking hand before he turns, wordlessly heading for the stairs.

“That's it?” I spit out, taking a halted step towards him.

He stops, looking over his shoulder, “It's late and I need a shower.”

“Cohen, can't it wait?” I hate how desperate my voice sounds, I... don't want him to go. I want to be close to him... just for a minute.

*I was so worried about you.*

“No, it can't. Enjoy your wine, we can talk in the morning,”

“What the fuck is wrong with you?”

He doesn't answer me and suddenly it's not just him I'm looking at it's her too. The way he spoke to her. The familiarity. The need for him in her eyes.

He continues up the stairs, “Reagan, just... I need a minute.”

I let out a sharp breath, my hands still shaking. Now it's not just the nerves, "You need a minute? You!?"

He whirls, his dark hair hanging into his face, "Yes Reagan, I need a fucking minute."

My mouth is open, my skin flushed from anger and the wine. I am so... stupid. I am fucking stupid and he is too. I just stand there staring at him until he's gone from my line of sight. Then I stare some more at the space he had occupied before bringing the glass to my lips. It's not fun anymore. It was for a second. After everything today, having some answers was at least a silver lining. I want more. I need more. I wanted him to hold me, to look at me the way he did in that restaurant. He needs a minute, but each minute I've spent waiting for him tonight felt like hell. My hand clenches the glass harder as I sag against the counter, regretting telling Gilda she could go home. Hating the empty cold feeling that's felt behind when he leaves.



## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

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## IS THIS BETTER OR WORSE?

**C**ohen

The tightness in my chest isn't entirely unfamiliar to me, but I hold it back like my life depends on it, at least until I'm out of sight. I can still feel her eyes long after I've peeled out of my disgusting smoke-filled clothes and entered the shower. My body sags against the wall, the breath that leaves my throat rises above the steam and cascading water, making a harsh, distressed sound.

*I almost lost her.*

That thought is enough to haul me closer to the edge, that tightness in my chest slipping towards my throat, "Fucking hell."

The last few hours sitting in the police station being fucking grilled was nothing compared to what I felt watching them grab her in the parking lot. The way her voice strained as she screamed at me. My fists tighten before I rear back, punching the wall as water fills and burns my eyes. It takes nothing to split the already scabbed, damaged skin on my knuckles. My shoulders ache from smashing through the window at the restaurant. Each cough that left her lungs behind me sent daggers through my heart. Venessa

being locked up in a mental health facility doesn't touch the burn I feel in my chest, the terminal need I have to snap her fucking neck. Even if she is a monster *I* created, she served her purpose and given the opportunity... I'll make sure she lives just long enough to regret threatening Reagan. If her fractured mind is even capable of feeling such a thing.

It's never been more glaringly obvious that I *need* Reagan. I need her like I need the fucking air in my lungs. It would've been so easy today... if I'd lost her... I wouldn't have hesitated to follow her wherever we go next, if anywhere at all. I'm certain we don't belong in the same place if there is anything beyond this. Today was a pebble in the bottom of a river compared to the boulders I've laid... the ways I've soured my soul to keep her safe... keep her close. Each rapid in the river is a sin, things I can never come back from, each monstrosity worse than the one that came before it. Every betrayal is painful, and it cuts deep, but... it's worth it, because she's fucking worth it.

She's the only goodness, the only light I need. So, I'll keep going. I'll blacken every inch of my soul until there's nothing left if that's what it takes. None of the guilt matters, none of the pain, because somehow she makes the insanity... the agony feel like fucking nirvana.



The music is still pounding downstairs as I slip into my office, making each throb of my headache feel like a shard of glass being twisted in my temples. No, more like being beaten over the head with a hammer. A pretty albeit frustrating hammer named Reagan. It's loud enough I can hear it faintly,

even through the soundproofed room. I'm pulling up the camera feed for the dining room before I even sit at the desk.

*Empty.*

Kitchen. I glower at the opened bottles, the spilled and sloshed wine on the counters. Reminding myself to *pick my battles*, as mom used to say. I never much liked that sentiment. I'd rather pick every battle.

*Where are you, little butterfly?*

My phone dings and I'm only half paying attention as I pull it off the charging pad, unlocking it with my thumbprint without daring to take my eyes from the monitor. I glance away from one of the most beautifully erotic things I've ever seen to glance down at the link Andrew sent. Pulling up an article I can't bring myself to read properly, unwilling to look away from the sway of her hips as she dances.

### **Shut In Billionaire Game Designer Saves Restaurant Full of People**

*Sources say the child prodigy turned founder of one of the most successful game design companies of this generation jumped into action without hesitation today. Pulling what one former staff member of the establishment said looked like his date along behind him. After finding out the exits were blocked, the building quickly filling with smoke...*

Reagan leans forward, whipping her hair with her before throwing it back again. My cock presses against the front of my sweatpants. My fist tightening on my knee. Long gone is her awkwardness, the way she struggled to keep up with everyone else in her dance class. She's offbeat, in a world of her own, but it takes nothing from the effect she has on me.

*The police haven't commented on the cause of the fire but according to an employee, a young woman was arrested on scene after confronting the game designer and his date.*

It says nothing about my arrest or that my date too was detained. I know a spin article when I see one, especially when it's Andrew's work. It certainly rolls off the tongue better than the truth. Shut in, billionaire's former... What would you call her?

*Toy? Sex slave?*

Former... girlfriend that he never took anywhere and only used when it suited him had a swift break from reality after a sudden break up. It says nothing about the questionable things I did to her, the questionable things I made her do. I would almost feel guilty about it... almost, but not quite, not fully able to pass the cusp of remorse. I tailored her as perfectly as I could, auburn hair, the rasp to her voice that she never quite got right. Yeah, the truth is far more fucked.

I zoom in on Reagan, watching her shake her ass along to the music, my cock throbbing and heart aching for her. Fuck, my whole body is aching for her. Every fiber of my being needs her on a primal level I don't even understand. How in the hell did I ever convince myself I could mimic you through someone else? There's only one Reagan, and she's *mine*. She's been mine since the day I met her in that parking lot.

My mind is already made up as I shove away from my desk, heading into the hall. Everything I'm about to do is an accumulation of all the wrongs I've committed to get her here. Seeing her in danger today... seeing her break apart like that... we're at a precipice her and I. The point of no return, I'm clinging to her like my life depends on it and she's dangling off the edge of a cliff.

*All we need is a little push.*

**Reagan**

Granite by Sleep Token

My chest feels heavy as I bend, swiping the bottle off the ground in one fluid motion before tipping it back. The wine doesn't burn, it's smooth and tastes better with each drink. My dark hair splays out across my face as I take a deep swig. Never stopping the circling of my hips, my free hand teasing my taunt nipples underneath my night gown. The soft silk like material cuts low into a deep V, the fitted skirt nearly brushes the ground. I teeter precariously from my place on top of the angular stone coffee table as I bend to deposit the bottle back on the floor. I'm exactly where I want to be, rounding up on numb and absolutely fucked.

“Careful butterfly, wouldn't want you to fall.”

I shoot up straight, my head swimming as my flushed cheeks darken. Their own way of trying to copy his eyes. Cohen lords at the balcony, his necklace hanging between his pecks. His bare chest is perfectly sculpted in lean muscle, his dark hair messy and unfixed. He looks... dangerous, like he wants to eat me. I swallow hard, my core tightening at the idea. Trying to grasp onto something, my anger, the hurt and confusion, but all I can see are those eyes. They're getting closer now. He's moving down the stairs in the same languid pace he always does, but somehow it feels more... intentional.

“Dance Reagan, I was enjoying the show.” My eyes widen as I jump down off the table, looking towards one of the many cameras in the house. The tingle deep in my belly grows to an unbearable throb, a pull, a *need*. I sway my hips again, trailing my hands softly up my thighs, avoiding my sore ass. Even my own touch deepens my need. My hands slip back down, my fingers trailing over the bundle of nerves between my legs that's screaming for contact. I gasp, letting my eyes drift closed as my head falls back. Getting lost in this forbidden moment, lost in the sensation, in myself.

*In him, because he's watching me, but I want him to do more than watch.*

When he reaches me, it's not a gentle thing, it's a rush of passion... of mutual need. His long-ungloved fingers knot in my already tangled hair, slamming my mouth against his. He kisses me deeply, slowly and then harder. The taste of mint and wine drives my senses upwards to formerly unobtainable heights. His tongue prods and urges my lips to open, swallowing my answering moan as I do. I don't notice how he backed us until my back hits the chilled glass of a window. His hands, *God his hands*... they explore me, his fingers digging into the flesh of my hips in a way that makes my head feel light. He's gentle and rough, hot and icy cold all at once. It's sensory overload, but I don't mind. Not even a little. I gasp as he jerks my leg up, hitching around his hip, his hardened length grinding into my soaked core.

“Reagan...” He groans, finally letting me up for air, my lips already swollen more the pressure of his kiss. His breath heats my skin as he dips underneath my jaw, his tongue tracing the outline of the bite mark he left on my neck. The one on my chest begs for his attention too. I moan, gripping his hair tightly, trying to push him where I want him. The stubble on his face tickles my chest as he dips lower, making a chuckle escape from my lips. I can feel his smile as he plants kisses on the tender flesh between my breasts. His fingers work their way to the straps of my blush pink nightgown, the bandages on his hands brushing along my skin as he goes. His fingers hook underneath the thin straps, keeping the dress from falling free as his lips continue their torturous exploration of my chest. With each tender, loving kiss he presses along my collarbone. I clutch him a little tighter, want him a little more. He shudders slightly as his tongue explores

the space between my breasts, ignoring my attempts to wiggle free from my gown.

“Be patient baby.”

*But I don't want to be patient. I don't want to wait and play games anymore.*

“I want you.” A moan leaves me as my head falls backwards against the window. Cohen stills his lips hovering over my pert nipple, hidden and erect behind soft fabric. Those full bowed lips brush my oversensitive nipple as he looks up at me, his eyes shining with more vulnerability than I've ever seen in them, more unabashed adoration.

*Devotion and something much, much darker.*

I pull my bottom lip between my teeth to stop the onslaught of confessions my intoxicated brain wants to hurl at him. The realization of what my words spoken in the heat of the moment must've meant to him. I almost take them back, but I don't want to. I couldn't possibly. He looks so beautiful like this, kneeling, wanting... *me*.

*Not that other girl, not Casey or anyone else. Me. Somehow, he thinks I'm enough. So for right now, I'll pretend to be.*

“You don't have to mean it, but I need you to say that again.” His voice is husky, something between a low whisper and a groan. The sound alone pushes me closer to the cusp of begging him to suck it into his mouth.

His hair is cool to the touch as I run my fingers through the dark waves, “I want you, Cohen. even if I shouldn't. Even if it's wr-“

I gasp as he tugs down the top of my dress, exposing my breasts to him, his mouth latching onto my nipple, flicking his tongue across the peaked mound. He continues, his teeth holding it captive while he flicks his tongue. It's just an edge... a little pain that makes my core pulse when he releases it

and sucks hard. I'm gasping, unceremoniously grinding myself against him wherever I can when he stops the assault. Pulling away and rising to tower above me again.

"Don't you dare say it's wrong."

My dress is gathered around my hips, my heart beating rapidly as he hooks my leg on him again, pressing into me, "Cohen," I moan, loving his name, his taste on my lips as my head spins alongside my heart... both wildly out of control, "You're my step-."

His hand captures my jaw, forcing my heavy-lidded eyes to his, "I'm the man that has been fucked for you since the moment we met. I'm the man that has *never* been anything but entirely devoted to you." A whimper leaves my throat as the sound of my underwear ripping fills the room, barely audible over the music. I open my mouth to argue when he continues, silencing me. I try to concentrate on his words, but now he's jerking down his pants. His hardened length rests against my lower belly. It feels hot against my skin, but I don't look down. He's... big, daunting even. I want it. I don't think I could want it more.

It takes me a second to realize he's speaking again, the octave of his velvet voice impossibly low, "I'm the man that would kill, bind, torment, and rape the fucking world blind if it meant keeping you where you belong. I'm the man that's spent the last four fucking years in *hell* without you."

My heart pounds in my ears, a moment of panic washing through the lust filled haze as he lifts me up, resting my slick core on his cock. I can feel each thrum of his pulse, each corded vein pressing against me. A breathy moan leaves my throat as he lifts me higher, sliding me up and down the length of him, coating himself in my arousal. His own voice getting deeper, more strained, "I adore every fucking single thing about you, and you're

finally mine, Reagan.” He lets out a dark, breathless laugh, grinding me harder along his cock. Everything in my tummy tightens, building into something bigger, “Me? I have *always* been yours.”

I don't know if it's those words or the head of his cock catching my swollen clit that sends me over the edge. An orgasm ripping through me like a wildfire as I cry out silently, gripping onto his strong shoulders. Digging my nails into his flesh, letting his moans push me higher. His lips find my neck, plastering it in kisses, letting me ride out the waves of my climax as his hands grip my ass. His fingers digging into the sore flesh should be painful. I should hate it, but I don't... anything but. My body trembles as he pulls us away from the window, his cock nudging me as I let him support my weight.

### **Cohen**

She's silent, only soft breaths and the occasional nudge lets me know she's still awake as I lay her gently on my bed. My cock is so hard, each throb is growing more painful than enticing. The most beautiful pair of green eyes flutter open, peering up at me. Somehow keeping all of their innocence, even after this. I know they'll remain just as they are now, even after all the ways I plan to strip her of that innocence. Her pink dress is still caught around her wide hips, her chest rising and falling in perfect tune with mine. Wavy auburn locks are splayed out around her head like a crowned goddess. Her breasts bare, the skirt of her dress barely hiding her glistening core.

*Fucking hell, she's beautiful.*

*And mine.*

*All mine.*

Her swollen lips part as I lean down, pressing mine into hers and giving her my tongue. She swirls hers with mine as I bite back a groan, wanting so badly to be seated inside her. I still for a second before pulling back, letting my hands trail down the curves of her body. Playing gently with her nipples as I pass. When I lift her dress, her wet cunt is every bit as fucking beautiful as I imagined it would be.

“Fucking perfect butterfly.”

I run my fingers, my *bare* fingers along her slit, teasing and playing with her folds before making tiny circles around her clit. I don't feel the need to rush to the bathroom to wash her, or my hands. I don't recoil, no sickening build in my gut.

*I don't feel dirty, although what I'm about to do to her is nothing less than that.*

Reagan cries out, her back arching up off the bed and a part of me waits for the anxiety that should be ravishing me, should make me feel like my chest is going to implode but nothing particularly ugly rears its head... nothing unbearable, anyway. Nothing strong enough to take away from this moment with her. I watch carefully as I slip a finger inside her. Fucking hell, she's tight. Too tight to take me. My cock jerks and my eyes darken when she moans. The sound alone is damn near enough to make me burst, pre-come already making small wet spots on my sweatpants. I lean down, finding her pert nipples she loves to have played with, nibbling on one before swirling my tongue around it and sucking it into my mouth.

“Cohen!” She jerks up off the bed, trying to sit up as I slip a second finger in, feeling her sex try to tighten impossibly before giving.

“I got you baby; I've always got you.”

She nods. Her lips parted as I scissor my fingers inside her, her brow furrowed. I keep going slower and slower, loving the feeling of her adjusting around me. How her arousal is leaking down my fingers onto my hand as I move onto the other nipple, sucking it into my mouth. Fuck, I could do this all day as I lift my eyes, watching her intently as her small hands fist the blankets. Her subtle whimpers making my self-control slip rapidly. I don't want to hurt her, not like this anyway. Her whimpers turn to moans as she bucks against my fingers, groaning in frustration when I pull them out before she can come. Her eyes are filled with tears as I crawl over her, stroking my cockhead across her clit. I can hear my heartbeat pounding in my ears. Tucking my head into her neck for a moment as my cheeks grow deceptively warm. Why am I fucking nervous? I've fucked before, many times... but this is different.

*This means something.*

*This means everything.*

*This isn't some girl I trained to imitate my butterfly, it's her.*

I notch myself in her entrance, fighting the urge to slam into her and fuck her soaked cunt brutally, consuming her all at once. Instead of this torturous pace I've set for myself. Her eyes widen as I push forward, slipping the head of my cock into her warm sex. Her hands grip hard on my arms, her nails digging into my skin, "Stop. I-I'm not. I can't. I've... never done this before." She looks up at me from underneath thick lashes and fuck if it isn't the hottest thing I've ever seen.

"Do you trust me?" I ask, cupping her cheek as gently as I can. Brushing a stray tear from the pinked flesh.

I swear I feel her silence like a knife in the gut. Letting out my breath when she finally answers with a shaky *no*.

I cock my head, watching her closer, anger and misplaced hurt bubbling up in my gut. My cock is fully aching now, my heart too. She looks away shaking her head, her eyes filled with unshed tears, “I trust you... with this. Just this.”

I don't hide my smile, knowing damn well I couldn't even if I wanted to. I don't deserve her trust, but it's nice to confirm I have it, at least with something like this. As I push forward, sinking deeper into her, I let my answering kiss serve as a thank you. She gasps against my lips, squeezing my arms tightly as I snake my hand down her chest, leaning back so I can play with her clit. Ease some of the painful stretching. Her moan comes only seconds before she hooks her legs around my hips, crying out as she forces herself further down on me.

“Give me all of it... just do it.” She gasps, her eyes pinched in pain.

“Rea...” The head of my cock is flush with her barrier. I kiss her deeply before pushing past, swallowing her cry. When I look back, there's an impossible amount of tears brimming in her eyes, her hands clutching me so tightly her knuckles are white, “You okay?”

She nods so I roll my hips, shifting further above her, grinding into her clit. I moan her name as I pull out. Her answering sounds spurring me on as I sink deep into her again. Burying myself. She's wet, so fucking wet, and now she's meeting me thrust for thrust. Her tight cunt clenching and gripping my cock, “Such a good girl. Does my cock feel good, baby?”

“Yes.” She gasps, clinging to me tighter. Her arms around me like this is all I've ever wanted. She turns her head to the side, her full lips parted, lost in her pleasure as I piston into her. Keeping my thrusts hard enough to sate her, but not so much it hurts. It's not like me to be so gentle, but this needs to be perfect.

*For her.*

*Anything for her.*

I feel my balls tighten, my cock jerking inside her. She's getting close too, her beautiful tight body so pliant, so ready to tip over the edge with me. She's not on birth control. I should pull out, just to be safe. I've always shown an overabundance of caution before, but she's different. The thought of filling her pretty little pussy up with my come makes a sick thrill run down my spine as I grip her chin, pulling her face back to me, "Eyes on me." She nods, her pretty green eyes slipping to mine. Her moans grow louder and more desperate as she grinds her clit into me, her palm sized breasts heaving with each thrust.

"You're about to come, aren't you baby?"

"Cohen..." she moans, and I slow my thrusts to a languid, agonizing pace.

"No," She gasps, dragging her nails across my back, "I- oh god, I'm about to come."

"Such a good girl. I'm going to fill you up, okay baby? You're going to take every drop of come I give you."

"You can't! I'm not on the- " I cut her off, slamming my lips into hers, my cock throbbing at the prospect of breeding my pretty little butterfly.

When I pull away, I feel her walls grip me and spasm. "I didn't ask Reagan; you'll take every fucking drop I pump into you."

"Oh! Yes!"

She's halfway through her climax when mine slams into me like a runaway train. I groan, my fingers bruising her flesh as I empty into her, making sure my cock is as deep as it'll go. When we're done, I stay nested inside her, pulling her onto my chest. We don't speak, my heart hammering

so hard its bordering on painful and I know it has little to do with the physical exertion. Soon her breathing slows, her fingers still tangled in my hair she'd been playing with.

“I love you, Rea. You'll never know how much.”

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## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

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## THE MORNING AFTER

There's no way to tell how long I manage to lie there, reveling in the gentle slope of her back, the way she grumbles in her sleep, the smell of the shampoo I bought for her. It was the closest thing I could find that resembled the one she used back then. An opened bottle sits unused in my shower as it has for years, so I could bring it to my nose and smell her from time to time. Expanding my lungs fully to inhale her, soaking in the feeling of her pressed against my chest until my... *aversions* finally make it impossible. I might've even dosed off a few times. I faintly remember being startled awake a few times. Alarmed by the weight of another body beside me, something I haven't experienced since she was a kid... since before everything got so fucking complicated. My reddened eyes flick towards the dim hallway, the faint morning light streaming in from the downstairs windows as the sound of the front door latch filters up. If Gilda is here, it can't be later than six in the morning. I brush my lips across her forehead, my eyes pitching closed as I breathe deeply, willing away the anxiety budding in my chest.

*We're dirty.*

*I need to get clean, need to clean her.*

My skin crawls as the thought of germs and bacteria overrides every normal worry I should have.

*Will she freak out when she wakes up?*

*Will she think I took advantage because she was drunk? I mean I did, but that wasn't the point.*

All of that would make sense, but all I can think about is scrubbing myself raw. I school my breathing, trailing my fingers gently over her back until I get to the bundled fabric still gathered around her hips. Repeating the process until she stirs, her long wavy hair falling across my chest as she digs her elbows into me to lift herself.

“Morning baby.”

She groans softly, rolling off me as she rubs her eyes.

*God, how can one person be so fucking sexy, adorable and make me want to jerk my hair out by the root all at once?*

My fists clench as she stares anywhere but at me, her lip trembling already, “So last night wasn’t just a super erotic dream?”

I chuckle rolling out of the bed, before twisting to pop my back, one of the more annoying parts of gaming and being hunkered over a computer for a living, “No, not a dream. I am although honored you think I’m dreamy.”

Her small delicate arm lifts to rest across her eyes, hiding them from me, “They would be so disgusted with us. So... disappointed.” I can’t see her tears, but her lip trembles just a little harder, her hands clenched tightly. I don’t know what to say... how to make her feel better. I’ve never known how to comfort her. I always just said whatever came to mind and it seemed to work. Why should this be any different?

“It would be quite the task for me to disappoint them any more than I already had.” It comes out dryer than I wanted it to. My eyes unfocused on the golden locket that's flipped over backwards on her chest.

“You're wrong.”

“About?”

She follows my eyes, quickly pushing up against my dark headboard, pulling the dirty sheets higher to cover her chest. My teeth grind so hard it's nearly painful.

*Don't hide from me and don't touch the sheets.*

“You never disappointed her Cohen, she adored everything you did. Always. She...” her voice cracks, “Kept up the cleaning schedule and the house rules until the day she died. She didn't finish that day... so I did. I thought maybe you'd come home when I told you the news, that you'd be... pleased with us.”

My hands tighten on my dresser, my battered knuckles aching. It's a welcome distraction from the faint hum of guilt in my chest. I won't feel guilty, not for any of it. Not with her wide green eyes staring at me while she's tangled in my sheets. I open my mouth to say something odious, something that would probably only serve to hurt her and myself more. But for the first time in my life... nothing comes to mind. I don't allow myself too much time to wonder what that means.

“Come on baby, let's get you cleaned up.”

Her cheeks flush a beautiful shade of pink, and much to my surprise, she listens. Pointlessly, infuriatingly turning away from me to tug her nightgown over her perfect breasts. Her eyes are misted with tears, her hands trembling. She won't look at me, not even a glance but when I offer her my hand, she takes it. And just like that... nothing else matters again.

Everything else seems insignificant in the light of *her*. Just like that, she's the only star in my perpetually dark sky.

Reagan leans by the counter, tracing the artistic lines in the marble. She tries and fails to hide the fact that she's watching me prepare the shower. Following every little movement as I make sure everything is ready and exactly as it should be. I can tell she's gearing up to say something, so I take my time despite my skin burning. I know Rea well, so fucking well. Sometimes she just needs a moment to gather her thoughts before she can voice them. I do my best not to obsess over what they might be, if she rejects me again...

*I can't... won't watch her try to pull away anymore. I'd rather-*

"If I'm ever going to trust you again... I need to know why you left, why you did all of this. I mean *all* of it, Cohen, every detail, even if it hurts." She takes a deep breath, hugging herself as I pull her closer to me, caging her in my arms. Her small ones still folded around herself like a protective barrier. She's so small my chin rests comfortably on top of her head, "Even if it ruins everything Cohen... I deserve to know."

If it ruins everything... my teeth sink into the inside of my mouth, trying to bite back my smile. That means she's admitting there's *something*. She's here with me, after all. Waiting to be stripped bare and bathed by me. Her mean older stepbrother she wanted nothing to do with. I nod, untangling her arms and tugging her nightgown over her head, "Of course butterfly, but after you're clean and your stomach is full."

Reagan

I stay in his enormous shower until my fingers have pruned, letting him tediously scrub every inch of my skin. Ignoring the way my core tightens at his touch. It wasn't sexual, even if everything he does becomes inherently

sexual by the time he's done doing it. He needed this... to clean me. He needed it to feel okay again. By the time he'd pulled me underneath the water, his chest was rising and plunging. His movements lacked their usual lethargic grace. He was unraveling. Even so, he didn't wash me in the clinical, rough way I'd expected. The way I'd watched him furiously scrub at his own hands and arms time and time again. He scrubbed my skin too hard for it to be comfortable sure, but it was done with a reverence that made tears bud in my eyes. My head is pounding, but I would've stayed there with him forever. It feels like a betrayal to myself to be with him like this... to want him so badly. Even then, I can't deny how good he feels... how *right*.

But it's not right, none of this is. It's so disgustingly wrong it's rewired my brain. I resent so much about him, the things he's done to me, but last night isn't one. No matter how this ends, I already know it will never be one. I can't bring myself to regret any of his violently sweet, adoring touches. Not really. I have a feeling the bits I haven't been told about the story could change that... I almost hope they do. I hope they are so dark and horrible they blanket every good thing. It'll be easier then... for me to hate him. To live without a constant weight bearing down on my chest. I'm lost in my own thoughts as I leave the bathroom, hoping to grab one of his shirts and make it to my room before Gilda sees me.

I never have had particularly *good* luck. That has never been more apparent than when I lift my head, meeting the soft eyes of the older woman. She's clutching a basket full of Cohen's bedding, staring at me with no small amount of surprise. My heart slams into my chest as her eyes flick to the bathroom, where the shower still runs.

"Gilda... I-

“Breakfast will be ready in a few, sweetheart.” She interrupts, spinning to head out of the bedroom door I don't think we ever closed last night.

“T-thank you.”

She nods, her small weak smile faltering for a moment as well as her steps. My breath halts, preparing myself for her judgment, her scolding and disgust. She looks back at me, indifferent to my stark nudity despite me obviously trying to cover every inch of my most private parts, “Are you okay, Reagan?”

I frown, “I- yes, of course.”

Relief floods her features I hadn't even recognized as tense before they no longer were. She nods again, releasing a heavy breath, “I'm glad.” I don't get a chance to ask her why I wouldn't be. I mean, aside from the obvious part of me having engaged in fucking pseudo incest. Grimacing to myself as I bolt out behind her. Grateful to see she's back in her own world halfway down the steps as I scurry down the hall, slamming myself into my room and collapsing on my bed.

*Why did she look at me like that?*

It was the same way those people looked at me when I woke up in the hospital as a kid... the same sympathetic concern you give to the most delicate endangered creatures. I clutch my stomach, remembering the way the man's weight felt on top of me, how much my body hurt...

*Stop.*

*It was Cohen. He'd never... he was so gentle.*

I swallow hard, staring up at the large butterfly painting above my bed.



My stomach has been rumbling furiously for at least twenty minutes when my bedroom door flies open, making me jump. Cohen's eyes are at least two sizes wider than usual. He looks almost worried before his eyes settle on me, calming to his usual disinterested scowl. My own eyes dart down to my previously packed up laptop, praying the shame I currently feel isn't showing on my face and that he doesn't look at the screen. He smirks, taking me in as he leans casually against the doorframe, adjusting his own features but I don't dare ask why. Fuck, I don't even breathe.

He was just taking so long in the shower; I got bored... and curious. I've never been more grateful for the earbuds in my ears, although what's playing through them makes it even more difficult to keep it cool.

"Why aren't you downstairs eating?" He asks, his eyes following mine as they dart down to my laptop again.

*Oh, Jesus Christ no.*

My flush spreads down my neck as I snap it closed. Too fast... way too fast judging by the way he shoves off the door frame, stepping closer to me.

"I... Gilda was changing your sheets when I came out of the shower, she knows. I was embarrassed... so I waited for you."

His thick brow rises, "So you're embarrassed by me then?"

"I'm embarrassed that I'm in a relation- that I slept with my stepbrother."

*A relationship? Get a fucking grip, Reagan.*

He's almost at the bed now. My brain defaults as I stumble off the other side. Awkwardly adjusting my oversized t-shirt as I try to head for the door.

I feel like a kid that got caught with their hand in the cookie jar, “I’m really hungry, though.” I mumble as I try to pass him, only for his fist to knot in the back of my shirt, jerking me back.

My heart lurches as I stumble, his free hand cupping my jaw gently, “Of course you are baby, I wouldn’t have taken so long if I knew you were waiting.”

I don’t know what to say as I remove my now quiet earbuds, tossing them on my dresser before I grab his hand away from my face, trying to steer him anywhere that’s not my laptop. My pulse is thrumming so hard I feel like I’m going to pass out.

“Let’s have a look at that laptop first.”

My palms flatten on his chest as he tries to walk to it in a pitiful, admittedly desperate plea to stop him. When he moves steadily forward anyway. I blanch, “Cohen, it’s my laptop. Anything that’s on it is none of your fucking business.”

His head snaps down towards me, that cold anger flaring in his eyes. Gone is the playful, loving glint. This is the Cohen that used to give me the silliest butterflies when I was younger. The overly possessive, controlling Cohen that never let his friends touch me, the one that always made it a big deal when I talked to boys... the Cohen that dragged me out of the club that night. He peels me from him with little to no effort at all. My eyes catching the superficial scratches my nails made on his skin last night as he roughly jerks out the charger lifting my laptop from the bed.

“Knock it off... it’s my stuff Cohen, you have no right.”

“If you haven’t figured out by now, butterfly, I’ll let you in on a little fucking secret. When it comes to you, I have every right. You’re mine and you’re hiding something from me. That’s not going to work.”

I scoff, trying to mask the way I'm half out of my mind with nerves, "That's grand coming from you."

When he opens the screen, it's locked and I can't hold back my relieved sigh.

"Password." He orders.

*I would rather die.*

"Reagan, we both know I don't need it. I'm giving you a chance here. Take it or I'll have your petulant ass so fucking sore you'll make those delightful whimpers every time you sit."

My belly heats, a tingle starting up between my legs despite my panic, "Oh, so we're back to that now?"

He smirks, not the happy kind, of course not... it's Cohen, "Yes I suppose we're back to pretending you didn't enjoy every second. That you aren't every bit as fucking obsessed with me as I am with you."

*This is not the time for butterflies, Reagan. We're at Defcon five.*

He just shakes his head at my blank gaping, my mind struggling for the right words to stop this. Any words as it opens and closes like a stupid fish. I watch in helpless, abject horror as he types on the screen, pulling up rows of code containing the inner workings of my laptop like he's brushing his teeth. No, I'm confident he focuses harder on that. I've walked my humiliated ass to the bed, plopping down in defeat as the speakers blare what was previously in my earbuds. My face is hot as Cohen's back straightens. If it was anything other than *Big Cock Stepbrother Makes His Sister Pay*, I would be proud I had managed to surprise him. Cohen stares at the screen, at the writhing bodies on it for just a moment longer before exiting out and pulling up some other webpage I don't recognize.

Something that looks important. I bury my face in my hands as clicks and lightning-fast typing fills my ears.

My body goes rigid when the laptop finally closes, followed by the sound of Cohen returning my earbuds to their charging dock. I don't lift my head until he tugs my hands free from my face, word vomit spewing out and coating us both before I have the chance to stop it, "I swear I've never looked at porn before. Well, not really. I just googled porn sites and I don't freaking know why. I was just curious, and I didn't know *that* was a thing. Well, I knew porn was a thing, but I didn't know it was like *that*. You were taking so long, so I just kept looking at more and Andrew told me—"

"Andrew told you to watch porn?" He growls.

"N-no." *Did I just fucking squeak?*

I gasp as he palms my throat, slamming me down to the bed, his eyes flaring as he jerks down the shorts I'm wearing, "Keep explaining baby. I haven't decided if this is going to be a punishment or not."

His fingers hook in my underwear, watching intently as he clenches his jaw at the sight of the damp spot caused by my arousal. I scramble to find words, "I was picturing us. I didn't really like it. I don't know. Andrew said being... attracted to your step sibling isn't all that weird but I-

A scream gets lodged in my throat as he pinches my bare clit sending waves a pain and strangely enough... pleasure through my body. My eyes immediately begin to water from the pain. A pain he quickly wipes away by the gentle press of his thumb on my clit, the tiny circles his making now. He slips another finger lightly across my sore opening, making my back arch off the bed.

"Am I being punished?" I gasp as he leans down, grazing his teeth along my thigh.

“Does this feel like a punishment, Reagan?”

I feel myself tightening, my arousal dripping from me as he releases my clit, running his fingers down my wet slit, “I- I can't tell.” I gasp as he slips two in. It hurts... more like a burn, but not necessarily in a bad way.

“Hmm.” He mumbles pensively, as if he's still trying to make up his mind. “No butterfly, I won't punish you for being curious. Sometimes I forget how young you are.”

I moan loudly. For a moment my nerves, my embarrassment and shame are gone. Long forgotten as he twists his fingers inside me, hitting that rough patch I didn't know I had, the one that he discovered last night that made me see stars. My belly flutters as he leans down. For a moment I think he's going to kiss me down there, but instead he blows cool air gently on my clit. Adding a whole new level of pleasure as he works his fingers in and out of me. My hands find his face, trying to lift him away from me as I erupt, coming loudly on his fingers. He doesn't pull them out right away, leaving me feeling full and sated as my orgasm wears off. Planting soft, sweet kisses on my stomach.

“What did you do... on my laptop?”

He looks up from underneath his dark eyelashes, annoyed I broke him away from his musing on my stomach, “Adult content blockers.”

I narrow my eyes on his, “You can't be serious. I'm an adult.”

A devilish smirk fills his face, a glint of warning in his ice-blue eyes, “Yes, you are, and the only cock you need to see is *mine*.”

“Then you can't watch porn either.”

He finally removes his fingers, giving my stomach a final kiss before he heads to my bathroom, “Never cared for it.”

“Bullshit.” I mutter, shaking my head.

My teeth clank shut as he leans out of the bathroom giving me a pointed look, “I've tried trust me, all I can ever think about is how unsanitary it all looks. Wondering if they've cleaned everything properly... Kind of kills the vibe.”

He doesn't wait for my response before he ducks back in, focusing on cleaning his hands, which is fine with me, considering I didn't really have one anyway. My core aches more this time when I move off my bed. It's painful, but in a good way. I suppose I should be offended by his need to wash himself so feverishly after touching me, but I'm not... it's just Cohen. Once he's done and I'm readjusted to his liking, he grasps my hand, tugging me from my place in front of my vanity.

“Hang on, you're still going to tell me everything... right?”

He takes a deep breath before nodding, “Everything.”

And he does. Once he decides I've eaten enough. He shakes his legs nervously underneath the kitchen table as he recounts his version of one of the worst nights of my life. A night I would've sworn couldn't have gotten worse, but I was wrong.

*God, I was so wrong.*



## CHAPTER NINETEEN

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## C ohen The Night He Left

I thought the drive out to the cliffs would calm me down, allow a bit of reason past the red haze that's settled in my vision. It didn't. My car rolls forward slowly, climbing up the steep hill, edging closer and closer to that wide, steep abyss. His screams are getting louder too. Another streak of more lightning cracks across the sky, ensuring even the universe wants this to happen. If it didn't, it wouldn't be storming, right? There would be groups of stoned teenagers here to stop me. To force me to rethink a terrible decision I made the moment I saw his cock hanging out of his pants. Staring through the open window at *her*.

*At my sweet Reagan. Innocent, kind Reagan.*

Reagan, who is still too fucking trusting after whatever happened to her all those years ago at that shelter. Reagan who trusts her big brother to protect her, to keep her safe. It's not even a question in my mind as I reach forward popping the trunk. No one has to know and if they do... that's fine too. I just made more money than most people see in a lifetime. It would be just as good in her hands as mine. As soon as there's an opening, he jumps

from the trunk. My hand snaps out grabbing his ankle, sending him flying towards the ground with a yelp. I stare down at him as he scrambles in the dirt. The sight of his flabby, exposed cock only pisses me off more.

“Cohen, stop. You know who my dad is. He’ll know it was you. He knows you don’t fucking like me.”

*He’s not even trying to stand up.*

“Get up.”

He shakes his head. His dark eyes look like saucers, “I don’t want to fight you. Fuck that shit. I- I swear I’ve never done it before. I- I’m in therapy. I’m working on it, I swear.” Spit spews from his mouth as he speaks and it’s one of the most repulsive things I’ve ever seen.

“Get up.” I growl, my clenched fists shaking with increasingly violent tremors.

“I’m fucking sorry, okay? Calm down!”

The first swing of my fist happens so suddenly I don’t realize I’ve done it until my knuckles connect jarringly with his teeth. It hurts, fucking hell it hurts, but I don’t stop. I *can’t* stop. Time slips and it’s all fists, boots and then my hands are around his blood slick neck. His body makes a disgusting squelching sound, and it’s all I have not to vomit at the thought of touching him. My hands form a vice around his throat, squeezing so hard my knuckles pop. At least I think it’s my knuckles. The rain feels like tiny pinpricks against my skin as it pours harder on us. I refuse to let go. I won’t. Not until my body forces me to release him, until he hasn’t moved in a while and I’m confident he won’t again. I sag in the mud, my back pressed against the tire on my car as I jerk off my shirt, frantically wiping at my blood covered hands, but the more I look the more there is. My arms, jeans, boots... I’m covered. I’m covered so thoroughly I’m not sure what’s from

my own sliced open knuckles and what's his. His face is mangled, looking far more like my dad did the last time I saw him than Jake.

I grew up with this kid, played basketball and gamed with him. Smoked with him, I mean we were never best friends, but we were... *friends*. My body screams in protest as my mind struggles to find any trace of the remorse I should be feeling. A bit of disgust with myself, as I lift him underneath his shoulders, dragging his limp form through the slick mud. A grunt leaves my throat as I slip, his body landing heavily on mine. His head is still hot. I can feel it against my bare stomach and the need to vomit flushes my skin.

*I need to get home.*

*Just get home.*

I force the picture of him hunkered over in front of her bedroom window to the front of my mind as I continue our slow ascent up the steep hill to the ledge. He's heavy, really fucking heavy. The rain and sudden, unforgiving gusts of wind sting my eyes. The thunder cracks loud enough to rattle my bones as I heave him off the side of the steep embankment. Time slips again and when I come back, I'm still staring down into the dark where his body had fallen from view. The faint memory of thuds and crunches has me scrambling to my feet as I head back to my car. My hands shake as I tear myself from my mud and blood-soaked clothes. My constricted chest feels lighter the further I get to clean. I restocked my car yesterday, so I have everything I need. It's fine.

*I'm fine.*

*She's safe now.*

*I did that.*

*I did what I had to, to make her safe.*

*I had to.*

I repeat that like a mantra in my mind as I wipe down my bare form with all the time and accuracy I would at home in the shower. Not in the shadowy woods... in the middle of a thunderstorm less than three feet from a crime scene. For all of my attention to detail, it doesn't help much; my knuckles won't stop bleeding. The roads are harder to navigate on the drive back to the house; more maybe now that my exhaustion is kicking in. The squeal of tires forces my eyes back open after they'd drifted shut again. A new dump of adrenaline slams into me as I jerk the wheel, my car skidding to the right just barely out of the path of the large truck I nearly collided with. My heart is hammering in my chest again, and that nauseous feeling grows the closer I get to home.

By the time I'm parked in the driveway, it's almost midnight. Nobody usually stays up this late, not even Rea, despite how hard she tries. I cringe as my tennis shoes squeak against the linoleum floor, my hands throbbing as they grip the handle of my old gym bag. The house is thankfully dark and quiet as I make my way up the stairs. Each step hurts more than the last. Muscles I had never been aware of before screaming out in pain.

“Cohen.”

I jolt at Raymond's voice, barely turning around to glance at him with my eyebrows raised.

“What the fuck are you doing? That bag is trailing water everywhere.” He hisses, his clothes disheveled like he's just waking up. My eyes dart down, my pulse finding a way to speed up even further as he flips on the hall light. Perfectly illuminating the trail of pink tinged water I've left like a stupid, murderous slug.

*Fuck.*

He frowns, his lips pulled back in disgust, “What is that? Where have you been?”

“Out and don’t worry about it, I’ll get it cleaned up before you leave for work.”

I knew I fucked up before his eyes met mine, narrowed. I’m never that agreeable... especially not to him.

“What happened there?” He asks, gesturing to my bloody knuckles.

I shrug, “A disagreement. Night Raymond.”

“Cohen.” He spits. Suddenly the bag jerks roughly from behind, taking me with it.

I barely catch the banister to stop my decent, ripping the bag from his fist as I whirl around, stepping down to his level, “I’ll warn you one fucking time Ray, not tonight.”

“You’ll warn me, huh? This is my house!” He yells before we both freeze. Our eyes snapping to the top of the stairs, waiting to see if sleepy auburn-haired girl peers over.

Mom rounds the corner, house shoes slapping the floor like paddles, her glasses sat high on her nose. She frowns, tugging a robe my dad bought her tightly around her shoulders, “What is going on? You’re going to wake up Rea.”

“Fucking great.”

Her eyes widen on my hands and suddenly she’s rushing towards me, a nonsensical string of questions leaving her thin lips. I just glare at Raymond, dropping the bag behind me on the step as she gathers my hands in hers. Studying the damage like she’ll know what to do outside of antibacterial ointment and band aids.

My rage and anxiety finally hit a detonation level as I rip my hands from her, forcing her to stumble back. “For the love of god, both of you fuck off!” I hiss as quietly as possible. I’m so close to a full-blown anxiety attack, my ability to hold back the vomit lumped in my throat is dwindling with each touch, each question. I jerk the bag up, turning to stomp up the stairs when Raymond’s large hand slams down on my shoulder, his meaty fingers digging into the sore muscle.

He jerks me around, my mom letting out a startled cry as I rear back, slamming my battered fist into his jaw. I hear the crunch of my already fractured knuckles before I feel the pain. Raymond’s large, lanky form knocks loudly onto the floor, his light brown eyes wide with shock.

“Fuck.” I curse, bowing over to grab my hand. It hurts… a lot. There’s no fucking way it’s not broken. I’m too focused on my hand to see it when he gets to his feet, lunging for me.

My mom’s small frame grips onto his to stop him, her slip-on house shoes tripping her up as she pushes her weight into him, “Stop it right now!” She cries her voice cracking, “Cohen what has gotten into you?”

I don’t answer her. Turning back to head up the stairs, my mind a garbled mess of pain and everything the fuck else.

“Cohen James Bennet, stop right now!”

*I ignore her.*

The bag is jerked back again, only this time I’m not fast enough, not anywhere close. I don’t even think I really try. I’m… exhausted.

Raymond has it on the floor by the time I’m turned towards them enough to collapse on the stairs, my chest heaving. I try not to see the concern in my mom’s eyes as she rushes to my side, her hands fluttering over me like she doesn’t know what to do, how to help. For a moment, I feel bad. She’s

crying and I know I'm scaring her. She wants to hold me, I can tell, but I move away anyway. I hate it as soon as I do it. My head rests against the cool wooden banister as Raymond stills, his eyes widening as he pulls out my bloody shirt. His attention snapping to me, and then my mom.

“Oh god, Cohen... what did you do baby?” She whispers.

*I don't answer.*

“Cohen.” Raymond warns, quickly stuffing the contents back into the bag. I don't miss his own hands shaking.

For a minute, I think about lying. I even come up with a good one or two before I realize... I'm just too tired. So, I tell them everything. From the moment I got home and saw what Jake was doing to the moment I shoved his lifeless body off the cliff. Mom is sobbing, making the same terrible sounds she made the day she found me and dad in the shed. Raymond just watches me, a strange, unsettling look in his eyes and... I just want to go to bed. I want to bundle Rea up in her fuzzy butterfly blanket and hold her. I want it so badly; tears sting the backs of my eyes.

“Cohen, do you have no idea what you've done? You killed someone. W-what are we supposed to do Ray?” She sobs, frantically pacing around the hall.

“Lynn.” He breathes, never taking his eyes off mine.

A long moment passes, mom growing more and more panicked before he gives me a slight nod turning towards her, “Lynn.” He repeats, harsher now, “Take the bag, the clothes, shoes, all of it and wash it.”

Her eyes widen in horror, “Ray...”

“Wash it over and over again. When you think it's clean... wash it again.”

Her sobs halt in her chest as she nods, holding back a gag as she takes the bag from her husband and heads for the stairs.

“Have you told anyone?”

I shake my head, too exhausted to be surprised or even partially grateful.

“Don’t. ever. Not Andrew, nobody.”

*Wasn’t planning on it.*

He asks me several more questions, all that I answer with barely discernible movements of my head. I’m halfway nodding out on the steps when he thrusts cleaning supplies into my arms, “Get your trunk, I’ll start on the carpet.”

I’m numb and halfway asleep, allowing the process of cleaning to work me into a comfortable trance as I scrub the trunk. Time seems to evade me a lot tonight. When reality bleeds back in, I’m sitting under a stream of brutally hot water. It hurts, but I keep scrubbing myself, my broken hand tucked painfully into my chest as I go. The air of the house feels jarring and cold when I finally make my way out of the bathroom, frowning at the sight of trash bags outside my formally locked bedroom door. I barge in, feeling more awake now. Angrier... as Raymond piles more of my stuff into bags, touching everything with his bare hands.

“What the fuck are you doing?” I snarl from the doorway.

“You’re leaving.”

“The fuck I am.”

He stands, throwing a stack of hard drives onto the floor before storming across the small room, his finger jabbing at my chest, “The fuck you are, and if you ever... ever so much as breathe in the direction of my daughter or this house again I call that kid’s dad and tell him everything.”

Rage... no *hurt* boils through me as my mom whimpers from behind me, her hand clasped over her mouth to stifle the sounds, “Mom...”

*Don’t do this.*

*Not tonight.*

She cries harder, her chest heaving with the force of her sobs, her golden locket clutched tightly in her free hand.

*Mom...*

I clench my jaw, shoving past her before heading for Reagan.

“Take one more step and I call the cops.” Ray warns from behind me.

My hand screams as I attempt to curl it into a fist. The already bruised section of his jaw doesn't make me feel any better, “I'm not leaving without saying goodbye.” My voice cracks. Fuck, my voice actually cracks.

“And tell her what Cohen, huh? What would you even say?” He snaps. He's... *desperate* for me to go. My eyes fall past him to my mom, shaking her head.

*She wants me to go too.*

One look back at Reagan's shut bedroom door is all it takes to shatter my heart so thoroughly I can feel the shift everywhere throughout my body and mind. Everything left in me that cared, that wanted to do better... get better evaporated like it was never even there.

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## CHAPTER TWENTY

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## R eagan

My eggs and toast sit cold and abandoned in front of me as I stare up at Cohen. My heart beating harder than it ever has before. His eyes are glued to the locket on my chest, looking at it as if it were a tarantula, or in his case, a used tissue. I understand now why he hates it so much... why he hated them in the end. I remember that night too, waking up and stumbling through the dark hallway into his room, using my special key. When I realized the bed was empty, I was sad he wasn't home. Then I looked around... my heart sank to my feet. In my eyes... that was the first time I had ever experienced betrayal.

But it wasn't *me* who had been betrayed.

Hot, angry tears fill my eyes, my fist tightening so hard on the fork its silver handle aches in my palm.

"Butterfly... I'll..." He takes a deep breath, "Understand if you need time to process this. All of it... but know it doesn't matter what I did or what happened that night. Nor how you *feel* about it. You aren't leaving."

He doesn't understand. It takes several long moments for the right words to form on my tongue. All the while his leg bounces under the table, his hands fisted like he's preparing himself for something. For a fight. That's what it always is to Cohen. His whole life is one really drawn-out fight. I'm angry. God, I'm fucking angry... with him for manipulating me instead of speaking to me. For taking my choice from me... but if I'm being honest, I don't know if I would've been able to hear him before now. I'm angry at dad and Lynn, especially dad.

"Rea--"

I shove up from the table, slapping my hands down hard against the surface just as my tears crest, spilling free from my nearly constantly reddened eyes, "They abandoned you when you needed your family most." I sob, "They did it, told you to leave for *my* benefit. How don't you hate me? I took your home, your mom, your family. You can never go back there. I remember when they found his body months after you left. They came to the house to talk to my dad, but I saw how the cop looked at me. He looked... ashamed, like he knew what his son thought of me. I... I ruined your life because creeps can always sniff out a fucking victim."

He's up from the table, lifting me into his arms before I can protest. How could he think I would resent him for this... for protecting me and ruining his life in the process?

I inhale deeply as he carries me from the kitchen. Sitting us on the couch, adjusting me until I'm straddling his lap, my head buried in his neck, "I could never hate you for that. Never. I'm sorry--"

"Don't you dare apologize to me for something you had no control over. You remember the night I caught you up on the cliffs smoking?"

I nod, trying to silence my cries as he runs his hand over the back of my head like you'd console a child. This was what he felt like before he left, the same as my dad did, safe and warm.

“You started to tell me that night... what happened to you...” He runs his fingers over the large scar on my arm making shivers roll up my spine, “It was that haunted look in your eyes... I couldn't let him live after I saw that look.” I fight him, only a little before I let him pull my head back, his eyes pinning mine. It's an indescribable... impossible feeling. These past few months have overwhelmed and overwritten everything I thought I knew about myself, about him. I have so many questions, but right now, I don't care much about any of them. I want his touch... and his lips even more.

“You're my girl, aren't you Rea?”

I nod my head sniffling, “I always was... even when you were being awful.”

My heart warms at the sound of his musical laughter, the way his blue eyes grow impossibly light, taking the edge off the ever present raw ache in my heart. When his lips touch mine, it feels like everything... all at once. Colors explode behind my eyes and everything terrible matters just a little less. The distance between us that felt like a trillion miles is now less than an inch. Every misdeed, every lie and trick was born from indescribable love. Dad used to say something like that, right?

*“Love is a beautiful, confusing and painful thing, but it's worth holding onto. Love is special and it helps make us who we are. When it hurts, it teaches us who we don't want to be. Love makes us stronger and weaker, cry and laugh and scream. There's beauty in every lesson, even when the lessons make us feel as if we'll never love again.”*

Why can't he be my lesson and my salvation? My safety and the thing that scares me. He's beautiful and hard-edged. He's everything my dad taught me about and the boy he tried to keep me from.

When his tongue prods the opening of my lips, I moan, letting him in. Letting him consume and swallow me whole just the way his eyes promised he would that very first day I arrived on his doorstep. We're not okay, I am *not* okay. Things have never been more convoluted or beautiful. All those things that have tormented me since the day they pulled our parents from the water are there, that grief is there begging, demanding to be felt. But how could I when his hand is knotting in my hair, pulling me in deeper than I ever thought I could go?

Right now, Cohen... his messed up devotion and love is all I want to feel. I want to drown in it until it's the only thing I'm capable of feeling. As if answering my unspoken request he lifts us, his hardened length pressing against my core. Despite the ache there, I want it... I *need* it. I open my mouth to tell him as much when the front door opens, making my heart slam up into my throat.

"Mr. Bennet, you have a meeting in less than an hour. The board is getting restless since you've gone silent."

Flush colors my cheeks at the hard edge to Gilda's voice. Shame forces me to try to wiggle free from his arms. Cohen only tightens his hold on me, making my skin break out in goosebumps as he presses my aching center harder against him, "Thank you, Gilda."

I don't dare look at her as he starts up the stairs, "Please let me down." I whisper, burying my head in his neck again.

"Not a chance."

"Cohen..."

“You have no reason to be ashamed, butterfly. Although it is really fucking cute.”

I let out an exasperated laugh, fighting to swallow back every moan he tries to bleed from me the rest of the way up the stairs. It doesn't take long for that embarrassment to fade to the back of my mind. A gasp leaves my lips as he spins me away from him. Forcing me to face myself in the black-rimmed mirror in his room, “Undress.”

I don't fight him, don't even take a moment to keep up the pretense that I want to. We both know better. No matter how taboo... how innately *wrong* what we're doing is, neither one of us has the strength to stop. The fabric of my shirt was soft and comfortable a few hours ago. Now it feels oppressive and restricting. In my hurry I try to tug it off me. Pulling it straight up and over my head was something I've never been able to do with any sort of fluidity. Cohen's fingers trace the swell of my breasts before he helps tug it off the rest of the way. I do my best not to think about how incredibly unsexy it is to get your arms stuck in your shirt. His eyes glint with amusement as he pulls at my pants and underwear, working them down my thighs until they drop on their own. Allowing me to kick free of them. My body is tense, my thighs slicked with my arousal, but he's in no rush.

“You're going to be late for your meeting.”

“I usually am.” He answers absently, his tongue tracing the fading outline of where he marked my neck.

“Cohen please.” I whine, leaning my head back on his chest, my core throbbing for even the lightest touch.

“You've always had such good manners, baby, please and thank you. My perfect girl...” His thumb brushes over my hardened nipple before he captures it, rolling it between his fingers.

“Have you... always wanted me like this?”

He stills for a moment, and I regret allowing the question to spill from my lips.

*Please don't stop.*

A small smile forms on his lips when he senses my apprehension. Cohen has always been so... intuitive when it comes to me. He shakes his head softly, planting kisses on my jaw between words, his long fingers and scuffed knuckles trailing down the pale plane of my stomach, “*This...* started almost a year before they died. Just a fleeting thought from pictures a *want* at night when my mind drifted to you. I wasn't... infatuated with you in this way when you were a kid. If I'm honest, a part of me always knew that I would be one day. I clung to you, you were everything to me back then, Rea... and you're everything now.”

His palm slides up my back, pushing me lower until my elbows rest on the dresser. The sound of his pants dropping fills me with anticipation, “You have more questions, don't you baby?”

I nod, pulling my bottom lip into my mouth.

“Ask.” His cock runs the length of my slit, over and over again. The tip of his head catching my clit with every pass.

“W-“ I gasp as he notches himself inside me,” Groaning loudly as I push back into him.

“What was that?”

My mind scrambles for a moment. Trying to remember the question as his fingers lightly, adoringly run the length of my spine. My sex gripping and fluttering as he eases his way in, inch by inch, “Hard to think when your tight little pussy is getting filled up with my cock, isn't it baby?”

I groan, breathing past the slight burn, knowing soon it will turn to mind numbing pleasure, “Where is she... that girl?” I watch him in the mirror as his eyes darken, his jaw clenching ever so slightly. My mouth opens in a silent cry as he thrusts his hips forward suddenly, sinking in so deep for a moment I think I feel him in my belly. My eyes go wide, my hands fisting on the dresser at the sudden sharp pain before he adjusts me. Pushing forward again at a slightly different angle and again I'm consumed by a burning pleasure I had never experienced before. The discomfort is forgotten in a rapturous minute.

“Gone. Locked in a facility that can help her.”

He wrings a sharp cry from me as he thrusts forward, burying his throbbing length again to the hilt. My body reacts, constricting around him as he stretches me. His handsome, brutally sharp face disappears from my view in the mirror as he rolls his hips. His thrusts are gentle, building me up to something bigger as his tongue teases my back. Each time he slips his cock in, it finds an even deeper mind-numbing spot inside me. I'm lost in pleasure, him draped across my back as he ruts inside me. His cock filling me up so tight I feel like I might explode, just like he said he would.

“What happened to her? Why did she hate me so much?”

I can't stifle my scream as his teeth press into my back, biting me hard as his hand finds my clit, drawing those tiny little circles that drive me crazy. Soon the pain blends with pleasure in a way I had never imagined possible. My core tightens around him as I come apart violently shoving back into him as he stills, licking and kissing the place he bit as I fuck myself on his length.

Tears tumble free from my eyes, my mind so hazy from my climax I can barely focus on his words. I try my best, knowing their importance. “I

trained her to emulate you. I made her wear contacts; she died her hair auburn like I asked her to. I wouldn't... speak to her when she messed up. If she ruined the fantasy. I made it clear I wanted nothing to do with *her* unless she reminded me of you."

His words sober me quickly. I try to push up from the dresser, trying to pull him out of me, but he doesn't let me. His arm bands around my waist hauling me up against his chest as he continues to fuck me, "That's... *horrible Cohen.*" I whisper, chastising myself for the butterflies in my stomach and the way pleasure is quickly washing away any apprehension his confession filled me with.

He uses my hair to steer my lips to his, and I let him. For a moment we're all teeth, lips and tongue and neither of us pull away until there's no oxygen left between us, "Yes, it was and the moment I looked close enough to see her struggling I cut her off."

"So she..."

"Yeah baby, I'm sorry you got hurt."

I watch his reddened cock in the mirror as it thrusts in and out of my dripping core. Waves of pleasure are coaxing me towards another climax. I'm so transfixed by it I almost miss the way his lips pull up... just slightly into a smirk. He's not that sorry. I suppose he wouldn't be. My mind forces the image of them in the parking lot into my mind. How he spoke to her... and I'm angry again, irrationally so. I squirm, trying to get away from him, but his arms are like steel bands keeping me in place. When I finally wiggle free, I whimper at the sudden loss of warmth or pleasure he was giving me. It was so abrupt it almost hurt; I don't fight that hard when he grabs me again, slamming me against the wall before he hikes me up. Spreading my legs wide with his arms before impaling me on his cock.

His lips crash against mine, swallowing a scream that's only slightly more pain than pleasure, "You have no need to be jealous, baby. You're the only one I'll ever fuck again. I'm yours Rea, all yours. I always was. Now be a good girl and let me pump your pretty little cunt full of my come. Can you do that for me?"

I gasp, my head falling backwards as he leans in, capturing my nipple and sucking hard. The words I had just found leave as quickly as they came. My name leaving his lips in a moan erases everything that isn't him as he finds his own release, grinding me down on his cock until I burst apart for a second time. Knotting my hands in his dark wavy hair, he's still lodged inside me as he pulls us away from the wall walking towards the shower. When he pulls out, an unbridled surge of anxiety washes over me. "Cohen, I'm not on birth control..." I whisper, hating how ridiculously shy I sound.

He flips on the water, pressing a few more controls, lowering the temperature before he pulls his eyes from the stream, "I can't get you pregnant, baby." The way he says it makes a lump form in my throat, it sounds like an apology.

I immediately feel guilty for the amount of relief I feel, "Oh that's okay... I-I uhm, is there something-"

He lets out a little chuckle, "I had a vasectomy a few years ago. Kids and germaphobes... don't mix."

His eyes widen slightly as I burst into laughter. The small look of amused concern only makes me laugh harder. Like he's worried my mind has just broken. My stomach is aching by the time I finally get myself back under control. He's pulled me into the shower and gotten to work cleaning himself from between my legs. I let my back fall against the cool sterile wall, "This is all so messed up."

He nods thoughtfully, “Are you disappointed that I can't get you pregnant?”

I think for a moment, soaking up the flush on his cheeks. Cohen has never been coy about expressing his dislike for children, particularly their aptitude for carrying bacteria. He dubbed them germ riddled gremlins several years ago when I had dragged him to a county fair.

*Poor guy was horrified the whole time.*

“No. I never really... thought of myself as a mom. I'm young though, there's time.”

He stands so quickly I flinch. He towers over me, seemingly unaware of his head being almost directly underneath the spray as he grips my wrists tightly in his hand, “Do you think that this claim I've laid on you has an expiration date? You think in a few months I'll tire of you and let you go? Let you go find some boring fucking shrimp dicked guy and start your new happy little family.” He scoffs, his eyes flickering like a blue flame as water cascades down his face, “You're mine Reagan, today, tomorrow and fifteen fucking years from now.”

*I guess I had just assumed...*

“Is that what you wanted, Reagan? Huh? Someone else?”

He clenches his jaw, waiting for my answer, but I can't give it to him. Not even with the promise of violence in his eyes.

The finality of his words sink in all at once, snapping away the pretty veneer his affection had covered our situation in. *He* although not intentionally got our parents killed, he fucked a poor girl up so badly she tried to kill *me*. Twice. He lied, cheated, and manipulated me and everyone else to keep me under his control.

He takes a deep breath, letting it all out at once. “Don't do that baby, don't look at me like that.”

“This is all so... messed up Cohen.”

He leans in quickly, cupping my cheeks in his hands. His lips pressing against mine as he kisses me deeply. Stealing my breath and mind again, “Did that feel wrong?”

I don't answer him because suddenly every pump of my heart is raw and brutal.

“Reagan.” He growls, “Did that feel wrong?”

I shake my head. It's the truth... it didn't feel wrong. Far from it, but the look of vulnerable, delicate relief in his eyes makes me feel like I lied. He tugs me into his chest, kissing the top of my wet head. Another thing I can't believe he's okay with as the water pours over us.

“I love you.”

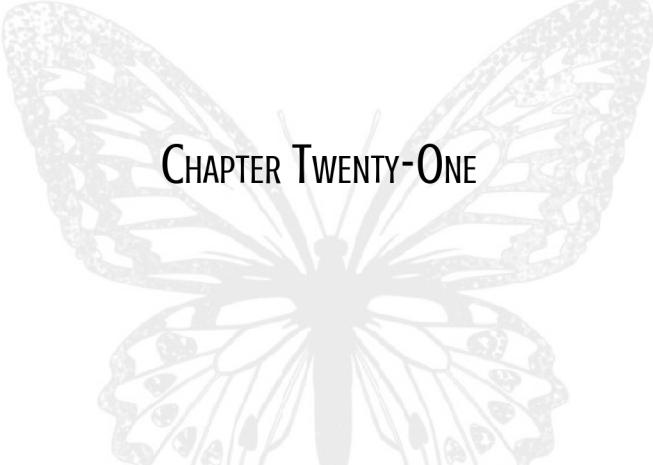
I hug myself tighter to him, desperate to go back to that happy, numb place I had found myself in. My anger for him is gone. I could never be angry at him for saving me. For needing me as badly as I needed him... but-

“Butterfly...” He warns.

How could a warning sound so full of love... so gentle?

“I love you too, Cohen, so much it hurts.”

*I can feel his smile against my head as tears bud in my eyes.*



## CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

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## R eagan

The next three weeks pass like a blur of soul-crushing kisses, delicate forbidden touches and experiences I never thought I'd have with a man I never thought I would love in this way.

*And God, how I love him.*

I feel myself slipping, caring less and less about the wrongs and losing myself to Cohen. He doesn't even have to take me; I give myself freely... wholeheartedly despite my brain screaming stop. Warning me of the inevitable fall that comes after a high like this. Flying, floating so far from reality. Logically, I know staying hidden away in a stone house with gray walls and heated blue eyes won't solve anything. It doesn't take away the raw ache in my chest; the mind shattering grief or the anger I drown in alcohol. What's worse is he lets me... because he knows too. In the daylight it's sleeping in late, him following me around as if he's tethered to me. Gilda shoving water and food down my throat. I'm in a beautiful prison with a beautiful man that adores me.

*And I can't leave.*

If that beautiful, fucked up man stopped adoring me and Gilda stopped caring for me like a broken little bird... if the stone walls crumbled and the alcohol stopped being enough... I still couldn't leave. My only money comes from Cohen. The luxury car he bought me last week is in his name....

*His name.*

*Not mine.*

My cell phone, the calls from old friends checking in have gone unanswered for weeks, so they stopped calling. When they do, I don't dare answer. Seeing the way his fists clench, jaw sets hard as he watches me carefully. He's a volcano, the way he's always been. Now there's no one to steady him, no one to keep him at a safe distance. No one left to catch us as we hurtle towards the sun. He refuses to leave the house. When I ask to, he distracts me with orgasms, words and threats that make my face flush and core heat. He's happier than I think I've ever seen him, but after those distractions he slips into his medicine cabinet, taking a pill or two to take the edge off his anxiety. After we left last time... even the question became too much for him to handle. My chest fills with emotion, way too much confusing emotion as my hand clasps around the locket on my chest.

*“Why give me access to all this, Cohen?” My lips press against his bare chest. His hands still knotted in my hair, the wine making my belly warm.*

*“Because you deserve it, butterfly. You deserve every explanation I can give you, access to all of me” He pauses kissing me gently on the top of the head, “Even if it’s just to hurt me the way I hurt you, to burn it all to the ground. It’s yours to do with what you please, so am I. My only requirement is that you-“*

*“Stay.” I interrupt.*

*He smiles. God, that smile.*

My head is already a little fuzzy as I close out of the game I was playing, not bothering to save anything. My eyes once again drifting up to the omnipotent closed door of his office. He's been there for three hours now, livestreaming to hype up a new game he partnered to develop.

I didn't even know he had a new one coming out. No wonder the other higher ups at Astro Gaming have been annoyed with him since I arrived. Even Andrew has been uncharacteristically quiet, giving us our space, I guess. Or maybe Cohen just hasn't told me when he's called. My eyes burn as I rub them, ignoring the lightness in my head as I make my way into the kitchen, scowling at the bottle on the counter. I'm three glasses in which is where Cohen has decided to cut me off, but he's usually here... and I'm bored out of my fucking mind. Pursing my lips, I quickly opt for disobedience. Knowing whatever punishment he has for me will be more pleasure than pain. He spanked my sex a little too hard a few nights ago. I almost couldn't suppress my laughter at the horrified look in his eyes when I hissed in pain instead of the string of guttural moans I'd been offering up. He wants to hurt me... but in a good way, a concept I still kind of struggle with.

A wave of nausea hits me as the man's weight settles on my back again, knowing he's still out there somewhere... I don't think I'll ever stop feeling like he follows me, lurking in every dark corner like a ghost. He didn't rape me, which I suppose I should feel grateful for. That other residents heard the sounds of his feet and fists connecting with my limp form before he got that far. He didn't need to rape me; the damage was done. I'll never forget him, and he'll never forget me. I'll never forget the sound of his gruff voice as I drifted in and out.

*“Does that feel good?”*

*“You like being hurt, don't you?”*

*“I was just trying to help you; this is your fault, not mine.”*

*“You just had to fuckin scream.”*

My hands tighten on the bottle, fighting the urge to bolt upstairs and release the contents of my stomach as I pour another glass. I don't sip this one, I down it so fast I'm sure it's going to head straight back up. The hot water from the sink burns my hands as I scrub them, making sure to get everywhere and do it perfectly. I've already decided I have no intention of staying down here alone anymore.

*If he's too busy to come to me... I'll go to him.*

*I feel... off.*

*Destructive.*

*Things have felt too calm for too long. Everything on the outside is almost normal, and that pisses me off. I don't hang around with my thoughts long enough to figure out why.*

When I make it to my room, I unceremoniously shed his Astro Gaming hoodie. Taking a long moment to wrap the sleeve over my hands and inhale it deeply. Breathing it in like it might somehow get stuck in the tiny hairs in my nose. The smell of his warm, earthy musk and hand sanitizer makes my heart flutter in my chest. Stepping out of my oversized sweatpants proves slightly more difficult, the soreness in my core and ass making each stretch. Each pass of fabric feels like a warning in and of itself. It doesn't stop me from rifling through overflowing badly packed boxes of clothes for something more attention grabbing. Not that what I was wearing tonight was an issue to him earlier. I'm still suspicious Gilda dropped that dinner

plate in protest of the way Cohen was pinning me in my chair, making all manner of threatening promises if I refused to eat the rest of my food.

I tow out a black miniskirt I bought at the mall a year ago. It fits a little snugger this time; I try not to think of the way Lynn clapped as I walked out of the dressing room, my cheeks bright pink with embarrassment. I was already at my spending limit; my birthday money had run dry fifty dollars ago. I knew logically there was no fucking way I'd ever even wear it, so I left it in the room. Only to find out, much to my dad's horror, she'd slipped it on the counter to buy when I wasn't looking.

*And now I'm using it to seduce her son.*

The thought makes me shudder as I rip the tag off, kicking my underwear off in the corner with it as well. I won't be needing them. My auburn hair is longer than I've ever kept it, falling in loose waves over my breasts. I turn, looking over my shoulder at another weird version of myself. Never really cared much for the color black, but it suits me now. It matches the look in my eyes, his bite marks adorning my skin.

*I feel all grown up.*

*I'm not sure if I like it... This darker, haunted version of me.*

*Or maybe I was always going to be like this. Maybe before wasn't me at all.*

Pushing my hair out of my face, I smile, the brightest one I've got. The one that they loved; the one Cohen would spend hours coaxing out of me in those first few days we met. There's a disconnect there now, one I'd never seen on myself before. I feel happy like before when his attention is on me; I feel untouchable even. It's when his attention is elsewhere that the problems start. I swallow hard, tearing my eyes away from the girl in the mirror in time to see her stumble just a little. I tug out a black bralette.

*It's slutty, confident and dark.*

*Entirely not me.*

Nodding to myself I kick my way through the mess of my room, the only place I'm allowed a mess. The only place in the house that looks just as disorganized as my feelings and thoughts. That's why I avoid it, not that sleeping next to Cohen is a chore by any stretch of the imagination. Except when I sweat or drool on him and he leaves to take a shower in the middle of the night, that's a tad annoying. We'd never slept so... close before. There was always a fuzzy blanket wrapped around me. He called it my *Rea cocoon*. It felt safe, wrapping myself as tight as I could when I got scared. If it was ever not tight enough, he was always there to help.

My bathroom lights are bright enough to be a personal slight against my alcohol induced high, making me squint as I dig around my makeup bag for lipstick. My eyes haven't fully adjusted when I shut it back off, using the dim glow of the wax burner I brought from home to apply it. When I step back, the tiny stick feels like a lead pole in my hand. My heart seizes in my chest as I reach for a wipe to remove it before the tears come.

I don't know why I took her makeup with me. I should've thrown it away, even I can admit its kind of gross but... it's *her* lipstick. The one she always wore, a deep wine red that made her look so... regal. My eyelashes flutter rapidly, trying to dispel tears because it doesn't look regal on my full lips.

*I look... cheap.*

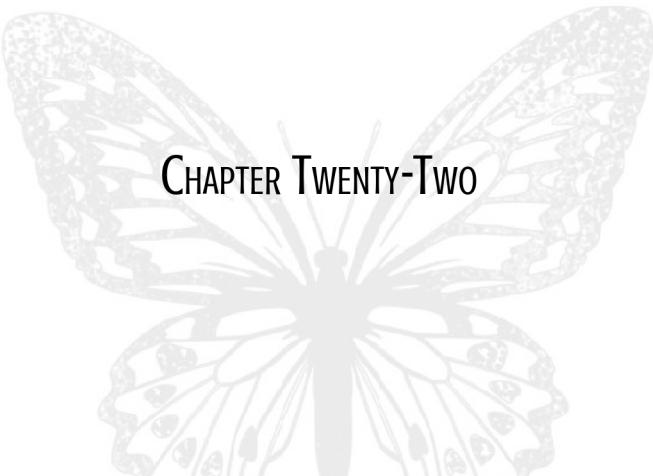
Swallowing past the lump in my throat, I can't take my eyes off my reflection. The stranger looking back at me. The girl that would make her parents ashamed. I'm grateful they aren't here to see it, that they'll never

know. Words can't explain how deeply I hate myself for that thought, for the fact that I mean it.

*Really mean it.*

"You didn't come in here to make yourself feel worse." I remind the girl in the mirror. We nod at each other as I cap the lipstick stalking out into the hall before I can change my mind. Stopping to support myself against the banister of the stairs, I nearly wipe out as I gracelessly slip on the thigh high socks I swiped off the top of my dresser, flashing my bare sex to the hall.

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## CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

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## Lying is the Most Fun a Girl Can Have With Her Clothes Off by Panic! at the Disco

**C**ohen

“Launching in five.” I mumble, adjusting the headset mic and settling back into my seat. The chat is going crazy like usual. I assumed they would after being gone for a while. I’ve never really understood the appeal of watching gaming streams. I’d rather be playing than watching someone play.

*Especially when they’re my games, but I assume I’m biased.*

Never cared to make the games everyone wants, I make games *I* want. That’s how it all started and how it’ll stay. I could give a fuck less how much more profitable it could be if my games were more... mainstream. If I have an idea of something I want to play, and I can’t find it, I make it. Pretty simple, loyal fans of Astro Gaming get that. Respect me for it. That was never more apparent than it is in this stream, celebrating the launch of my fifth game, which is available to buy in roughly ten hours, judging by the countdown someone slapped on the bottom of my screen. Thousands are

watching, mostly true fans. Some trolls which can be amusing. Other streamers trying to steal viewers by blatantly plugging their links before my mods ban them. Mostly E-girls trying to get the attention of the large male audience to their channels and cam sites.

I don't see why my mods don't just let them be. It's not like I need the money from the streams, the only time I care is when they flood charity streams. Why donate ten dollars to the Cancer Society when you can see *GamerGurl420*'s cunt for eight-ninety-nine?

### ***Do the voice.***

Pops up in the chat for the fifteenth time from the same user. I roll my eyes knowing if I ignore it much longer Andrew will text me bitching on behalf of one of my *keepers* at the company. He doesn't even work for me; I don't know why they insist on involving him. A donation pops up on screen, making the LED panel lights behind me flash the Astro Gaming logo. I glare harder when a rose pops up beside it, wishing I was two rooms down, holding Reagan and not here.

***AstroAndrew*** tipped four hundred dollars the note attached: ***Do the voice whore.***

*I'm going to fucking kill him.*

I clear my throat, deepening the tone until it vibrates deep in my chest. My voice is already pretty deep as it is. When I drop it into a baritone, the streams go wild, "If AstroAndrew would pay attention to the game, maybe we wouldn't be losing this match."

I ignore the chat as new messages and tips pop off at a ridiculous rate. Squinting as the door to the office opens, taking my attention off the game. My hands go still, pretty sure my brain makes an error code sound as Reagan slips in, pressing her back flush to the door. I can tell by my in-

game characters' grunts and cries I'm being slaughtered, but I have never cared less. Her full hips are hugged tightly by the low hanging skirt, black... I don't think I've ever really seen were wear that color. Her breasts are spilling from the bra she's stuffed them into, her long hair framing beautiful green eyes wide and trying to appear anything but innocent. I open my mouth to ask her what she's doing, only to snap it shut when she brings a dainty finger to her red painted lips, silencing me before pointing back to the game. My cock jerks in my pants underneath the table as I force my eyes back to the screen, my body overly aware of *her*.

*If you walk into view of this camera, I swear I will spank your cunt so fucking hard we'll wake Gilda in the guest house outside.*

Regret hits me immediately when I check the chat. My eyes rolling back so hard in my head it almost hurts.

***Bro lost his own game lol.***

***Who he lookin at?***

***Blink if you're in danger.***

***Looks like bro saw a ghost.***

***Isn't he like a total shut in? pretty sure nobody lives with him.***

"Launching in five." I rumble as Reagan walks behind my monitors looking down at the game, her breasts on full display making focusing as impossible as catching rain in a bottle cap. My hand leaves the desk just long enough to adjust my cock in my pants, shooting her a warning look.

***She smirks... that bratty fucking smirk.***

A girl pops across the chat, calling me daddy, as they usually do. I look up just enough to see that smirk wiped away, replaced by a cute frown. I like Rea jealous, it's nice for a change. Although she should know by now,

she has nothing to worry about. I'm entirely fucking hers, if she wants me or not.

"Bot on the left by the fence." She says, making me go rigid in my seat. I don't dare look at the chat. After killing the guy that I admittedly didn't see, I shoot her another pointed look that hopefully says something along the lines of *Shut your beautiful ass up*.

The company is going to flip tomorrow. It almost makes me laugh. After the fire, people have put together that the girl with me wasn't my girlfriend but my newly legal stepsister and the internet did what it does best and memed the fuck out of it according to Andrew.

*Not that I give a shit.*

My heart thunders in my chest as she walks beside me, *just out of view* of my camera, which she's watching intently.

*This fucking brat knows exactly what she's doing.*

She reaches into view, only her arm on screen as she takes her time fixing my hoodie string. Another quick glance at the chat tests my weaning patience. Andrew, of course is now oddly silent, knowing full well the fire she's playing with. The look in her eyes tells me everything I need to know.

*My sweet little butterfly wants me to burn her.*

***Woah that's a chick.***

***Show elbows.***

"No, she will not be showing elbows." I growl, glaring over at her.

*Fuck, she looks beautiful right now. It's pissing me off even more.*

Her long hair is pushed over one shoulder, falling so low it shows in the screen as she leans closer to the headset displaying her breasts as my irritation topples into anger, "Two-hundred-dollar tip and I'll show my elbows." Her words slur, only adding to that sexy little rasp in her voice.

“No, she will not.” I spit, hitting the keys harder than I need to as I turn my chair, pushing her away with the high back.

*Fucking fuckers better leave the stream. Every last one of them.*

The lights behind me flash my logo again.

**AstroAndrew** tipped two hundred dollars the note attached: **Show Elbows, please uwu <3**

“Andrew, the next time you show up at my house I'm going to-“

The rapid ping of donations and flashing from behind stops me mid-sentence, my eyes darting to the monitor displaying my camera feed. To Reagan leaning casually against the couch behind me. Her beautiful tight fucking body is on full display as she pretends to adjust her locket. Her thighs are hugged tightly by the long black socks she's wearing. Rage boils through me, her name leaving my lips as a growl. When our eyes meet, I see that beautiful glint of apprehension in hers; her smirk still on full display as she slowly walks out of frame.

*The chat...*

*God, the fucking chat.*

**Mommy? Sorry. Mommy?**

**Just nutted fr.**

**Kill me with ur thighs.**

**Slut.**

**Go away attention whore.**

**She's not even that pretty.**

**Isn't that his sister?**

**AstroAndrew** tipped eight hundred dollars, note attached: **I did not condone this. Please, I am not involved. Do not hurt me.**

**Show bobs?**

**Jump.**

**Where go?**

**Bring her back!**

“I’ll be back.” I growl, slamming my hand down to cut the stream. A gasp leaves her mouth as I’m out of my chair before she can take a step back. Crossing the short distance before her soft skin meets mine, jerking her arms behind her back. Using them to leverage her as I push her face into the desk, “What the fuck do you think you’re doing, huh?”

She opens her mouth to answer, but I’m not interested in hearing her right now. I cut her off, slapping her ass hard, making her whimper, “No, you don’t enjoy this. You need my attention that badly you’re going to walk in here showing off *my* fucking body to thousands of people? Pissing me off and acting like a brat? Huh baby, is that it? Couldn’t stand being away from me for a few fucking hours? Is that what my little butterfly needed, attention? Her little pussy spanked?”

**Slap!**

My fists tighten on the back of her neck as she smiles, a breathy little giggle escaping her throat as she wiggles her bare ass into my cock. Her wet cunt leaving spots on my pants. I pull back to slap her ass again, barely resisting the urge to end the stream and impale her on my cock when she bites into her lip, fighting another giggle looking all too fucking thrilled with herself.

“What?” I growl.

She nods towards my screen, my heart stopping cold in my chest when I see what I did... ended the camera feed yes, but I didn’t mute my headset.

“Fuck.” I slam the headset mic up, muting it before straightening myself.

“On your knees Reagan.”

Her eyes widen at the use of her name, dropping low in front of me. My cock throbs so badly it hurts. Her teeth abuse her bottom lip as she spreads her legs wide. She's drunk, I can tell that much, but still, I'm not sure what's gotten into her tonight. It's fucking hot, don't get me wrong, but it's bratty and provoking even for her. She knows what it could do if people find out I'm fucking my barely legal stepsister. The shitstorm the mere suspicion has already brought on the company.

*We've all but just confirmed it.*

"You'll stay there until I'm done, one more pretty little toe out of line, and your punishment won't be the fun kind."

I go to sit back down, too angry to touch her without doing damage. I almost miss the way she rolls her eyes.

*Almost.*

I flip back on the stream, ignoring the chat, lowering one hand under my desk as I snap my fingers, getting her attention as I motion her closer. She listens well, too well, laying her head on my lap, her mouth leaving little kisses on my tented cock. I can barely focus on the game as her soft, delicate hands work their way up my inner thighs. Trailing feather like touches up and down my pulsing length. Donations are still flying in. A quick glance during respawns tells me my computer's software picked up several people screen recording the stream. It'll only be a matter of hours before gossip channels on YouTube and tabloids get wind of it. It wouldn't be terribly difficult to get their IP address, send a virus that would corrupt every file on any device connected to Wi-Fi... but no, I won't do that.

*Let them report everything.*

*Reagan is mine now, and I've done nothing illegal to obtain her, as far as they know.*

Her conservatorship is well sealed under my overpaid attorney's request, so I'm covered there. My eyes leave the screen they had already unfocused on, meeting the most beautiful wide green eyes I've ever seen. Having Reagan's unobstructed attention on me is just as world consuming as it's always been. Even when she was a child, her finding me worthy of her time, her attention, her smile made me feel more loved than I could ever have imagined a person like me could feel. My chest constricts and warms. Not like the comforting glowing warmth you feel when you sit beside a fire in the fall. A blistering, skin melting heat you feel when you dive headfirst into that fire. Begging it to melt you down to nothing so she can build you up again, mold you into whatever she sees in you that made you worthwhile.

*No, I don't care who knows.*

*Not a single bit.*

My effort to refocus on the game is pathetic at best, especially as her hands work at the waistband of my pants, trying and adorably failing to pull them down. I don't help her, despite how badly I want her hot mouth around my cock. She's never sucked a cock before, but there's nothing she couldn't do that wouldn't please me. Hell, she could bite it clean off and after we stopped the bleeding she'd still be wonderful.

*Does that make me a simp?*

*Probably.*

She huffs in annoyance when she figures out I have no intention of aiding her, a dangerous little smirk pulling at her lips, "Help me step bro, it's stuck." She whimpers, taunting me. My fist can't slam up to mute my mic fast enough. More dings and donations fuel my raging jealousy, a possessiveness that would probably get branded as toxic online.

She picked up several cringy lines from the taboo porn she was watching. She's well aware of what she's doing. My fist tightens so on the mouse so hard it hits a key I didn't mean to, getting me killed. I glare down at her, finally lifting so she can free me. The proud, bratty look in her eyes is equal parts sexy and infuriating. I can't decide if I want to spank it out of her or preserve it there forever. Her soft lips crest the head of my cock, the veins in it bulging in a way they never had before it knew how good it felt to be sunk deep into her.

"Launching in fiv-"

A groan slips from my mouth as she takes me to the back of her throat and gags. A moment of panic overwhelms me when she gags again. I'd never get upset at her for getting sick, but I don't really feel like ending the night with a panic attack and scrubbing my dick raw. She pulls back a little more, wrapping her hand tightly around the base instead.

The thought of her learning all this from a video of some other man makes me want to shove so deep into her throat she screams around me. After a few deep breaths, I convince myself not to. I cut the camera feed, no longer fighting to spare a shred of attention for the game.

"Thank you for watching tonight-“ I pause as she sucks harder, running her tongue along my cock and effectively lodging my words in my throat. “-Remember Razor's Edge launches in just a few hours for those that preordered and tomorrow evening in the game store. Thanks for the donations from everyone except AstroAndrew. Goodnight.”

I'm already jerking her off my cock when I end the stream, her mouth coming off with a loud pop that makes my eyes roll back in my skull. She gasps, giggling drunkenly as I hoist her into my lap. The tip of my cock

nested against her slick opening. The moan she makes as I slowly slip her down over me, forcing her to adjust to my size is like music to my ears.

*No way fucking better.*

She whimpers, draping her arms over my shoulders as she rolls her hips. My hand grips the back of her neck, roughly halting her, “I have a bit of work to do, butterfly.”

“What? No, I want you.”

“Hmm, then I suggest you be still so I can focus, baby, or else I’ll make sure that little cunt of yours doesn’t see an inch of release until tomorrow night. You’ve been very fucking bad, teasing me, making me jealous, letting God knows how many people see what’s for my eyes only.”

She purses her full lips, staring at mine like she wants to taste them, but she won’t. Rea knows what I can and can’t take, “What if I say sorry?”

“You’d be lying.”

“Yes, but it’s the thought that counts.” Her voice is breathy and fuck. This is more a punishment for myself than her, I think.

“You’re going to shut that sexy fucking mouth of yours and be a good girl now. Lay your head on my chest.”

She does, moving her hips more than necessary as she goes. Soaking up and moaning loudly at every little ounce of friction she gets before I squeeze her neck again in warning.

*Fuck, this is miserable.*

I work as quickly as I can, running code to make sure the launch goes perfectly. Although there’s a good chance the servers will crash after the first few hours. It’s not an uncommon occurrence. Her little moans and whimpers make it hard to concentrate, especially with my cock throbbing as it’s buried deep inside her. Thoughts of pumping her so fucking full of my

come that it's dripping out of her battered cunt makes a task I normally enjoy feel like hell. When I've finished there, she's gone quiet, her little pants slowing into deep breaths as she relaxes against me.

"Rea?" I whisper, gently brushing her hair out of her face. She's out, her cheeks still painted a lovely shade of rose. Her sex still drenching me with her arousal. It never bothered me before, but after a while the need to clean got to be too much. This time I'm bothered even less, using her steady deep breaths to steady my own until our chests move in perfect synchronization.

My email is filled with strongly worded messages from public relations and the board, all who are livid at the unexpected turn the stream took. They aren't wrong to be, but it won't matter. My work speaks for itself even if I get *canceled* tomorrow for moving my eighteen-year-old stepsister into my house and starting a relationship with her. I have more than enough money to sustain us both for the rest of our lives.

*Who would really hold it against two deeply broken, grieving non-blood related siblings for taking comfort in one another after losing everything?*

She whimpers softly as she adjusts, making my cock jerk in response as I lift us from my chair, "Baby, you awake?"

*Nothing.*

She barely even stirs; the only indicator of her awareness is the way she tightens around me. Her cunt gripping me with every little movement as I walk us over to the couch. Her long hair falls behind her like curtains as I lower her, my hand supporting her head until it hits the couch, "I'm going to fuck you now Rea."

A small smile forms on her lips as she nods dreamily, never really surfacing. My little butterfly is every bit as stunning screaming as she comes apart on my cock as she is when she's sleeping. Her hands absently

tangle and play with her hair stretched high above her as I roll my hips. My fingers dig gently into the swell of her hips, holding her to me as I fuck her, my free hand running languidly over her body until I reach her breast, kneading them. I'm irritated with her, beyond fucking *irritated* but I don't want to wake her either. I always thought maybe our separation would harden me to her, make me less inclined to melt to her every whim.

*It did quite the opposite.*

A little moan leaves her soft lips. I want to touch them so badly my hand finds them too. My thumb running over the slightly swollen flesh smearing her red lipstick further, "My sleepy little Rea still needs to be filled up with my come, don't you, baby?"

She gasps, her hands knotting together above her as I drive into her harder, faster. Instead of grabbing her small throat, I cup her face, whispering things I've always wanted to tell her. Things my pride won't allow me to admit to a fully conscious Reagan. I whisper things about how important she is, what I would do to myself if she left. I tell her it would be her fault, that I love her too much to be separated again. A groan leaves my lips as I pound harder into her and it does nothing to halt the confessions spilling from me. Her moans are softer now, even as her core tightens, her back arching up off the couch at the force of her orgasm. The sight of her angel face contorted in pleasure does me in as I erupt inside her, gripping her hips and pumping until I'm spent.

*The confessions don't stop there, even though they should.*

*Fucking hell, they really should.*

But she looks so beautiful right now and she's filled with my come.

She's mine and I can't stop.

*That's the problem, sweet Reagan. I will never fucking stop.*

She's completely sagged against me as I peel her from the couch, not even a reaction as I pull free from her cunt. The one I've been painfully buried in for over an hour now. The crisp air of the house hits me like a whip as I hit the hall.

"If you leave Rea..." I chuckle to myself, but there's no humor in the sound. The full weight of my thoughts hitting me hard, "If you leave me, if I can't have you... I *will* kill us both. I hope you know that deep down. I'm your only choice forever. When I said it the other day in the shower, I saw that look in your eyes. The fear... I suppose I can't blame you, not entirely anyway--"

I'm almost in our bedroom when a creak on the landing pulls my attention from her, Gilda stands her arms tucked behind her back as she watches me a guarded look in her eyes. Eyes that have had that look many times over the years, following, fussing and caring about me despite my best efforts to make her stop.

"You left hours ago. Why are you here?"

"I always come back after your streams, Mr. Bennet, to clean your office." She pulls her arms in front of her, crossing them tightly. Her eyes staying high and away from my quickly softening cock. I lift Rea higher, pulling her tiny skirt down to better, knowing she wouldn't want to be on display like that.

"Have you really never noticed?" She asks.

"No, not really." It's the truth. Part of me doesn't like it that the old woman stays up well past three in the morning just to clean my office, "You don't have to... anymore. Just do it when you have time the next day."

"I've never minded Mr. Bennet. I also know you have work to do and will just avoid the room until it's clean."

"Goodnight Gilda."

I turn back towards the bedroom before her quickly approaching steps stop me. Irritation from lack of sleep and the sleeping girl in my arms makes me spin quickly again to face her, "What?" I snap.

"Cohen... please think about what you're doing. Again."

"Don't you fucking dare compare her to Vanessa. She's different, and you know that."

The misting in her eyes makes me take a step away from her, apprehension filling me. I never know what to do when people cry, except for Rea. Even then it's guesswork. "That is why you need to stop this. You've punished them enough."

"For fuck's sake, she isn't about punishing them."

She just shakes her head and I grip Rea harder, making her whimper softly and hike her legs higher around my waist.

Gilda steps closer, her tears now gathering in her eyes, "It's exactly what it is. I know you love her in your own way, but Cohen... Mr. Bennet, you cannot condemn her to a life of solitude and abuse in this house. She's a child! She needs to experience life. If she chooses to, she will come back to you.

"Enough." I growl, my fingers digging into Rea.

"I never said a word to stop you with Vanessa, never. Even when the things you did disgusted me because I love you Cohen, like my son. Please, you have to know that I care for you. I never so much as lifted a finger against you, but I cannot sit back and watch you destroy someone you love."

Rage bubbles up inside me as I take another step back, "I am not destroying her, I'm saving her."

"You are saving yourself. You have clung to her since the day you met her like a life preserver and you've been slowly pulling her under water ever since. She is drowning Cohen, just like Vanessa did when you stripped her of everything she was and made her over like the girl in your arms. Then you left her to die when you were done with her. I tried to help that girl, I tried to give her the support she needed, but she was so broken..."

"You kept in contact with her...?"

"I had to do something. I had to make it right!"

"Gilda, how fucking stupid- "

"I know what you did! I *know* what you did." She whispers, her chest heaving.

My mouth snaps shut, jaw clenching so hard it aches as she stands in front of me holding more cards than I ever wanted her to. For a moment we're locked in, her letting the weight of her words sink in as if they'll make a difference.

*Me?*

I'm wondering if I could kill her quiet enough that it doesn't make up Rea. Gilda has no family, few friends since her job requires so much of her. Maybe a fall down the stairs. With her advanced age and the cancer diagnosis she got a year ago, it would make sense. She refused treatment despite my offer to pay for everything. My offer to get her the best in home care, to let her stay in the guest house.

*So much has changed since then.*

"I know... and I tried to stop it, to save you from yourself. I might not have known Reagan then, but your love for her made me love her too. Like a daughter too. She might be different from Vanessa, but she will end up just as damaged if you don't stop this now."

"Will you tell her?" She flinches at the warning in my voice, the promise.

"I've spent many nights wondering if I could stand to see the look on her face when I did..."

"And?"

*Don't give me a reason, Gilda... I don't want to hurt you.*

She shakes her head, "No. I think that would shatter anything left."

My heart screeches to a halt as my butterfly leans up, rubbing her eyes sleepily before turning around, her green eyes widening on Gilda. Her cheeks and neck flushing, "Gilda, are you okay?"

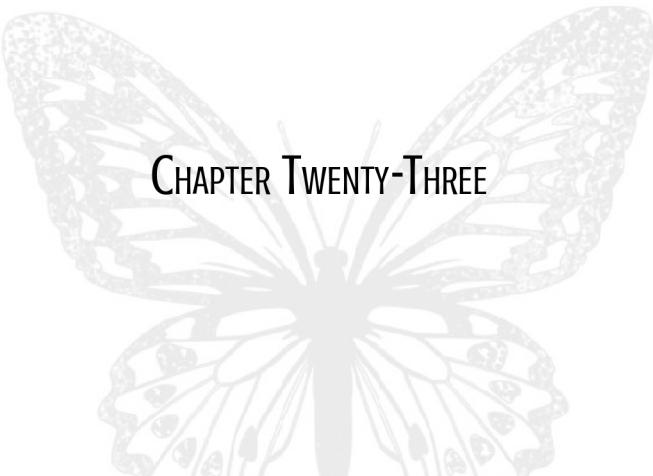
"I'm good dear, just checking on you."

Rea flashes her a weak smile, tucking her hair behind her ear, "I'm okay. Uhm, Cohen was just taking me to bed." Her lie is pitiful even for her. She knows it too, which would be very cute if I wasn't feeling downright homicidal at the moment. When Rea looks down and notices my nudity, she practically turns two shades deeper red.

"Chicken and waffles in the morning sound good?" Gilda asks softly. Trying to spare Rea the word vomit I'm sure we were seconds away from her spewing.

Rea buries her head in my shoulder, nodding.

"Goodnight Gilda." I breathe out, giving her a look that I hope expresses myself properly before turning and taking my little butterfly to the shower.



## CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

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## R eagan

The sound of the doorbell jolts me from sleep. The dark warmth of Cohen's room makes the allure of rolling over and going back to bed almost irresistible despite his absence. It's rare I sleep later than him. Bits of last night filter in, but even then it's foggy at best. I scoot to his side of the bed, noting the renewed soreness between my legs.

*We had sex; I guess.*

When I roll over I shove my nose deep into his pillow, inhaling him. Even that isn't enough to make the pang of being alone subside. My body is stiff and my throat painfully dry as I make my way out of the darkness of his room. The bright hallway is always jarring the next morning. Even it is dark by normal housing standards, the entire house is... dark. The sounds of unfamiliar voices makes me detour from my sluggish path to my bedroom and head for the stairs. Cohen's voice is far from lazy velvet, instead it's harsh and scathing. That alone makes my pulse jump, my heart pumping harder than it was before. Detective Bolton and Dehnert look like sentinels in the doorway, the afternoon light shining into the inky house from behind

them as they stand arguing with the dark God that lords here. It's been so long since I've seen someone other than Gilda and Cohen... something that might've been comforting before just... isn't.

Their eyes turn towards me halfway down the stairs, my anxiety forcing me to stop and just... stare. I don't like the way they're looking at me; I don't like the way Cohen is looking at them. I don't like them *here*. They couldn't possibly have anything even remotely good to tell either of us. Bolton's eyes are just as warm and kind as they were before as he greets me. This time, that warmth doesn't reach me. It lingers in the air between us, until it too grows cold, his smile snapping out of place as he looks me over. Dehnert's eyes narrow on Cohen. I don't speculate on the conclusion they're forming, no point. I can see it... the repulsion. Cohen's lip twitches as he catches on, leaning against the doorway dressed in all black as usual. Even his tall, lean, muscular frame is enough to stop them from coming in closer.

The bruises dotting my legs and arms I'm sure look terrible; I don't know if the fact that they brought me such pleasure would be better or worse than if they'd brought pain. I'm only wearing Cohen's t-shirt, and it only falls mid-thigh, showing many of my favorite bite marks he's left on me. The ones on my inner thighs rub together when I walk, keeping them angry. Cohen hasn't doctored them yet today, gently cleaning and rubbing soothing ointment on them to keep them from being too much of a bother. Still the hint of soreness doesn't do what I suppose it should to my body, it just makes me want *more*.

“Reagan, we were hoping you’d have a moment to speak with us.”

I open my mouth to say something... what I'm not sure when Cohen interrupts, “She doesn’t, as I’ve told you. If you’d had done your fucking jobs-“

“What’s going on?” I ask, my voice betraying my nerves.

Detective Bolton roughly steps around Cohen, heading for me. He takes less than three steps before Cohen’s gloved hand grips his shoulder squeezing hard enough to make the man wince, “Do not speak to her. I am her legal guardian; you do not have my consent.”

“Yes, we heard about the conservatorship. Unfortunately, in matters of her safety, we do not need your *consent*.” He shrugs away from Cohen’s grasp, his demeanor darker than I’ve seen it. My stomach churns as he turns away from Cohen, “And if you touch me again, I’ll have you arrested.”

“Cohen, it’s okay. I can talk to them.” I offer before he has a chance to respond. God forbid get himself arrested again.

His eyes cut towards me, scathing possessiveness shining in twin blue flames, but he just nods, “Head upstairs and get dressed first baby.”

My cheeks flush as I turn, running back up the stairs.

“Look at her ass one more time and I’ll make sure neither of us see the light of day again.” Cohen warns, making me run even faster, pulling his shirt down to better cover myself. I’m sure I’ll be in trouble for coming down here like this, especially after last night. My belly heats, the space between my thighs slickening at the thought as I shut myself in my room.



The tray in Gilda’s hands is shakier than I’ve ever seen as she pours hot tea into the long abandoned cups in front of us. Cohen’s gloved hand making

slow passes on my thigh underneath the table. With each one my chest squeezes harder on the delicate organ it's supposed to protect.

"It happened late last night. It seems she had gotten her hands on a staff member's phone. We don't know if they were complicit yet, but they are being kept at the station until we find out. She was... triggered by a video game, uh, video—" Dehnert's blue eyes cut to Bolton for help.

"Your stream last night upset her. When the staff finally reached her, she'd done... significant damage to herself and was taken to the hospital. A lack of communication between the emergency responders and hospital staff allowed for the gap."

I swallow past the bile in my throat, "And you think she's going to come here?"

Dehnert nods sharply, barely taking his eyes off Cohen, "If I may be frank, Vanessa Ferrell is a deeply deranged woman. She has had a complete break from reality. She was mutilating her own face when they got to her in the facility. It's impossible to tell what she'll do, but considering her infatuation with you and your *sister*, it would make sense she'd come to you."

The room around me tilts, making me sway slightly in my seat before I grip the table to catch myself. The warmth of Bolton's hand on mine pulls me back, capturing me despite the way Cohen stiffens at my side. I don't pull away, wanting so badly to feel the kindness he's offering me. Wanting to have his words comfort me like they did the night they died. The night he let me sob into his arms, the way he stayed long after his shift ended to make sure I would be okay.

"We're going to have officers posted close by from the department here until she's found. They'll be out of sight, but I give you my word, they'll do

their best to keep everyone safe. Even Vanessa."

Tears fill my eyes for the first time today. They feel heavier than ever as they drip onto my cheek, "Why would I want her to be safe?"

His eyes widen for a moment as he pulls away, nodding either to me or to himself. I can't tell. I suppose it doesn't matter; it won't change how I feel.

"I don't think it's best for her to speak with you further. You can tell she's upset." Cohen snaps, still in a heated glaring match with the both of them.

"Mr. Bennet please, we'd like a chance to speak to her alone."

"No."

I grip his hand tightly, stopping it in its track, "It's okay, Cohen."

My heart flutters amidst its pounding as he leans in, kissing me gently on the temple. The softness in his eyes I know is reserved for only me, but I don't want his love right now. I need his anger. His venom is the only thing keeping the impending spiral at bay.

*I miss the rage that makes me feel strong and weak, just by being in his presence. Hard to believe things so conflicting could be comforting at all.*

When he's gone, no doubt pacing in the living room, a fat silence fills the room. Both of them looking at me in a way that makes me shift in my seat. When I look behind me for Gilda, she flashes me a quick smile before heading out too.

"Reagan, please know that we aren't here to judge you." Bolton offers, clearing his throat uncomfortably.

*It's small consolation that he's just as offput by this conversation too.*

"Are you in danger? One word and we take you out of here. Bring you back home if you want to."

"Of course, I'm in danger. There's an insane person trying to kill me." I snap, fisting my hands so hard my nails press into my palms, leaving tiny

red crescents underneath.

"Is your brother abusing you?" Detective Dehnert asks bluntly, "You were covered in bruises when we saw you earlier."

I shake my head, "Cohen is the only thing *helping* me. I need him. I wanted those and don't... don't call him my brother." He runs a hand through his silvered hair, watching me carefully.

"But he is your brother, Reagan. You grew up together for a time." Bolton adds, reaching for my hands again as I pull them underneath the table, squeezing them.

*One.*

*Two.*

*Three.*

"Stop it."

"Reagan, have you tried speaking to anyone?" Bolton asks, his eyes on my skin making a sharp pain fill my chest.

"A professional? You've been through a lot. You have friends in St. Louis, options far away from—"

I jerk up from my seat, sending it crashing loudly to the floor, my chest heaving, "Stop."

"Rea—"

"Cohen!" I yell, gasping now as the walls rapidly close in on me. The stone becomes fluid as it swaddles me in a sarcophagus-like hold. The edges of my vision darkening.

*One.*

*Two.*

*Three.*

*Dad, please. Just come back. I need you to make me feel safe, please; you promised. I've given it a good try, Dad. I want to come home now. I want you to come home.*

Sobs I hadn't realized were coming from me cut off in a gasp as warm arms band around me, hugging me tightly to an equally warm solid chest. He lifts me quickly and I don't waste time before I wrap my legs around him, holding myself to him as tightly as I can as the knot in my chest loosens. The smell of musk and hand sanitizer fills my nose as the bite of leather caresses my skin.

"Get out of my house." Cohen growls and soon Gilda's soft voice is urging the detectives out, getting further away as he carries me.

"I got you, baby."

"Get them off." I sob, "Get them off of me now!"

*I need you.*

*Please.*

*I'm not..*

*I'm not...*

I grip his neck so hard he hisses, my nails scraping his skin until blood pebbles there.

One.

Two.

Three.

"Get them off Cohen!"

"What Rea? What to do you need? I don't understand, baby." His voice cracks as he leans against a wall, letting us slide to the ground together.

"I need you; I need you to touch me."

"Okay, okay. I got you, it's okay. I-I'm fixing it." The sound of his gloves hitting the floor comes seconds before his warm hands grasp my trembling form. Petting, caressing, and reassuring me.

"I'm not okay Cohen."

"Shhh, baby."

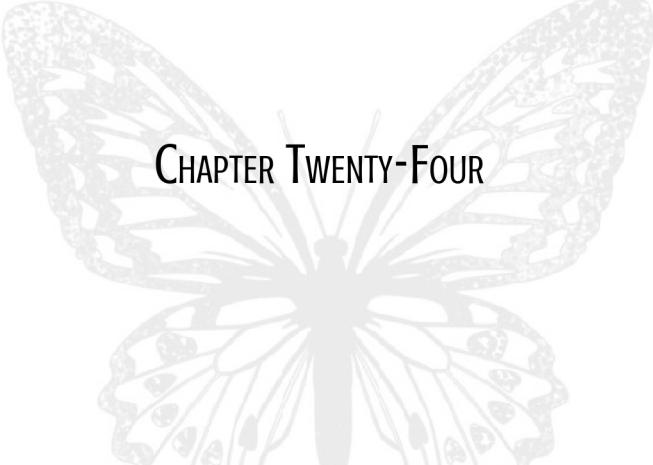
"God help me, I'm not okay. Please make it stop. I can't live like this. I can't keep feeling like this!"

Tiny drops of warmth patter against my exposed shoulder, "I'm sorry Rea."

"I can't take it Cohen, I'm so... everything hurts and I'm broken." I sob, "I'm fucking breaking and I can't stop it. I can't stop." My voice cracks as I scream.

He's rocking me now. I don't know if it's to comfort me or himself, "I'm sorry, butterfly. I'm so sorry."

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## CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

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Roses and Gold by Bryce Savage

## C ohen

Something is different and I can't seem to stay calm enough, for long enough to spend the adequate time to figure out what exactly has shifted. If it's me or her, or both of us. The sounds of her screams, her pleas for help have embedded themselves in the walls so thoroughly now and then my heart feels the echo of one. They are every bit as lethal as they were three days ago when I rocked us against the wall. Clinging to my justifications, repeating them in my head to drown out her sobs. My heart cracking as I listened to screams the world wouldn't hear. The oceans should've emptied, the skies erupting in violent storms for her pain, but the sun was shining. And I still didn't possess enough strength to give her what she needed. She didn't cry out in fear, but in agony, begging for solace from the man that took it from her.

*"She might be different from Vanessa, but she will end up just as damaged if you don't stop this now."*

I can see it in her eyes even now what was once tiny splinters are cracking open, leaving abyssal craters where light had been. Her fingers leave electrified tingles in their wake as she runs them up the planes of my stomach, tracing the lines of my muscles absently.

*Absent.*

That's what she's been the last few days, like a shell of Reagan and it's killing me. Drowning me in an elephantine amount of guilt she bled from me as she cried in my arms. But that's all that it is, guilt for hurting her, for making her feel this way, for not preventing it.

*Not regret.*

*Never regret.*

How could I regret anything with her in my arms? Those apologies I gave her, I meant them. I am sorry, sorrier than I've ever been for anything ever before. Sorry for not helping my dad in that stupid dusty shed more. Sorry for not being more careful that night, for not thinking things through enough. Not considering every tiny little detail, because how could I? For the past twelve years, I've been consumed by *her*. All rational thought, taking a backseat to the ones that involved her. Everything I've done since that day in the parking lot, when I met a shy little girl who was allergic to strawberries, everything I've done has been for *her*. When I sold off my first game to a developer, it was for her. So she could keep going to the private school she was enrolled at. So she could keep dancing even though she was shit at it. So I could afford to provide for her all the things she could ever possibly ask for. And if I'm being honest?

*So she would need me.*

*And she does need me.*

It's the steps I took to get us here that stole that light from her eyes, that created those deepening cracks but I can fix it.

*I will fix it.*

The brush of her soft hair across my face distracts me as she climbs on top, straddling me. The heat from her sex pressed into my cock, quickly hardening it.

"What baby?" I ask, tossing the long-ignored tablet I had been holding onto the bed.

"I want you." She breathes out, rolling her hips to grind her core against me.

My hands snap out, stopping her despite everything in my body begging her to continue, "You don't need to do this."

Her wide evergreen eyes meet mine, the blankness in them unsettling. Not entirely blank, not yet. "Promise me you'll keep me safe, Cohen." Her hand trembles as she brushes her fingers across my cheek. She bends, resuming the roll of her hips as she kisses me softly. Her eyes pinning me with an intensity that wasn't there before one that jerks the thoughts straight from my mind, "Promise me."

"Of course, I'll keep you safe, Reagan. She won't even get close. There are cops posted outside, the house has a state-of-the-art security system..."

She shakes her head, a moan slipping from her lips as she tugs me out of my pants, "Not just from her, from everything... from myself."

My heart pinches in my chest as I grab her wrists, stopping her again, "What are you talking about?"

"I need to stay here like this. I need you to keep me numb, Cohen. Please."

My mouth opens, but I shut it worried my voice will crack. I watch her wiggle from my grip, her fist pumping my cock to get it harder again before notching it at her entrance. Our moans harmonize as she slides down my length, burying myself in her for the first time in three days. She jerks her shirt over her head, her eyes shining with desperation as she fucks herself almost violently down on my cock. A note of panic in every roll of her hips. As amazing as it feels, I try again to stop her, slowly losing grip on my will to. She ignores me either way, fucking herself harder. God, she feels good, so fucking good.

My eyes widen as she winces, hissing in pain. She's still moaning but her eyes are pinched shut in pain, not pleasure as she forces herself to stretch around me. My hand snaps out, gripping her neck hard enough to take her breath, forcing her to still on my cock, "I don't want you numb, Reagan. I don't want you hurt." My stomach rolls as I look down at the tinge of blood coating my dick, my heart sinking down to the pits as I realize what she's done.

*She tore herself.*

I lift her off me gently, gathering her in my arms as I walk her to the bathroom. I don't dare sit her down to turn on the faucet of the tub. Filling the steaming water with oils and soaps I had Gilda buy for her as soon as I realized she was coming. Her eyes are misted with tears as I lower her into the water. She doesn't even wince as she brings her legs up to her chest, making herself as small as possible. I just... stand there watching her for a long time, at absolute fucking war with what I want to do and what I'm capable of.

Baths are breeding grounds for bacteria, and the idea of sitting in one makes vomit burn at the back of my throat. Fuck, it makes me want to shed

my skin and walk about in my meat suit instead. My fists clench and unclench as I stand there, knowing damn well what she needs and hating myself for even hesitating to give it to her. Those beautiful fucking green eyes snap to mine after what feels like a lifetime, "You can't always get what you want, Cohen. Sometimes you have to let things just... be messy and hope that somehow... one day they'll be clean again." She quickly looks away, sinking further into the water, and I fucking hate it. I hate not having her eyes on me, not having her attention.

*I hate seeing her like this.*

Before I know it, I'm halfway to the mirror. I don't even bother washing my hands before I throw it open. Grabbing the bottle of pills inside and dumping two into my palm. I don't stop, don't give myself a chance to think about what I'm doing as I step into the water with her.

"Cohen..."

My breath shudders as I lower myself, watching my bloody cock lower underneath the water. Grateful for the bubbles quickly hiding it from view. I close my eyes, leaning my head back as I try to steady the pounding in my chest, the way each breath makes it grip my lungs tighter.

"Cohen you don't need to-"

"The day my dad shot himself, I found him, you know. I... had him all fucking over me. I was freaking out. It freaked mom out too. She didn't even call the cops at first, she just... jerked me up and ran with me. I was almost the same size as her by then. It didn't slow her down. She ran with me all the way upstairs and filled up the tub."

She's looking at me again, her eyes wide, hanging on every awful word that comes out of my mouth, "She was panicking. I just... kept screaming about not being able to get him off me, so she just dumped me in the tub

and started scrubbing. Soon-“ I stop taking a deep breath and dropping my hands underneath the water so she can't see how badly they're shaking. "- Soon the water was filled with him, tinged red with bits of his fucking brain floating around. It scared the shit out of me." I whisper the last part, not sure why I told her any of this. I was well on my way to regretting it when she moves, uncurling her legs, the tiny bubbles popping on her breasts as she moves to me. I'm holding my breath when she lays back against the chest, her hands finding my shaking ones underneath the water to wrap them around herself.

"You know I love you, right Rea?

"Yeah, I know."

I rest my chin on her head, hugging her even tighter to me, "Do you love me?"

She huffs, "So much I think it's killing me."



After fifteen minutes my panic swallows my desire to hold her, pushing myself up and out of the tub so suddenly she gasps. As I step out, my foot hits a puddle of water, sending me careening towards the floor. My wet palms only barely gripping the edge of the tub quickly enough to steady myself. Rea steps out too, water dripping from her slightly reddened skin.

"You don't have to get out." I gasp, trying to calm myself as she moves towards the shower, turning it on. Attentively making sure everything is ready for me. I hate so much, most times the *hate* is all I feel. Right now, I particularly hate the fact that I can't focus long enough to appreciate the

gesture. I step into the water when it's still cold, making me flinch, my hands still unsteady as I grab my soap, dumping it into my hands. My nails don't feel like enough, no matter how hard I'm scrubbing. When she joins me in the water, it's too much. I barely hear her hiss in pain as she reaches under the now scalding water to get my soap.

"Get out Reagan." I snap.

She pauses for a moment but stays as I take a deep breath, battling the bile in my throat as I lean my forehead against the wall of the shower. Her hands find my back, scrubbing me hard, not hard enough to scratch me, but hard enough to feel... effective. Time passes like the rapid fire of a machine gun until it doesn't. Suddenly it seems to stop all together. Her skin is an angry shade of red, having adjusted to the scalding temperature long before she made her second pass around my body. Washing me everywhere, even places I rather she didn't. I was too far gone... too fucked up to care. I'll worry about the damage done to my pride later. She's finishing up my left leg when I pull my head from the shower wall, turning to lift her up from where she was sitting on her knees.

"I'm sorry." I whisper, brushing a wet strand from her face.

The only answer she gives me is in the form of a kiss. It's the only answer I need. No matter how far we push, how fucked up this all is, she's mine, now and forever.



House of Memories by Panic! at the Disco

Being woken up from a pill induced coma is disorienting at best. Being woken up after a panic attack during a pill induced coma by a hundred and forty decibel siren is fucking shit. The room shifts wildly as I jerk up in bed, displacing Rea from where she was curled up against my chest. Her hands fly up to cup her ears as I get out of bed, "Stay here." I growl, my voice still husky from sleep. She shakes her head, already awkwardly trying to untangle from the sheets as I hit the control panel beside my bedroom door, silencing my alarm.

*Gilda forgets to disarm it from time to time...*

My heart thuds heavily in my chest, something deep inside me knowing Gilda isn't the one that set it off. The cops have been posted up around the property, doing patrols... what are the fucking chances she got past them? Reagan is already behind me when my hand hits the doorknob.

"Now is the time to fucking listen." I whisper shout, pointing her back towards the bed. My mom's locket gripped tightly in her fist, "It's probably just Gilda, lock the door behind me and don't come out unless I say you can. Nobody else, baby."

The shorter strands of her hair that frame her face slap against it with the force of her shaking her head.

"Reagan, please."

Tears bud in her eyes as she backs up to the bed, her shoulders trembling underneath my t-shirt. That fact alone helps me find my anger, the familiar white-hot hatred that's plagued me most of my life. I lock the door from the inside before I pull it shut. The click sounds louder than ever before in the stagnant house. As I slip down the hall, a rustling floats up the stairs. My fist tightens on the banister as I peek over, looking into the large mirror... the one that perfectly displays the downstairs general layout from the

balcony. A tuff of auburn hair a shade too bright gives me the perfect place to funnel that rage.

"M-Mr. Bennet!" she shrieks, her voice hoarse.

I crack my knuckles as I take a step onto the stairs, trying to focus on something... anything that's not her. I'm not sure how effective my attempt is to school my features as I hit the middle step. My stomach rolls at the sight of her. Where there was once smooth unblemished skin is open wounds that have dripped blood onto the collar of her bleached Astro Gaming sweatshirt, jagged lacerations cover what was once a face similar enough to my butterfly's to keep my attention.

*At least for a time, until the fantasy ended and she was no longer useful.*

"M-Mr. Bennet, I-I I'm sorry about the alarm, I forgot the access code." She mumbles, smoothing her matted hair as she rocks slightly on her bare, bloodied feet. She keeps her head down, just like I trained her to, but not far enough to hide the missing chunk she took out of her bottom lip.

"You never had an access code Vanessa, we both know that."

Her head snaps up, her body pitching forward, "No! That's not my name! I'm Reagan, Mr. Bennet look!" She coughs, making my pulse jump. My fist banding around the railing to keep myself from stepping back.

*She's too close.*

*She's probably sick.*

*I'm going to get dirty.*

*She's walked all over, covered in dirt.*

She pulls her head up cupping her face with hands that look closer to dark muddy brown than their usual shade, the dirt on her knuckles creased with the lines of her skin, "I fixed it Mr. Bennet, see? I fixed my face so I can do it right this time. I can be your Reagan." *She's fucking disgusting.*

*Those wounds look infected.* "I did everything you asked Mr. Bennet, I kept my mouth shut-"

A small gasp comes from the top of the stairs, whipping me free from my spiral with striking clarity. Our heads jerk in tandem, both of us turning to look at Reagan's shaking form on the top of the stairs, her hand clasped over her mouth.

"Why is she here?" Vanessa half whimpers, gripping her face so hard her dirty fingers prod her wounds, "I made myself perfect Mr. Bennet, she shouldn't be here."

"Get back inside the room, Reagan." I growl, but she shakes her head, stepping down on the first step. The scream that leaves Vanessa makes us both jerk back towards her. It's not anything even remotely human, like that part of the woman died.

*Like I killed it.*

"She's supposed to be dead. Mr. Bennet said I was a good girl and-"

"Kneel." I order, taking steady steps closer to her despite my body recoiling, so close I can touch her. So close I could snap her neck. I just need a moment, an opening. It would only take a second.

She shakes her head, "I don't need to do that anymore, I- I'm Reagan, just like you wanted."

"You need to get to a hospital... please let us help you." Rea says softly, finally reaching me, her fists shaking as she knots them in the back of my shirt.

*You should've stayed upstairs, baby.*

Vanessa tilts her head, her eyes dark and hollow as she reaches behind her. My heart stops in my chest, shoving Reagan backwards against the stairs as the moonlight reflects off the barrel of the gun now pointed directly

in my face, "You're in the way, Mr. Bennet." She says breathlessly, her hands shaking, her finger already hugging the trigger. "You don't need to protect her now. You have me!" She shrieks.

A soft sob comes from behind me, the urge to comfort her pokes at my chest. The words threatening on the tip of my tongue.

"Put the gun down." My voice is soft, but I'm enraged. I bite the inside of my cheek so hard the taste of copper fills my mouth as I reach around her, sirens wailing in the distance. I flinch as my hand cups the side of her face. The feeling of the mottled skin forces me to swallow a gag. She relaxes into my touch immediately, letting her hand that shakily holds the gun fall to her side.

The perfect opening.

My hand snaps from her cheek to her throat, quickly cutting off her air as the gun discharges into the floor. My eardrums ring, feeling as though they'll burst. Rea's scream from behind me sounds far away and when I look down, losing my hold on her, I barely feel the hot metal of the barrel pressing against my chest because there's blood.

*Reagan's blood.*

Rage burns hot in my belly, shoving past the shock and relief when she removes her delicate shaking hands from her calf, exposing a superficial flesh wound grazing the side.

"Stop looking at her, Mr. Bennet!"

My hands shake, but I'm not scared, not even fucking repulsed anymore. My chest is hot and I barely register the movement behind Vanessa as a sick fucking smile breaks out over my face, "I'm going to fucking kill you." I pant. Her eyes widen, stumbling down a step. The next few seconds are quick, too quick. Gilda cries out, slamming something long down into

Vanessa's shoulder as a strangled *no* leaves Reagan's throat from behind me. The sound of tires displacing gravel narrates the sound of Vanessa's scream as she turns her eyes wide with shock... with betrayal. I lunge as she raises the gun again, falling to my feet slumped against the stairs as it discharges somehow even louder than before.

I recognize the anguished cries leaving Reagan as she half runs, limping past me. My heart pounds as I grab her, only barely slipping free from my grasp as Vanessa's nails score my legs through the thin pajama pants as she clings to me, begging, whimpering, sobbing.

She's fucking disgusting. That has never been more clear than it is now. My disgust feeds everything else until I'm vibrating with it, until it's all that I am. She's the cause of those screams leaving the girl I love. Vanessa isn't even gripping her shoulder as blood pours from the knife wound, her head laid at an uncomfortable angle on the step. The gun long forgotten, having fallen to the bottom of the staircase where it still lays, glinting in the moonlight. A gurgle pulls my attention to Reagan as red and blue lights fill the dark house. She's sobbing, pulling Gilda to her chest as the older woman caresses her face, smearing it with blood. I can't hear the words of comfort she's giving Rea. I can't hear the pleas and sobs coming from the woman at my feet. I can only hear her screams, her desperate cries for help and nothing...

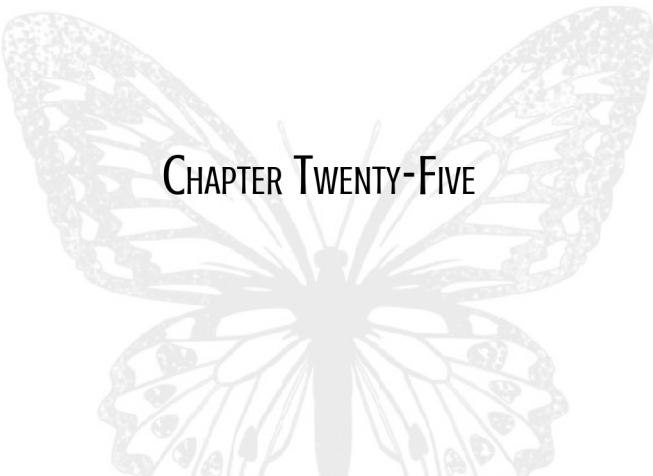
*Nothing?*

*I'm....*

Her wide green eyes latch onto mine, snapping me free from my... *grief*? The blood covering her face, what's seeping from her leg... the look in her eyes and the dying woman she's clinging to snaps that rage back into place. Vanessa's eyes widen as I look back down at her. I'm not sure what she sees

there. It looks so much like the way Jake stared at me that night. I wish I knew. She's sobbing louder now, begging as she tries to push away from me, her madness parting long enough to allow her a moment of clarity in death. Her body warning her in a primal way to get away from me, but she's hurt badly and she can't... not fast enough. I stomp down hard on her neck. The abrupt end of her cries, her eyes left wide, and the satisfying crack is soon followed by a swarm of police. Nobody in the room reacts to their raised guns or their orders. All I can see is a beautiful pair of horrified green eyes watching me before I'm jerked off the stairs to my knees.

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## CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

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I wrap the blanket tighter around Rea, just like I used to when she was little. Hugging her tightly to my chest as the zip of a body bag fills my eyes with an unexpected burn. Gilda's face is soon swallowed by the same undescriptive bag as Vanessa's, and it feels... wrong. For them to be in the same thing, like a simple black bag isn't enough for her. I decide I have no longing to watch them load it into the back of some van... so I don't. Reagan stares blankly at the open door, like she's waiting for something. I can feel her underneath the blanket, squeezing her hands together in quick pulses. I rock her harder, hug her tighter, trying to pull her back to me despite our bodies being flush. Her lips part, the first sign of life as Detective Bolton and Dehnert enter the house. Their eyes are nothing less than accusing. I suppose I hold much of the blame. I can deal with that in my own time as long as I have her...

*I can deal...*

*I can.*

Dehnert nods at me, and my heart clenches at the thought of leaving her right now. The look in his eyes tells me I don't have a choice. A large black

truck rips into the circle drive. Andrew jumps out, leaving the door open, the keys dinging loudly in the ignition. I can't put a word to the look in his eyes when he sees Rea, but I don't need to. I feel the same painful relief she's alive while knowing she's not okay. That she might never be okay again. What I don't expect is the same accusing look in his eyes, followed by the way he clenches his jaw... and his fists. I can count on one hand the number of times he's been mad at me. This bothers me more than it should, and that would piss me off if I wasn't so exhausted.

"Mr. Bennet, we-"

"I'll be right back, baby." I whisper, kissing the top of Rea's head, keeping my eyes off the bloody bandage on her leg as she stays cocooned on the couch, her eyes on Bolton. As I leave her, I glare at him, hoping he takes it exactly as I meant it. A warning. When he sits beside her and she digs herself from her cocoon to clutch his hand, it's all I have not to turn around. Every jealous, possessive fiber of my being screaming. Each step away from her twists like a knife in my gut, each hushed word from her lips feels like ice in my veins as Dehnert leads me into the dining room. Further away from my Reagan and there's nothing I can fucking do except watch my world crumble around me.



My leg bounces rapidly underneath the kitchen table as Detective Dehnert asks another variant of the same fucking questions I've answered a dozen times now.

*He's stalling.*

Where there was once eerie silence from the living room where I left my sun and moon long ago turned to hushed whispers, then to sobs and now?

*More silence.*

"Where is Reagan?" I growl, staring across the table at Dehnert.

"You mean your little sister?"

"Stepsister."

"Who you are taking advantage of, correct?"

A smirk pulls up at the side of my face, even though my heart feels like it's being run through a meat grinder and my chest is tight. Tighter than it's ever been, "What two contenting adults do underneath their roof has nothing to do with the police or your failure to do your fucking job, detective."

"You groomed her." He snaps, "I spoke to friends of her father. He saw it way back then. That's why he kicked you out, yeah?" My hands fist underneath the table.

"The opinions of a dead man have nothing to do with the utter failure of the police tonight."

"That woman Vanessa, she killed three cops tonight. Those men are gone, but their deaths are not failures. She killed your housekeeper, your parents. Almost killed you and your *sister*. I watched hours of her therapy sessions and police interviews. Few things she said were... coherent. Mostly ramblings about the sexual and mental abuse you subjected her to."

"Consenting adults."

"She was severely depressed when you met her. She said you gave her a reason to live. She was mentally ill and you forced her to pretend to be your little sister."

"She never told me about any of that." I hiss, gripping my thigh hard enough that it'll leave bruises. The pain rooting me to the spot.

*Keep calm, play your cards right.*

"Did you ever ask?"

I ignore his question; we both know I didn't. Never so much as pretended to care enough to.

He scoffs, shaking his head, "One thing she repeated perfectly, with an astounding amount of clarity was her account of the night she tampered with your sister's car... seems odd, that was the only thing she ever repeated with any consistency."

We glare at each other, so much and so fucking little hanging in the air before the sound of wheels clanking down stairs interrupts our stalemate.

"Here I've got it, you go."

The feet of my chair scrape loudly against the floor as I shove up from my seat, my lungs in a fucking vice.

"Mr. Bennet!" Detective Dehnert calls after me, jolting from his chair to follow, but I'm faster and for once... I wish I wasn't.

"Reagan?" I ask, my voice betraying me.

Her long hair billows behind her, her purse slung over her shoulder as she rushes to the door. Bolton drops her suitcase, the one I had Gilda tuck away out of sight as he heads for me. Not fast enough to stop me as my hand bands around her wrist. Spinning her around, so she has to face me. So she has to fucking look at me when she condemns us both.

"Take your hands off her now, or I will slam you." Bolton warns, inching closer, too close to my little butterfly.

*You're disgusted by me now, detectives. Your brains can't even conjure up with the depraved levels I'd sink to for her.*

"Reagan, what are you doing?" I ask, tightening my grip. When she looks up from behind the curtain of her hair, her flushed cheeks are slick, her tears still streaming down her face.

"That night... at the shelter when the man tried to rape me... Cohen, I can still feel the weight of him on my back as he kneeled on me. This... feels like that. You feel like a weight I can't get rid of, everything that's happened..."

My stomach rolls as I tug her to me, ignoring Bolton's hand slipping to his gun, "We can fix that. Whatever you want, butterfly, we'll do it."

Her chest shakes with the force of her cries, "No."

"Reagan..."

"No!" She yells, shoving at my chest but I don't let her, my eyes swimming as I try to focus on her face.

"Why does this feel like goodbye? Why do I feel like you're abandoning me?" I'm gripping her harder now, too hard, and they're warning me to let go. She winces, but I don't care.

*You can't do this to me.*

"Because it is Cohen."

"No." I growl, snaking my hand up the smooth plane of her back until it bands around the back of her neck, my thumb prodding the raw bite mark I left there just days ago.

*My mark.*

*Mine.*

She cries harder, leaning into my touch, "I'm suffocating Cohen. You're killing me."

"Then suffocate with me."

"The other day you said you were sorry," She sobs, "Did you mean it?"

*Fuck, I can't breathe.*

"If you leave, you'll be taking everything. You'll be taking the most important parts of me." My own tears feel like a betrayal greater than hers. They sting my eyes, sinking past my skin and deep into my bones, down to the rot that's festered inside of me.

She's jerked away, Bolton holding onto her as he tries to urge her towards the door. But fuck, I can't let go. My hands find the side of her face, her soft skin needling at the gaping wound in my chest, "You'll learn to live without those pieces like the rest of us, Cohen." she sobs.

"No, listen to me... you- you didn't even let me try to fix it!" The words leave me harsher, louder than I meant them as I press my forehead to hers.

Her hands tremble as they lift to my neck, banding there and the people attempting to tug me from her still for a moment, "If things are so broken they need to be fixed, it's best to leave them broken. You were like that Cohen, now I am too."

I shake my head, words dying on my tongue.

*She's not listening.*

*Please.*

*I can... I can fix it.*

I'm jerked from her. A sharp pain splaying across my back forces me to sag against the wall, hissing in pain. I turn seething as Dehnert stands, his baton in his hand before he points it at me, "One more move..." I turn away from him, wincing as I straighten just in time to see Bolton ushering her out into the darkness.

*Out of my home. Our home.*

"Reagan!" I bellow.

I watch her until she's locked in the back of their car, I watch as Dehnert walks to stand in front of me looking far past him, "You're lucky we have nothing on you Bennet. If it were up to me, you'd be behind bars. Stay away from her. If there's a decent fucking bone in your body... let her go."

*I would rather die.*

The drive is long empty save for a black truck when I finally peel my eyes away from the crumpled blanket I had wrapped her in, collapsing against the wall. Andrew doesn't speak as he enters the house, heading for the hall closet. I don't look at him, and he offers no funny quip, no words of comfort or reassurances as he loads the basket Gilda used with cleaning supplies and makes his way over to the puddle of blood that belongs to her. He doesn't speak when my bellows reverberate the walls or when I exhaust myself driving my fists into the floor of a house that was never going to be a fucking home.

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## CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

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## R eagan Six Months Later

"Rea, you left this!"

I stop, looking over my shoulder to see Al jogging across the busy road in his signature awkward lumber. A small laugh falls out of me so freely it would be hard for anyone to believe the amount of effort it took to bring it to the surface. To allow myself to feel anything that doesn't add to my grief but exists despite it. Grief is a funny thing. It's fickle and gut wrenching. What they say is true, at least to a degree... it doesn't come in waves but exists as a constant rainstorm in the background sending swarming tsunamis when it sees fit. Some days are better than others.

*Today is not a particularly good day.*

"Thanks." I breathe out, grabbing my phone from his baseball glove sized hands. We stand there for a minute in silence, neither of us sure what to say. Allen is awkward as hell, but he's sweet and I always smile more when we're scheduled together at the game store. I brush my shoulder length black hair behind my ear. Fighting the urge to grimace at the smell of fresh dye from this morning, "Well I'll see you, thanks again." He clears his

throat, glancing back towards the window of the storefront where Lana stands nodding aggressively and gesturing towards me.

*Please don't.*

My hand goes to my neck where Lynn's locket used to hang, grasping and fisting on nothing. Bittersweet nothing.

He takes a step towards me, and I root myself to my spot on the pavement, practicing breathing the way I'm supposed to, "I was wondering if you'd like to go out with me tonight? Like as friends... or a date. If you'd like that too."

I can't help but smile as he stumbles over his words, making a glimmer of hope shine in his dark eyes that I immediately feel bad for, "I can't tonight... I uhm, I have an appointment."

*With my therapist.*

"Oh, yeah no that's cool. I just thought-"

"I'm free tomorrow night... for a date." I choke out, the words bursting past the anxiety pulling at my chest. It's been months since that night I saw the look in his eyes as he stomped her, heard his screams as I felt. Felt my heart shatter in ways I hadn't imagined was possible. As much as I hated her, he just... killed her like it was nothing... a woman who needed help, a person who wasn't a threat to either of us anymore. It's been months and still I look around, anxiously worried he heard me, if I'm safe.

*If Allen is safe.*

*It's been almost seven months without a word. He's let go.*

The rush of tears fill my eyes, so I stare at my shoes, kicking pebbles as the busy streets of downtown. St Louis rush around us. Unbothered by my problems, filled with their own.

"That would be awesome. I can pick you up at your house at five? I know a sweet café... if that's okay with you."

"Yeah, sounds great." I rush out before I have a chance to think about it.

*My house...*

I shift on my feet as he rambles on about a few more things I can't follow, unable to hear past my heartbeat whooshing in my ears when the bang of a fist against glass makes me jump.

"Oh shit, yeah. I wasn't really on break." He chuckles and I follow his line of sight, rapidly blinking my eyes clear. Our manager stands glaring out of the window at us, Lana behind him making faces. I nod goodbye, ignoring the buzzing of my phone and the following dings from incoming messages as I walk down the sidewalk, trying hard to breathe past the irrational pounding of my heart. The way my skin is prickling as if I'm caught pinned underneath a microscope.

*It's a trauma response, that's it.*

*That's it.*

After a few blocks, I can breathe fully and deeply again without my lungs threatening to burst. I don't know what it is about this building that makes me feel like I should duck my head as I walk in. There's nothing shameful about getting help... I know that, but still other patients never glance at you in here like they would on the street. No happy understanding smiles as you pass. They stare at the ground and so do you. The small waiting room is muggy, like the air hasn't moved in years. HGTV plays loudly on the small flat screen to drown out the confessions and cries from those inside the room. My bag slides off my shoulder, allowing me to hug it tightly to my chest. Like a shield as I unlock my phone, staring at the new messages from

Andrew that we both know will go unanswered, like the hundreds before them.

**Andrew:** Mom is having a BBQ next weekend. I'll be down if you want to come.

**Andrew:** No pressure.

**Andrew:** it starts at four.

**Andrew:** PM not AM.

**Andrew:** Maybe a little of pressure.

**Andrew:** I transferred the money this afternoon should hit the account by tomorrow.

My fingers hover over the keyboard like they always do. Urging myself to say something... anything. *Thank you...* but nothing comes until the phone screen dims and goes dark all together. My own tired green eyes looking back at me. I am grateful for Andrew; I haven't said more than a few words to him in six months, but still he checks in, sends me money when I need it. For my car, my rent all of it. I take it... even though we both know where that money comes from, that much is obvious by the name beside the deposits. *Astro Gaming LLC.*

*I appreciate the game we play. The pretending.*

"Reagan, hello please come in."

I look up in time to see an older man with balding hair walk past me, eyes glued to the floor, as is the custom in the building. I smile, standing to follow Nathan into the warm-toned room, a basket that never seems to empty of tissues sat by an oversized leather couch. Directly in front of a high-backed seat that screams opulence as if the bills from this place didn't get the message across enough. It's why I work at the video game store, to pay for this... not that Andrew wouldn't if I asked. He's offered before, but

this... this is private. Unlike all my banking records, call logs and things I prefer not to think about. All of it under an umbrella's worth of things that'll never be private as long as my conservatorship stands. Which is part of why I'm here, to prove to the court that I'm stable. It'd be much easier to expose the lies, the mountain of them that brought me to this point, but ... no. I won't.

*I don't know why not, really. I guess standing in front of someone and hashing out every tiny detail of my time in Portland seems like too big a task for me right now.*

"How was your week, Reagan?" He asks, the same kind smile on his face as he fiddles with his phone like he does at all our sessions before placing it down beside him, face down... like always. It used to make me uncomfortable, like he was recording me, my first few sessions I barely spoke because of it. Until he helped me understand where that mistrust comes from. Forcing me to acknowledge it out loud instead of showing me his phone like I asked *-Er demanded. Loudly.*

Time passes as quickly as it usually does while I drone on about the little things that upset me this week, before dropping the date bombshell at the end. Hoping we won't have time to get into it.

"That's a huge step Reagan, are you sure you're ready?"

I pause, caught off guard by his question, "I- I guess so. Won't really know until I try. I mean, I really like Allen. He's nice and kind... soft. Nothing like *him*." I whisper the last bit, having only intended it for myself.

"You can say his name. It doesn't give him power."

I shake my head.

"You think you're ready to see someone else? To go on a date, but you aren't ready to say to say his name?"

I open my mouth before closing it. He's not wrong. I didn't even want to agree anyway, I just... felt bad.

*Right?*

"You've come a long way since I've met you. I'd just hate to see a backslide."

I nod, glancing at the clock. We're five minutes past time.

"Eager to leave today." He chuckles absently, shaking off the long line of ash on the end of the lavender incense he always burns, "I want to give you some homework. Tonight, stand in front of your mirror at home. I want you to stand there and look at yourself, and I want you to say his name."

I stare at him blankly, like he's just grown another head. He might as well have. Before it was, *avoid mirrors if you don't feel ready to see yourself. Don't say his name until you're ready, until you feel comfortable enough to say it.* Now suddenly we're at, *stare at yourself and say his name?*

He laughs again, bolder this time, "I'm always on call if you need me." Standing from his chair as he lets out the oldest sounding old man grunt I've ever heard, "It's only a suggestion Reagan. Have you been to their graves lately?"

I flash him a weak smile standing with him, "Last week I brought them some new flowers."

He nods, "You're doing great. Give it a shot. I think you can handle it." He ushers me out of the room gently, with his hand hovering just above my lower back, but not quite touching. Since the last time he touched me, I cried so hard I vomited on his carpet. "Same time next week?"

"Yeah, thanks."

The humid summer air feels like a relief compared to the office today, but discomfort is a sign of healing... at least that's what he says and it makes

sense. You have to tread through all the bad stuff to get to the good. The short walk back to my house is nice. It's quiet despite the street being nearly lined with cars for the dinner rush. I reach into the pocket of my Jeans, adjusting my tube top as it slips before the sound of a car pulling to the edge of the curb sends my heart into a frenzy.

*Calm down, it's a busy street.*

I quickly jerk my keys out, hurrying up my stairs before a voice makes me jump. Dropping the keys to my mat.

"Hey wait up!"

"Go away!"

"What?"

My hands shake as I right myself scrambling trying to get the key in the lock.

"I mean, I'm going to get in trouble if I don't deliver this." He breathes out as I turn towards the man, his toffee colored skin slicked with sweat.

"Oh, sorry." Relieved to not see a pair of icy blue eyes, chastising myself for being a fucking spazz. They didn't even sound the same.

We give each other uncomfortable smiles as he reaches into his satchel bag for a small ring sized box handing it over quickly, "Have a good rest of your day."

"You too, sorry again."

I tuck the small box underneath my arm as I let myself into my apartment, closing the door just in time to see the mail truck pull away.

*Fucking idiot, Reagan.*

*It'll be seven months in August. He's not coming back; you aren't going back.*

I clear my throat, trying to clear the sudden surge of emotions as I collapse on my futon, leaning my head back to stare at the crown molded ceiling of the small brownstone. Not sure how long I stare at the ornate squares before I finally decide to open the small package. Probably another gift from Andrew, sponsored by *Astro Gaming*. The wrapping is tight as I rip at the tape on the box. Instead of the tape peeling back slowly, the box rips. Sending a little sliver of gold through the air and onto the cushion beside my lap. My heart launches to my throat as the small box tumbles from my hands, falling to the scuffed hardwood floor at my feet. The small key, adorned with a butterfly key ring I'd recognize anywhere. Lynn ordered the key ring from the store special, assuming I wouldn't lose something that had a butterfly on it. She was right; it was the only key I never lost, not even once. Until I moved to his house, having left the only token of my home on the counter inside it. I knew they'd change the locks, especially considering how much effort it took to get me out. Leaving the key behind was more symbolic than anything. It felt like I was saying goodbye on my terms. There's no note, but I don't need one. My breath shudders as I leave it there, the bad kind of goosebumps breaking out over my skin. Like it's a snake that would bite me if my hopes got too high, if I dared to acknowledge it.

I don't know what I'm doing yet until it's done, but as lines of code, receipts, bank statements.... Most importantly, property records flow across the screen on my phone. My breath leaves me all at once.

*98 North Lake County, St. Louis Missouri. Two story residential nonbusiness related property.*

*He bought it.*

*He's had it all this time.*

A newer, deeper sense of betrayal lances me through the gut, all while an indescribable amount of relief floods me, creating a potent and toxic mixture that forces a scream from my lungs. My phone leaves my hand, and more screams leave my mouth. The sound of shattering glass does nothing to slow down my assault on my bedroom. Venting months' worth of repressed bullshit, months' worth of held breaths and trying to stay calm on objects I didn't pay for. When I'm finished, my hands are throbbing, my breathing slowed, and the sun is lower in the sky. I don't bother grabbing my shattered phone. It's toast. I head straight for the door, grabbing the car keys hanging on the hook and half running to the car he bought me. One I reserve for emergencies only.

*I can't think of a better use for it than to take me home.*

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## CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

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The nervous excitement I felt on the first leg of the half hour drive to the house is feeling more and more like dread the closer I get. When my tires hit the familiar quiet road, the neighboring houses are filled with cars, light... and life.

### *Families.*

People who have long forgotten the quiet neighbors that lived in the now abandoned house three down on the left. The road is long, and I doubt they ever see it anymore. They've forgotten the red front door that Cohen used to think was so ugly, or the fraying carpet on the stairs. If they take the time to drive down and look at the little house... I doubt they think about the loud laughter of the woman who invited a little girl and her father who had nothing to live in it with her.

### *The boy that used to stare dispassionately at anyone who said hi to him.*

We had nothing to offer them. Our clothes were rumpled and musty from being stored in our car. We had nothing to give but ourselves and she took us in anyway. She gave me something I had so long ago I didn't remember it anymore. Vague glances of a dark-haired woman who popped in and out

when she needed something. She always smelled of cigarettes and had chipped bright blue polish on her nails. When I pull down the curving gravel road, my chest burns from holding my breath, expecting to see a tall lanky man with scraggly unkempt hair smiling at me from the walkway.

*Because no matter how bad it got, he always had a smile for me.*

He'd be wearing some color variation of the same flannel shirt, even though it's hot. His phone clipped in the holder on his side. Maybe she'd be with him, but she'd probably wait inside. Already throwing together a quick, albeit unhealthy, snack for me, even if I'm not hungry. There would be papers from her work scattered on the dining room table, so we'd sit in the living room to eat. We'd watch some awful reality TV show and Cohen would scowl at the screen as he walked past. He'd stop, giving me a kiss on the top of the head, but he wouldn't speak... not until we were alone.

The lights burning brightly from inside the house startle me as I round the bend, my car skidding as I slam on the brakes, stopping just before I hit the drive. How could I place I love and miss so much, inspire so much fear? Andrew probably had someone turn the lights on for me. There's no other cars here.

*I'm alone and the house... my home is empty.*

My last night there still feels like a raw wound in my gut, but I pull forward, parking my car anyway. I can't tell if thinking about the hollowness of the place is comforting or not. I'm shaking, goosebumps bursting over my skin despite the muggy summer night as I walk up the drive, my old key pressing painfully into my palm. The handle of the red door feels like a far cry from the fancy double doors of his house. When I slip the key into the lock, my heart jolts.

*It's unlocked.*

I turn halfway, checking around me. Staring into the thin woods. Nothing. The reassurance doesn't stop me from being close to hyperventilation. When I throw open the door, a harsh gasp leaves my mouth. It's not empty... Everything is exactly where it had been before, the old couch that the bank took because there was no money left to store it anywhere for me. It's all here... the pictures I'd boxed away and sent to Lynn's sister are hung in their places on the wall. A sob builds in my throat as I close the door behind me.

*It's all here.*

*All of it.*

*This place... feels more like them than their graves ever do.*

A jarring clank comes from the kitchen and that sob halts in my throat, making me jump.

"Andrew?" I call out softly.

*Please...*

A yelp escapes me this time as a louder bang comes, followed by the hiss of water on a hot pan. God, I hadn't even noticed the smell, how baffles me. It's one I know well, the only thing Lynn could really cook... pancakes. Warm fresh pancakes and the smell of cleaning astringent. I stop in the hall, my heart pounding in my chest, knowing when I turn the corner everything changes. The fear and anxiety that's plagued me for the past six months will be real. There's a ghost in the kitchen and I would rather die than face him.

My feet move anyway, so eager to lead me to the fire. My skin prickling with electricity, waiting for the inevitable burn. My breath shudders as I place my back against the wall, my body reacting in such a visceral way to... *him* and I haven't even seen him yet. It's then that I realize the fear...

the anxiety, the looking over my shoulder all these months, hiding and dodging anything that resembled that chapter of my life.

*I've been jonesing for it... for this. Avoiding triggers like a fucking addict because I'm addicted.*

I steel myself the best I can as I step around the wall that was acting as my impromptu shield. It's been almost a decade since I saw him in this kitchen and it's every bit as heartbreakingly painful as I thought it would be. I want to cry. God, I want to cry. The tears burn the back of my eyes, making my vision misty as he lays a plate full of half burned pancakes on the counter, his back to me, but I can feel the scathing touch of those ice-blue eyes all the same.

"What are you doing here?" I whisper, pleased with myself for keeping the tears at bay. For having the strength to speak at least instead of crumble at his feet, even though my knees wobble.

He turns, his sharp profile just as hauntingly beautiful just as it's always been. Now the ever-present shade underneath his eyes is darker than ever, "Disappointed Reagan?"

"You bought the house."

"Clearly."

All my breath leaves me at once and I'm feeling angry again for the second time today. Two total times since I left that night, and it's because of him, "Why send me a key after all this time?"

I frown as he turns at his own lazy pace to face me, leaning against the counter like he never left.

*How can you stand here like that? Like this place means nothing to you.*

"You were getting comfortable, too comfortable. It seems it only took you six months to forget me, to forget what I told you."

I shake my head, taking a step back, a step away from him. My eyes darting to the container of strawberry syrup on the counter beside the stack of pancakes. He follows my line of sight, his face cold as ever, but it doesn't touch his eyes. They are anything but indifferent, instead shining like a raging volcano of ice.

*Allen...*

"What did you do?"

"Nothing, yet."

"I left you; you haven't contacted me. Haven't even tried!" I'm breathing harder now, my fists balled at my sides. Those hidden tears are back and coming for blood.

"I was giving you space. I thought if I just tried to be *understanding*... tried to give you time, you'd come home. Instead, you agree to go on a fucking date." His eyes darken on me before he turns, grabbing another plate from the cabinet and making himself one, smothering the pancakes in stuff that could kill me.

"So what? You're here to take me back? Force me to stay with you again?"

He laughs. The sound is cold and unnerving and I fucking missed it. He takes a bite, and I can't hold back my tears anymore. I'm terrified and... excited. All these months of growth, of separation, and he undoes it in a matter of seconds. Lured me in expertly, dangling something I love in front of my face as bait and I fell for it... hook, line and sinker. And I would fall for it over and over again.

"I'm not going to force you to do anything Reagan, but I don't need to do I? I've heard it you know, been there for every session, in spirit. Listening in on your confessions and musings. Every delicate little sob I've heard it."

My eyes widen, my fist flashing to my neck again to grasp at nothing, "My therapy sessions..."

"Never noticed the man on his phone. He was calling me baby. I warned you... told you that you were mine. Now and forever. You think six fucking months is going to change a thing? It certainly didn't for you. It was hot when you told him you'd touch yourself. Trying to stuff your cunt with your fingers all the while... thinking about your mean older stepbrother."

"I'm not coming back with you, Cohen! You can't do this!" No sooner than the words leave my mouth, he's on me, his hand fisted in my hair, his mouth dangerously close to mine.

"There it is." He growls.

"What?"

"My name. I missed hearing it from those sweet little lips of yours, butterfly."

"I don't have my EpiPen ..." I breathe out.

"But I want to kiss you so badly, fuck the way I've ached for you, baby."

Arousal sweeps from me, wetting my underwear as I try to twist away from him, all the while wishing he'd swallow me whole again. Consume me, consume everything in the way only he can. He gets closer, his lips almost brushing mine, my heart thundering in my chest so forcefully it hurts.

"I- I haven't washed my hands, or had a shower today."

"I don't mind."

My eyes flash to the counter at the ingredients still laying haphazardly around the sink. A glob of batter remains on the surface. His eyes flash with the beautiful vulnerability that's unique to him as he pulls away, shoving me

roughly, making my back connect painfully with the wall, "You aren't the only one capable of growth, Reagan."

*I hope it bruises. I spent hours pinching and slapping the yellowed fading marks he'd left me. I didn't... I didn't want them to go.*

My heart doesn't still with the distance between us. It continues raging alongside the butterflies in my stomach as he runs his hand through his hair. His jaw set hard as he dumps the contents of his plate in the trash, plate included.

My voice is thick with emotions when I find the courage to speak again, "Are you okay... being here?"

"Never been better."

*He's lying.*

I nod, giving one last look at the living room before forcing myself back down the hall towards the front door. My heart says to run upstairs, to lock myself in their bedroom like I had the first week after they died, but I don't. Burying myself in their sheets, hugging my dad's flannel dosed in his aftershave close.

"You can stay, I'll go." He says, adjusting his t-shirt as he heads towards me, "Just remember, whatever you do next will decide the fate of us both. I've never been afraid of collateral damage if something gets in my way."

Allen, he means Allen.

My chest aches at the thought of leaving, even so... I take another step towards the door, tossing the key still clasped in my hand to the floor in front of him. "It's okay, I'll go. You've spoiled this too."

*He doesn't chase me, not right away.*

*But he will.*

*And we both know it.*

That sick thrill settles into my gut and for the first time since I came back to him... I realize I might be worse than him.



I spent my night lying in my bedroom staring at the door, my body aching with a need he never comes to sate. By the time morning light streams through my broken window, I've put the room back together mostly... The ache between my legs has dampened, my nervous excitement heady with fear and guilt. Flashes of Gilda's face pinched in pain. The last words she mumbled, the weight of her against my chest, the warmth of her blood. I can still feel it on me. I can still feel the weight of their deaths, all of them. It's something I don't think will ever go away.

*"Go, get out of here. He'll be here when you come home."*

I don't like this person, but I can't be who I was before I lost them. Before I felt his lips on my skin and everything became so mind numbingly wonderful and devastatingly painful. Hours pass and I wait for him, but he doesn't come. He knows where I am... why isn't he coming? A spark of worry filters through me, raging like any good storm would. A flurry of thoughts and anxieties make the minutes pass like hours. Will he let me go again? Could I survive it? A knock at my door sends my heart into a tailspin as I run, stumbling over a pile of clothes I've neglected to wash.

*Cohen...*

I swing the door open so fast my hair blows back from my face. Allen takes a step back before laughing, "Ugh Hi... You ready to go?"

He must see my face fall, "You forgot, didn't you?"

I straighten myself. My eyes searching behind him, before I chuckle nervously, "Yeah, I'm sorry."

The look of disappointment on his face doesn't bother me like it did yesterday and I know I'm slipping down a dangerously steep slope but I waited up all night... I waited for Cohen and he didn't come. Just like I did the first few nights when I left.

*I stayed up and waited, but he never came for me.*

"It's okay I- uh I'll go."

My stomach growls loudly, making his eyebrows shoot up before I shake my head, forcing a smile for him, "No, give me a second and I'll be right out." His smile brightens infectiously and he's so damn nice... He's everything Cohen isn't.

*That's why this would never work. A new life, a fresh start. Because there's only one Cohen. There's nothing but bitter comparisons to be made when you've had the best. The one that was... so wrong and yet so perfect for you.*

I'm sorry Allen, for this... and for everything that will follow. This isn't your fight, your pain... this isn't your love or the battle you're fighting for it, but it's walking towards your doorstep with the same soul damning determination. Before I spin to head back inside, the sound of tires peeling away from the curb pulls my attention past Allen again. The flash of a black matte painted sports car backs him as he turns, the sick thrill in my gut building to cataclysmic levels.

"Holy crap, what a douche." He mutters, before turning and handing me a rose. One I hadn't even paid enough attention to him to notice.

"Yeah, I'll uhm... thank you for this... I'll be out in a second."



The restaurant is nice, modest and quiet as I drum my fingers impatiently against the table, halfway listening to Allen talk about work and something about his older brother getting a job there. By the time our food arrives, the nervous, unsteady flutter of my heart is leaking past my façade of calm.

Allen smiles sweetly at me as I excuse myself for the restroom, my heart pounding in my chest. What if he's tried to call me? What if he doesn't know my phone broke? I rush into the bathroom colliding with a waitress knocking her and I both back, "Oh god, I'm so sorry." I breathe out, helping her right herself.

"No, it's okay. Are you alright? You've been practically jumping out of your seat since you arrived." She chuckles, "I don't think your boyfriend has noticed."

I frown, stepping into the bathroom as my hands clench around the strap of my bag, "He's not my boyfriend."

She just nods, "Okay. I'm gonna get back."

When I close the door, all the panic floods back like a wave rushing the shore. The cool porcelain of the damp sink feels good against my clammy palms. The drain is dark, black. You can't see the bottom, zero sign of where it ends, but you know it ends. Closing my eyes, I imagine the same endless darkness behind my eyes, pretending I'm not looking at the backs of my eyelids but at nothing at all. I focus on that, on breathing next, when I'm ready. Despite the months long violation that was my therapy sessions, I did learn a few valuable things. How to breathe properly was never something I

thought I had an issue with before, seemed stupid at first that something as simple as deep breathing needed to be taught to me. I would've put a blade to my wrist half a dozen times by now if it hadn't.

*Just a minute long pause to think about things, or nothing at all has saved my life over and over again.*

When I open my eyes, I'm met by a pair of deep hued green ones. They aren't dark and hollow. It's not her I think of first, but me and then *him*. This is me, my body, the one he forced her to emulate. All along, it was me. The flash of hatred in his eyes that night scared me, no it fucking horrified me and now?

*I'd watch it all over again just to see his face.*

Allen smiles up at me as I approach the table, having refused to touch his plate, when the sound of clanking silverware pulls my attention. I can't stifle the gasp that leaves my mouth as Cohen dutifully wipes his silverware, leaned back in his seat casually a few tables over from us. His black tech pants with all the pockets and straps stand out like a sore thumb in here, along with his combat boots and permanent scowl. My fist tightens in my lap as the waitress's giggle and stare in his direction. Not that I can blame them, Cohen is... unrealistically attractive, always has been. His toned, lean muscles flex as he lays out a napkin, carefully placing all the silverware on top of it. His blue eyes focused on the task, but his full lips jerk up in a smirk and I know he knows I'm watching.

Allen clears his throat across from me, pulling my attention back to him, "You haven't touched your food yet."

"Sorry, I've had a lot on my mind lately. Seems it's finally catching up with me."

He smiles, always so understanding before he digs into his cold plate of food, "You always seem so introspective at work. Here I thought this whole time we were just too boring to talk to."

I force a laugh, "Just don't usually have a lot to say."

Conversation falters after that, so we eat in one of the most uncomfortable silences I've ever endured. He tries to make small talk and I try to listen. He tries to flirt and I try to respond in kind until the sound of shattering glass fills the room. Followed by the tense, murmured apologies from Cohen as his waitress scurries over with a pan and starts to pick up the glass. Carefully dabbing paper towels on the ground, all while glancing up and batting her impossibly long lashes at him. When she bends to focus again, those eyes hit me, robbing the air from my lungs. The look in them is so malevolent and full of threat my heart stops in my chest as I press my thighs together underneath the table, warding away the throb that's building there. When the girl pops back up, she's smiling at him and I feel more than a tinge of jealousy, despite him being nothing less than utterly disinterested in her.

"You'd better pay attention to what you're doing there. Wouldn't want you to get cut." He mutters, his voice deep and husky.

I take another deep breath, forcing myself to turn back to Allen.

"You'd just help bandage me up, right?" She jokes. The chatter in the small restaurant is getting louder as I strain to hear them. Squeezing my hands together underneath the table, the burn in my chest prickling making my skin flush.

"No."

"Oh yeah? Why not?" She thinks he's flirting.

*Is he?*

"That would require touching you." He deadpans, still staring intently at her, not a trace of humor on his face. She laughs uncomfortably as she gathers up her stuff, the floor still a little damp as she quickly retreats. My teeth press painfully into my bottom lip as I try to hide my smile. Cohen's food sits untouched in front of him an hour later when he pays and heads out. The loss fills the room in an immediate and painful way. Conversation with Allen had grown easier, the knot in my throat loosening until his sudden departure snaps it back into place.

"Hey, are you ready to go?" I interrupt him, cutting him off mid-sentence and because Allen is a nice guy, he just smiles and calls the waitress over to pay the bill. His perfect manners on display and a year ago it would've been charming. Allen is the type of man I would've wanted for my first time, a safe man. Now? I just want those hateful blue eyes. The same girl I bumped into in the bathroom comes over smiling. Everyone is so full of smiles in here. It makes me feel even more uncomfortable than before. I wet my lips, digging my nails into my palms.

"What can I do for you?"

"We're ready for the bill."

She chuckles, "Oh, it's covered. Your friend handled it and then some." She wags her thin eyebrows.

"What?" Allen says, his warm smile dissolving into an uncomfortable one, embarrassed even.

The waitress pauses, looking at me for help, "... the man that broke the glass."

"Oh... I don't know him, do you?"

I clear my throat, smiling at him, "No, that's weird."

She's staring at me now. God knows what Cohen said to her.

*Say something, end this here.* I plead with her internally. Allen can go home, and everything will be fine. This dangerous game can end before he ever realizes he's playing. It's not fair what I'm doing. I know better than most not to provoke Cohen.

*But she doesn't say a thing and Allen is too caught up with me to notice the accusing look in her eyes.*

She politely excuses herself as he helps me out of my chair, "Is there somewhere else you want to go? I would've liked to at least buy you dinner." He chuckles.

"Home is fine."

*And that's where Allen takes me, because he's a good guy.*

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## CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

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This is Love by Air Traffic Control

## C ohen

I twist the rose he gave her around in my hand, my knee bobbing as I wait in the dark corner of her sparsely decorated living room. Fuck, she looked beautiful tonight at the restaurant. Her hair cut shorter than I've ever seen it pooling atop her shoulders in loose waves that looked too fucking soft. She dyed it black shortly after she left, said it made her think of Vanessa. The guilt I still feel for letting her see me like that is as present as ever. I spent the first two months of her absence punishing myself for it. Days bled into weeks, a constant rotation of me forcing myself to do things I knew I couldn't before I'd snap. Only to turn around and drown myself in pills and alcohol afterwards. Baths, crowded places, refusing to wash my hands, the house. My own bizarre form of self-harm, I guess. It would've continued that way until I'd offed myself and her. Like father, like son. I was almost there, almost ready to let go. The sound of car doors shutting bleeds through the door as my hand tightens on the stem of the flower, letting the thorns puncture my skin.

I don't remember Andrew loading my blacked-out form into his truck, only waking up after I was already balls deep in a facility full of people who were just as fucked up as me. Some kind of ironic justice, I suppose to be involuntarily committed after what I did to keep her, a woman who left anyway. It did help though, at least a little. Gave me enough perspective to remember what I did all this for, what I'd been through already in pursuit of her. That I was wasting time wallowing in self-hatred that could be better spent with her...

*My sweet little butterfly.*

Her raspy voice that drives me fucking crazy is the next thing to come through the thin front door. My hands clench and unclench as she twists the knob, throwing it open with her back to me as they step in.

*They.*

*You let him in Reagan...*

He laughs at something she says but I can't hear it, I can't see anything as my vision tunnels on her hand, pressed against his chest. Delicate slender fingers pad him affectionately when they'd look so much better wrapped around my cock.

"What the fuck?!" He exclaims, grasping her arm. That same funny feeling I got the night I saw that spineless shrimp dicked fucker looking into her window overwhelms me as I stand. Still glaring at his hand on her arm.

*On my arm.*

*On my fucking girl.*

"This was almost amusing before. It's not now." I seethe.

"Rea go. Now." He whispers, "You're the dude from the restaurant."

"You heard your boyfriend Rea, go."

"Cohen stop." She breathes out, her voice huskier than usual as her chest heaves, but she's not scared. No, my girl isn't afraid one bit.

"Cohen stop." I mock and the guy steps forward like he's going to hit me, my eyes flickering down to his clenched fist. He's a big guy, I'm sure it would hurt.

"You know him?" He asks, still trying to pull her away from me.

*No, I don't like that one bit.*

"Yeah, she knows me, fucker. Tell him baby."

"Baby? You have a boyfriend?" he asks, spinning on her now. My eyes dart to his fist again. He's pissed and the way he's looking at her makes the blood boil in my veins.

"I- no. He's my stepbrother, but you should go Allen, really."

"You can't be fucking serious." He says before he laughs uncomfortably, "This dude was stalking us and you want me to leave you here with him?"

My fist hits the back of his head before he has a chance to shove her the rest of the way out of her front door, his head connecting with a hollow thud busting a decent sized hole in the drywall.

"Cohen stop! He was just trying to protect me!" She yells, her hands banding around my waist. It's everything I have to pull them away, but I do. I've been separated from her for six hellish months. Months without her shy smiles and soft touches for six fucking months. I can handle a few more minutes without them.

"You don't need to be protected from me though, do you butterfly?" I growl, hating the fact that she's defending him, defending anyone that's not me.

He groans, stumbling to his feet, and then I'm on him. My fist connects with his face more times than I can count, only vaguely aware of his

attempts to get out from under me. It's not his returning hits, or the way he's thrashing desperately that pulls me back. It's her.

"Cohen please." She whispers, squeezing me tighter where she's thrown herself on top of him, banding her arms around my stomach tightly.

Allen groans underneath me as I grip his jaw, my finger digging painfully into the gash I opened up on his cheek, "I had a lovely time on our date tonight but unfortunately you're not my fucking type Allen and you're not hers either. You could never be hers," I whisper, bending closer to him than my mind wants to allow, "because there's not a bastard alive that could take my place." Reagan gasps as I shove off him, accidentally knocking her back too.

"Sorry, baby." I say, as I sweep down lifting her back on her feet, "You okay?"

Allen's whimpers and groans go ignored by her, because she's decided to be a good girl again.. because she's remembered the only thing that matters is me, because it's only *us*. It will only ever be us. Her eyes widen on my bloody hands, my knuckles in a permanently scuffed state since she reentered my life, "Your hands, let's go wash them."

I smile, showing her all the hard work I've been doing as I bring my hand to my face, wiping the bloodied back across my cheek. It's fucking disgusting, and I want to puke a little, but I can handle it now.

*For her.*

"Cohen..."

My hand tangles in her soft hair as I pull her closer to me. So close I can smell her sweet scent, I can feel her flushed skin against mine, "I missed you Rea, so fucking much."

She lets out a little cry, her evergreen eyes filled so thoroughly with tears they'll spill any minute, "I missed you too Cohen, I really did."

Her mouth slams into mine, the only mouth I've ever kissed. Her tongue demanding entry to my mouth and I give it to her, because I would give Reagan anything. I have always wanted to give Reagan everything. My eyes open as a wet cough fills the room. Allen rolls to his knees, his one unfucked eye trained on us in horror as I devour her in front of him. She moans, ripping at my belt, as I back her to a side table, displacing the muted purple lamp that sat on it. She groans in protest as I break our kiss, my eyes still on Allen as he works to a stand.

"I want it. I want you so badly." She moans as her soft hand bands around my cock, forcing a groan from my lips. She drags her thumb gently over my cockhead, smearing the pre-come that gathered there before I murmur her name. Shoving into her hand as she strokes it just the way I showed her.

When she works her panties down, moving to hike up her dress, I grip her wrists stopping her, "We still have an audience butterfly. You know better than to show my cunt to guests."

"Please make him go." She whimpers, grinding her soaked core against my cock, her dress barely covering anything at all.

Allen is already halfway out the door when I look back at him. I don't look long unwilling to waste any more time with her than I already have. My hand finds its way to her throat, guiding her to sit on the side table, "Spread your legs for me."

The corner of her lips pull up, a light in her green eyes I haven't seen in too long. I take no small amount of pride in knowing I had a part in putting it back there. "Not going to take me to the bedroom?" She asks in the sexy, disobedient way she does.

I tighten my head on her throat as she rubs her thighs together trying to find release that's mine to give, "When is the last time you washed your sheets?"

She laughs and God; I fucking love that sound. I would kill, maim and torture for that sound.

"Open."

She takes her time, running her hands up her smooth inner thighs as she pulls her dress up, exposing her perfect glistening core to me, "Yes Cohen."

"I'm not putting any part of him inside you, baby so you're going to have to get that little pussy ready yourself. Can you be a good girl and do that for me?" The words aren't out of my mouth before she's slipping her fingers through her soaked folds, letting out a breathy moan that hits far harder in person than it does in the videos that have sustained me over the past few months without her.

"Am I doing a good job?" She asks, her teeth clamping down on her full bottom lip as she slides two fingers inside her.

"Yeah baby, you always do."

She beams at the praise as I step closer, cupping her face in my hand as she fucks herself with her fingers, rolling her hips and grinding down on them as much as she can. She needs more. My little butterfly likes to be stuffed full of my cock, and I'm ready to give her exactly what she needs.

"I'm ready." She gasps, mirroring my thoughts, her free hand gripping her thigh so hard it's discoloring her skin.

I lift her hand away from her thigh, looking at the angry red marks there. If I wasn't so fucking happy to have her back, I'd be irritated, "Nobody is allowed to mark your skin but me, understand?"

She nods, "Please."

"Have you missed my teeth, Rea?"

She nods again, her hair falling into her face as her grinding becomes frenzied, "Please. Please, I- don't want to come like this."

I chuckle, stepping back into her orbit, soaking her in before I kiss her hard. Its teeth, tongue and passion until I swallow her cries as she comes on her fingers. She's boneless when I lift her slight frame from the side table that's now slick with her arousal. It seems right, christening this place before she leaves it. I lost count of the times I'd gathered my coat in the middle of the night, ready to demand any redeye to St. Louis.

"Cohen..." She moans as I notch my throbbing length in her entrance. When I look down at her, meeting her eyes, they're brimming again with beautiful tears, "I missed you. I missed you so—" I cut her off, sheathing myself inside her. I don't move, listening to her whimper as she adjusts around me.

"Then never leave me again. Swear it to me." My voice is quieter, less confident than I wanted it to be. But that's okay, I can be weak when I'm with her.

"Never again, I... I swear." Her words leave her in pants as I pull back slowly before driving into her. It isn't the soft, sweet reunion I had been picturing, but it's perfect for us. It's me and she takes all of it, the ugly things and the violence. She makes it okay, makes the world look brighter than it ever had before. That's why it's her, why it will *always* be her. As much as she depends on me, needs me. I need her more.

*I've always needed her more.*

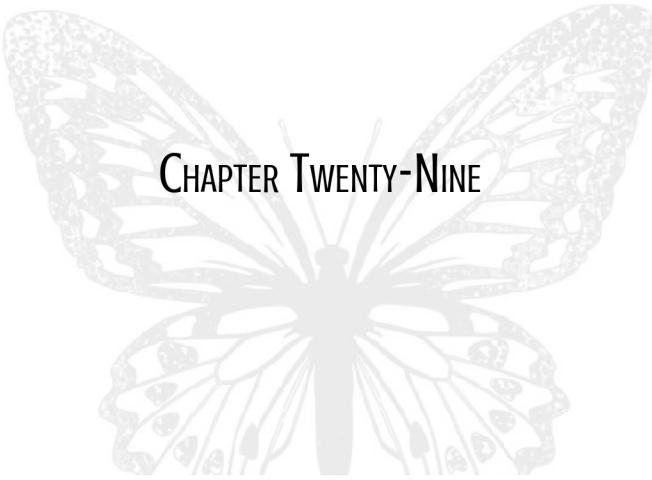
"Why though?" She gasps, "Why did you come back?"

"I'm sick," I groan, as I push forward each thrust just as soul shattering as the last, "I'm sick and I can't fucking stay away from you. Can't breathe

without you.”

I grip her thighs tighter, loving the way my fingers dig into her pliant flesh, picturing the beautiful bruises I'll leave behind when my lips find the crook of her neck as my cock slams in and out of her. Making sure to grind her clit against the base as she claws at the back of my neck. I inhale her deeply, the smell of her sweet skin and the musk of her arousal, my tongue teasing her. She whimpers in response, tensing. When my teeth dig into her flesh, she explodes around me, screaming out my name in pleasure and I follow her because *I will always follow her.*

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## CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

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Golden Hour by JVKE

## C ohen One Month Later

I don't know how I'd pictured their graves. It's unlike me to even take the time to, but standing here now, it feels wrong for a person like my mom to be in the ground surrounded by dirt instead of paperwork and home improvement magazines.

Or maybe this is guilt that I'm feeling. Either way, I hang back, leaning against the hood of my car as Reagan talks to them quietly. Her summer dress blows around her, a deep color of mauve that matches the crescents of my bite marks on her back and neck. It's the most gorgeous thing I've ever seen. How could I feel truly guilty about that? We've spent more time in bed in that old house than we've spent out of it, holed up there together prolonging our return to the real world. A world that will chastise me for the ring on her finger because we already share a last name. I knew she was mine, even then. The day she took my last name was one of the best days of my life... even if neither of us had any idea what would follow just a few years later.

She turns her evergreen eyes shining with a light again, just like they did back then as she shyly pushes her hair behind her ear making her way towards me. "I told them."

"About?" I ask, leaning down and kissing her soft lips.

"Us... about the ring." Her cheeks flush even now. After I made the impulsive decision to announce our relationship, leaving no doubt as to who she belongs to, who *I* belong to. The company is fine as I knew it would be, but people had an absolute shit about it all. That's been harder on her than me.

*I'd kill them all if I could, if it would make her feel better.*

"Baby... they're dead."

"Cohen!" She huffs, shaking her head, "Maybe if you weren't such an ass you wouldn't think about it like that. So definite and..." Her words trail off, water springing into her eyes. The sight makes my heart clench tightly in my chest as thunder rolls in the distance. So much like the night she... we lost them.

"Tell me what you want me to do, butterfly." I urge, wiping a tear from her rosy cheek.

"Grieve. Say goodbye before we leave."

I take a deep breath, shoving my hands into my pockets as flashes of the now ever-present cameras blink in the distance. They've swarmed our old quiet place ever since the announcement. Everyone is eager to see the former recluse billionaire and his stepsister turned soon to be wife.

"Will that make you happy?"

She shrugs, "It might make you happy." I lift her chin with my finger before kissing her deeply, giving the paparazzi the show they came for.

She pulls away, far too quickly, and I bite back the growl that builds in my throat, "You're stalling."

I sigh, shooting daggers at the band of people just outside the cemetery gate, a look that says if they take so much as a step further, I'll give them a hell of a fucking story.

"Don't wander." I warn her, glaring at the line again before I make my way over to the large black marble headstone.

*In Loving Memory of Two Souls That Loved and Laughed Deeply*

*Raymond and Lynn Bennet*

My eyes slip to the smaller headstone beside mom, wondering if my dad would be jealous she was buried with her second husband and not him. I would be. I ball my fists, making a mental note to buy plots near Gilda for Rea and me. I'll be fucking dammed if she doesn't rot beside me, or on top of me.

*Can you do that?*

A small sniffle from behind me pulls my attention, watching as my little butterfly wipes a tear from her cheek. I wasn't there to catch. Right, I'm supposed to be saying goodbye.

"We said goodbye already though, didn't we? Years ago, but Rea's watching so I guess I'm supposed to talk to the both of you... not that I did that a lot when you were alive." I shift on my feet, making a show of running my gloved hand along the top of the smooth stone when a sick smile tries to form on my face. One I've been holding back for so long, a smile that says *I fucking won*. I ignore my mom's side, unable to think of a single thing I'd ever want to say to her.

My teeth score my inner cheek as I bend closer to the ground, crouching just in case the body inside the left plot can actually hear me, "She tastes

just as good as I thought she would Raymond. It's a shame we couldn't ever come to terms... that things had to end the way they did. You reacted so... harshly when I reached out to you, asking to see her again." I lower my voice further as another boom of thunder rattles the windows of the small white church they loved. "She has no idea, no clue, the depths I sunk to for her. The things I did. I can't say I'm without regrets. I hadn't thought mom would be with you that night. She wasn't part of the plan... I had no way of knowing her tire would pop that day. It was only supposed to be you. Predictable nice guy Raymond, that always makes sure his precious daughter's car has a full tank of gas. I regret hurting Reagan, but it was a necessary pain. Pain that's only strengthened her. I thought you'd like to know she's even more beautiful after all that grief." I sit back on my heels, plucking blades of grass with my gloved hands, "I warned you Ray, I warned you not to keep her from me."

I take a deep breath standing just as rain trickles down from the darkening sky, "Well, I'd better get my girl home. It was nice catching up like this. We'll do it again soon."

She smiles brightly at me as I reach her, giving her another soft kiss before deepening it more than is appropriate for the setting. A parting gift for her cunt of a father.

She gasps as she shoves playfully at my chest, breaking the kiss. "You feel okay?" She asks, as droplets of rain run down her beautiful soft face, making tiny lines in the powder she applied there.

"As long as I've got you." I smile. It's a smile I feel past the surface and deep into my skin. One she gave me.

"You're getting wet baby, let's go out."

She chuckles, that cute little glint in her eye as I open her door, letting her slide in, "Not the worst thing that could happen to me."

I laugh, casting a final look at the cold forgotten stones before I slip in beside the girl I burned it all down for. The deep hum of my engine fills the small cemetery as the sky opens up, pelting rain on the windshield. She's still smiling to herself, her palm already upturned and waiting for me as I discard my gloves.

"What are you thinking about, butterfly?"

Her lips part, shooting a look out her window and I can see it, her at war with herself. Wondering if she should tell me. I give her hand a tight squeeze, reminding her there's nothing she can't share. That everything about her is mine.

"I'm just ready to go home."

"Me too butterfly."

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## EPILOGUE

### R eagan Four Years Later

The icy bottles of water have the pads on my fingers and palms turning an angry shade of red as I leave the kitchen heading towards the hall. My eyes slipping down to the framed picture of Gilda that rests next to several wide pillar candles, just beside pictures of my dad and Lynn. They decorate the entrance to a place that used to feel so cold. Artwork we bought together, pictures of trips we've taken and things we've done now line the walls. Even the huge gray, black and mauve splotched canvas we fucked on sits proudly in the dining room.

*All the warm, insignificant things that make a house feel like a home.*

"You fucking fucker!"

I roll my eyes, the sappy moment cut short by Andrew as he bellows from the side yard. I'm halfway out the door when the sound of footsteps pounding against gravel alarms me. Just seconds before Cohen slams into me, caging me against his chest, half knocking my breath from my lungs. The water bottles drop to the ground as a football slams against his shoulder hard enough it would've definitely knocked the air from my lungs. Judging

by our considerable height difference, it would've hit me square in the side of the face.

"Oh shit, sorry Rea!" Andrew calls before backing up casually.

"You good baby?" Cohen asks, his lips brushing my temple. I haven't gotten used to seeing him like this... his hair sticking to the sweat on his forehead and actually *enjoying* being outside. I love it, but I love every version of Cohen, some more than others admittedly. I chuckle, retrieving the bottles from the ground as he moves behind me to block my ass from view as I bend. The same thrill that always follows his tiny and sometimes gigantic displays of jealousy and possessiveness fills my gut. I nod as I pass him one, my words getting stuck in my throat when those icy blue eyes shine with a devious little glint.

He spins back to his friend, his arm extended fully to point at him, "For that, you pay with your life."

Andrew straightens his back, padding his chest in challenge, "Bring it on, you creepy little fuck."

He doesn't dodge quickly enough the half-frozen bottle of water I just handed to my husband grazing the side of his head, "What the hell?!"

I toss the other bottles to the ground, laughing at the sounds of breathless cursing and people sliding in the gravel as I head back towards the house.

"Hey, where are you going?" Cohen calls from behind me, the way he always does if I leave a room without an explanation. Always more comfortable if I'm sat beside him... or *on* him.

*Usually on him.*

I spin, flashing him the bratty smile he loves so much, my façade almost slipping when I turn to see Andrew's arm banded around his throat as they

sit in the gravel. Both paused seamlessly so he can be his overbearing lovable self.

"The graphics aren't going to work on themselves. My boss is an ass about timelines."

Andrew's mouth opens to form an exaggerated shocked expression from behind him.

"Hmmm, maybe I'll tell him about that bratty mouth of yours. I'm sure he has something to shove—“

Cohens words cut off abruptly as Andrew shoves him forward, "Fucking no. Not holding you when you talk dirty to my bouncing baby sister."

Cohen laughs, brushing off his hands on his pants, "Bounce she does." His eyes are light, but I can see the way he keeps looking down at his hands, at the dirt on them.

"Love you. Come get me if you want help."

"Love you too."

"Love you, Rea!" Andrew calls after me, followed by the sound of air being knocked from his lungs.

An hour and a half later I'm so frustrated involuntary tears build in my eyes despite me being perfectly happy. I shove back away from my desk, glaring at the screen. I could ask for help; Cohen came up a little while ago for a shower, but... this is my first official project with him for *Astro Gaming*. I don't want help, shouldn't need it after getting my degree in animation. After stopping myself from rubbing my hands over my face for the hundredth time today, I jerk my phone off the wireless charger popping open the locket around my neck. I don't have to ask for help; I have the perfect cheat sheet. Detailed samples and references from every step of the way on every game he's developed. His impulse to keep detailed records

and notes of everything has saved my ass more than a few times. Something along with his extreme aversion to germs we now understand is part of his brain's way of coping with what he saw when he found his father, an obsessive-compulsive disorder. His OCD made it hard for him to get the diagnosis he really needed, bipolar disorder. Not that putting a name to it allowed him to get a magical shot to make it go away. It helped him understand himself better. Alleviated just a bit of that frustration he always felt when he was unable to understand why his mind worked the way it did. Why he couldn't just be what everyone wanted him to be. Why things were never as easy as it was for others.

Soon rows of code and information are bleeding across my screen, leaving me wondering where it'll stop. It's barely worth it if I have to scroll through hundreds of pages to get to the gaming related parts.

*Damn...*

I glare at the screen full of travel logs, nowhere near the Astro gaming stuff. I toss the phone to my desk, just beside his in our office, rolling my wrists in preparation for a solid ten minutes' worth of scrolling when a date catches my eye. My pulse jumping as I cast my phone to the computer monitor. Staring blankly at the screen, ice flooding my veins.

*Ben Lancaster, one commercial seat from Portland to St. Louis... three days before they died.*

Ben and Lancaster are two characters from the first two games he released. I should know I spent thousands of hours playing those games just to feel... connected to him.

*He flew back the night of the accident. A red eye flight that left an two hours after they died.*

*Four hours before they managed to pull their bodies from the water.*

"Reagan." The harshness in his voice makes me jump as I close out of the page, spinning to face him.

*That look...*

His ice-blue eyes flick from me to the dark screen, his jaw clenched. It's the same look he gave me in their house when he came back for me, a warning... a *promise*.

The same promise he's held since the day we met. Devotion without limits. Without boundaries or lines, he's unwilling to cross. My stomach does something funny as he steps closer to me, using his hand to lift my chin, my heart pounding away at the inside of my chest.

"Something we need to talk about, butterfly?"

*That's what it is... the funny feeling. The same butterflies he's always given me.*

My lips part as he brushes a finger across them lovingly, all the while his light urging touch under my chin turns into a bruising hold and my body can't help but respond. His eyes dip to my tightening nipples underneath the white tank top I'm wearing, my belly warming with a heat that travels downward, "No, I don't want to talk at all."

His eyes widen for a second before that shock is wiped away traded for a heat so intense it threatens to burn us both beyond repair and I can't plunge myself into the fire fast enough.

"I'm still your favorite girl, right?" I gasp as he jerks me to him.

"Whether you like it or not." He whispers before his lips take possession of mine. This is the body of the man who made flower crowns with me. Who held my hand at the dentist when I was too scared to get a cavity filled. The body of the man that let me paint his nails whatever colors I wanted, even though his friends made fun of him.

I give myself over to him, fully, because he's never done anything less than that for me. Because a love like this is all or nothing. It's life or death and heartache and screaming at the top of your lungs because every lick of flame is beautiful agony. Gifted to me by a beautiful angry man who has never wanted anything but every piece of me.

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Thank you for reading Cohen and Reagan's story. I hoped their story sticks with you just as much it stuck with me long after writing it. Keep an eye out on my author newsletter for exclusive spicy character art of the Bennet's.

Your support gives me the courage to keep publishing all the stories that are closest to my heart. As an independent author, your ratings and reviews mean more than you'll ever know. If you enjoyed the book, please consider leaving your thoughts in a review.

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## **GERMAPHOBIC PLAYLIST**

**You're Somebody Else by Flora Cash**

**Romantic Homicide by D4VD**

**The Drug In Me Is You by Falling In Reverse**

**Sugarcash! by Ely Otto**

**All The Things She Said by t.A.T.u**

**The Ghost of You by My Chemical Romance**

**Loser by Sueco**

**Granite by Sleeptoken**

**I'm Not Okay (I Promise) by My Chemical Romance**

**Lying Is The Most Fun A Girl Can Have With Her Clothes Off by**

**Panic! At The Disco**

**Roses And Gold by Bryce Savage**

**House Of Memories by Panic! At The Disco**

**This Is Love by Air Traffic Controller**

**Golden Hour by JVKE**

[https://open.spotify.com/playlist/3lFmBJgikhKPuGvaKbcSC5?  
si=fc45f892c0634c63](https://open.spotify.com/playlist/3lFmBJgikhKPuGvaKbcSC5?si=fc45f892c0634c63)

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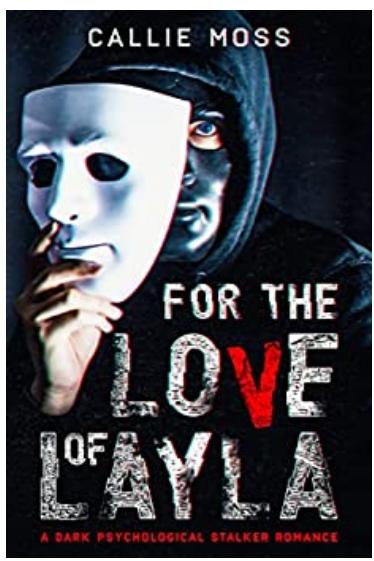
*A person lying on a bed Description automatically generated with low confidence*

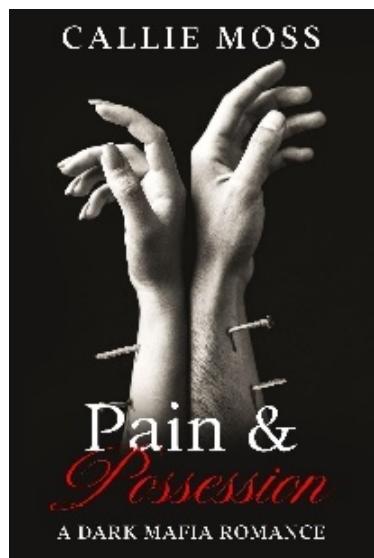
Callie Moss is an indie author. She published her first book Surviving December in January of 2022. Callie has overcome a lot after being diagnosed with Graves Disease at the age of twenty-three. She's a chronic daydreamer, lover of dark gritty romance that makes you clutch your pearls and forsake well rounded men. She's a stay-at-home mom, surrogate, and cosplayer that likes to spend her time reading, writing, and listening to true crime podcasts. She grew up in the Midwest, where she always felt different from the people around her. Never quite fitting in with the kids at school.

She was bullied for her macabre tastes. Relentless imagination and her obsession with a particular sparkling vampire. She found solace in escapism and learned the profound effect a good story can have on someone. She wants to give her readers the same experience, creating worlds you can lose yourself in, if only for a moment.

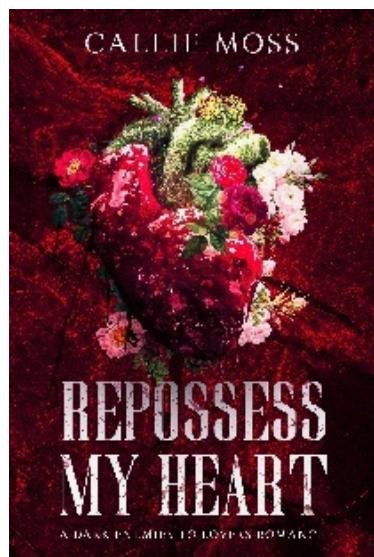
To keep up to date with Callie and her smutty shenanigans, check out her socials on her author website! For strictly book related updates, sneak peaks, never before seen chapters and character art sign up for her newsletter at <https://authorcalliemoss.com/>

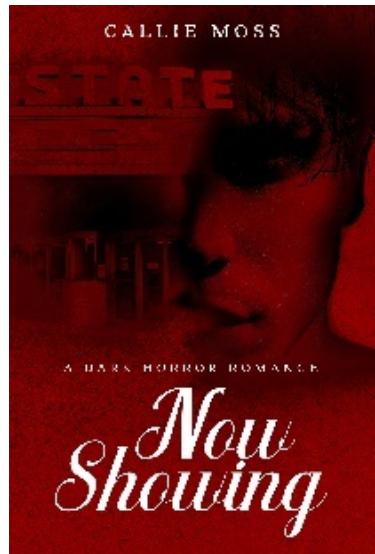
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## Now Showing

### Chapter One The Things I Regret

**D**<sup>ing!</sup>

My stomach flips as another jarring notification tone fills the otherwise quiet living room, my skin practically peeling away under the scrutiny of Josh's stare. Reruns of some stupid sitcom playing in the background. My eyes stay trained on it, but he's not buying my interest. Not one bit. We both know I hate sitcoms. His stare might as well be pinpricks in my paled skin.

*Please stop looking at me like that, I can't take it.*

I sniffle wiping away the snot beading at my nose against the sleeve of my oversized Georgia State hoodie. "Lix..." He whispers, as if speaking at a normal tone might set off another wave of tears and self pity. It very well might. Crying seems to be my brain's go to for well... pretty much everything. I've always been that way, at least as long as I can remember. God I hate it so much. I hate that I cry so easily, which makes me want to cry even more.

*Which is absolutely wonderful.*

We're four hours into my wallowing, I'm both surprised and grateful he's stuck it out this long without sharing some inspirational quote he's got stored away underneath his buzzed warm blonde hair. I don't respond as another tear leaks from my eyes, I don't need to. We both know how fucked this situation is and all about how I did it to myself. Taking responsibility and all that never looked so horrendous. An unintentional life altering mistake is still a mistake that screams at the top of its lungs for accountability I desperately don't want to take.

*Ding!*

*Please just go away.*

"Normally I would be all for you ignoring that asshole but-"

"I know. I just don't want to hear his stupid voice, not tonight. Not ever." I interrupt letting myself slump forward until my forehead makes contact with his brawny chest.

"Lix," He urges again before tugging me away from him, from all of the comfort his warmth has always afforded me. He grips my shoulders, squeezing them reassuringly before pulling me the rest of the way back to judge me some more. I let him knowing damn well there's zero chance of him dropping it. Shitshows of this caliber have to be addressed. For once he can't fight my battles for me, that alone makes my stomach knot.

*This is my mess, I need to clean it up. I know that I just... don't have that much in me. I'm chronically emotionally exhausted.*

"You can't just leave things up in the air like this. Stand up for yourself for once! I wont always be here to do it for you." He's right and I know it. The bitter reminder of our limited time together only serves to rub salt in a freshly opened wound. I want nothing to do with Christian Ford but I don't

really have a choice, I have to face him Monday at the very least. Imagining the earth shattering fit it would throw mom into if I dropped out over a fling has my chest tightening, clamping down over my heart. Making it work for each beat.

I pull away, the couch feeling too crowded all the sudden. He watches me, apprehension clear in his eyes as I bend jerking my discarded phone from the scattered papers on the black coffee table. The whole two words written from todays lecture mock me, I didn't even bother pulling out the assignment I knew I wouldn't finish. What will he do after this anyway? Fail me?

*I doubt it.*

We're stuck together until I graduate unfortunately. Pulling all the air I can into my lungs I let it out, sighing deeply before lighting the screen on my phone, sighing staring at my live wallpaper of fall leaves tumbling towards the ground. Willing the fifteen text messages and three missed calls to evaporate before my eyes. To tumble to the ground alongside those leaves and get lost in the fray.

*They don't.*

Another wayward thought enters as the screen goes black and I'm met with my own puffy eyes in the reflection.

I wish Monday would never come. I wish I had never let him get to me. I wish I had never enrolled here. I almost...wish I could curl up and die. It would be so much easier than this burn in my chest. The fear of what will happen next. What the consequences of my ignorance will be. What my life has always been... anxiety and tears.

I unlock the screen and my stomach scours as I read through the messages, each one progressively worse than the last.

***Christian: Don't overreact meet me tonight we can work this out***

***Christian: Let's talk about this***

***Christian: Answer the fucking phone Felicity***

***Christian: let me explain***

***Christian: meet me at the diner I'll be there until 2***

Welcomed annoyance builds in my gut, "Yeah fuck this." I mumble before shoving to my feet and marching towards my small bedroom. Knowing damn well my confidence is nothing more than smoke and mirrors. The fire and anger I feel for him making my limbs grow weary. It's not that I don't want to confront him. I do. I just doubt my ability to stand there in front of him like I'm someone who can do that sort of thing without crying and running away. Christian Ford doesn't deserve my tears, but he has them anyway. I give my tears away like they're nothing special at all, like the whole world is owed a piece of me. Confrontation has never been my thing, but here I am. Gearing myself up for my worst nightmare.

"There's my girl!" Josh yells to my retreating back as I clear my door shutting it tightly behind me, hoping all the shit emotions plaguing me will magically evaporate by sunrise. That committing to this absolutely hair brained sense of determination will somehow lance my pain from my chest. I pull out my phone sending off a quick reply, after typing and deleting seven other variations of the same basic thing.

*You're overthinking again.*

Me: you can explain if you need to but this is goodbye. The second you try anything I'm gone.

....

Christian: Thank you.

I frown at the screen, in the three months since Professor Ford transferred to my college I've never once heard him say thank you to anyone much less me. My chest threatens to constrict at the gesture, he's so terrible I'm impressed by the most basic manners.

*This is low, even for you Felicity.*

I take a shuddering breath before leveling myself in the full-length mirror hung on the back of my bedroom door. I suppose being caught in a lie this slimy would make anyone a little more pliable. I roll my eyes staring at my long choppy layered hair and puffy aegean colored eyes searching for an ounce of strength in them. Just one sliver, anything I can hang on to. I groan forcing my eyes away as my cheeks heat in embarrassment.

I'm such an idiot I nearly deserve an award. Perpetually a naïve child, so trusting and... needy. He saw my desperation, the lonely shy girl with only one friend who always sat alone in class. He used that against me. Manipulated me so expertly I apologized to him for every wound he inflicted on me. And like the ignorant girl that I am, I ate the lies he fed me straight from his palm. Never once questioned when he said he couldn't take me out on a real date. Save for the run-down diner he always insisted I meet him at. I didn't even question it when he said he couldn't afford to let his colleagues see us together, that it was better to meet two towns over... just to be safe.

*Seemed excessive. We're both adults but I admired how much he cared about his career. I admired him for fuck's sake.*

Scoffing to myself, I splash cold water on my face, jerking my hair into a messy unkempt bun on the top of my head. That spark of anger inside me continues to build, growing rapidly until it's a living, breathing thing of its own as I replay that moment in my mind. My own guilt throwing fuel on an

open flame. I was shocked at first when the woman met him at his desk, wrapping her arms around him. Jealous when she leaned in for a kiss, a kiss he met halfway without a moment of hesitation. It was brief and tender, filled with something I had never seen from him before. He was never tender with me. I had convinced myself the violent and aggressive, often painful way he fucked me spoke to his passion for me. I took it even when he scared me because he said only I understood him. That only what we had could give him what he needed. I was the only one he could share that special hidden part of himself with. Only one he trusted.

*Another lie.*

He fucked me like the whore he saw me as. Someone undeserving of tenderness. When I saw the ring on her finger and listened to the way they spoke with love and familiarity things begun to click into place.

*She was beautiful, elegant and undoubtedly his wife.*

A wife he swore he didn't have. I tried to stay there, to handle things like an adult but I couldn't. Tears prickled in my eyes and I shoved up from my seat bolting from the room like a scolded child. Everything in my life had gone to shit so damn fast. I was nearly done with college, struggling to stay sane between exams like any other person there when I got that call from mom. Not that any call with her was ever particularly good, being told dad had stage four cancer was definitely the worst.

*So far*

That was only the second blow, the first one had come a week prior when my best friend since kindergarten told me he would be dropping out and going home. Josh decided the best place for him and his future was at his brother's construction company. I was understanding, like always. Didn't bat an eye. He told me his parents offered to keep paying for the apartment we

live in until I could find something else but my pride wouldn't allow it. I wanted to be happy for him, as happy as he always seemed to be for me no matter what I did or how insignificant the achievement was. I just can't. I've never been alone before. Not really. Not without at least one guiding hand. My parents can barely pay their own bills let alone my rent, not that I would ever ask them. God forbid I give mom another thing to hold over my head.

I could always tell Professor Ford, Christian... saw something in me. Something that caught his attention and I suppose I was right. He did see something in me. He saw me. The bare bones of what I am, my weaknesses... all of them. He saw a shy, lonely girl ripe for the picking. It took Josh less than an hour to find his wife's Facebook, looking down at her and his three kids, my humiliation seemed silly compared to what she would be feeling if she knew, if she'd figured it out when I left the classroom in tears. I don't deserve to cry. Had I only looked I could've stopped this three months ago before he fucked me. Before he tainted my body with his touch. I walked around for weeks with that stupid smile on my face, that stupid false sense of belonging. I covered the bruises he left on my skin. Ignored every red flag because at least he was paying attention to me. Every time he'd take the sex a little too far, ignore my use of the safe word he gave me.

*I apologized to him for not understanding better. For not being good enough. It came so naturally I never even gave it a second thought.*

Josh warned me, getting involved with my Conservation Biology professor was a terrible idea and he was right. He had no idea how right he was. He's always right, my tether with endless inspirational quotes and he'll be gone in less than two weeks. I tear off my snot and tear-stained hoodie, throwing on an old dark green and black striped sweater and old leggings

still sporting cat hair from the last time I visited home. I'll be fucking dammed if I dress up for him again. I stare at myself one last time in the mirror making a singular vow.

*I'm done being a doormat. For the first time in my life I'm going to stand up for myself. I'm going to be strong, even if I have to fake it.*

\*\*\*\*

It took less energy than I expected it to in convincing Josh to let me go alone. Probably had something to do with the fact that it's nearly one in the morning and he was half asleep when I told him I was leaving. I rake air through my lungs, trying and failing horribly to steady my nerves. Ignoring the churning in my stomach as I lift my forehead from the cool window of the bus. Watching through the blurry space where my breath fogged up the glass as the dreaded town's bus stop comes into view. The faint glow of the half burnt out streetlight is the only thing that illuminates the large gravel parking lot. Well mostly gravel and a fair amount of dead grass, cigarette butts and things I don't linger on for too long act as additional unsavory adornments.

I ignore the knowing stare of the bus driver, the same one that usually drops me off in the mostly abandoned town of Hulmont as I step off the bus. The air brakes behind me sealing my fate as the doors close taking my chance of fleeing with them. Far too close to turning around, pounding on the doors and pleading to be let back in. I swallow down the lump in my throat, this whole thing suddenly feeling too big for me to handle. Not that I have a choice at this point, the taillights of the bus growing smaller and smaller with each passing second. My eyes stay trained on the flecked red paint of the Old Shack diner as my feet crunch beneath the gravel. I can't

help the chill that runs up my spine, the flickering light of the aged sign only adding to its creepiness. This would be the perfect setting for a slasher flick only I'm not being chased through the neighboring overgrown field by a masked man, his blade tinged red with the blood of my sexy, underdressed coeds. I'm going to break off a torrid affair with my slimy college professor. The smell of cigarette smoke fills the chilly night air despite there not being any other people outside. At least that I can see save for a few vehicles that look empty. A glance at the attached no tell motel by the same name has me cringing internally remembering the night he brought me here, our first actual night together. The first time he hadn't just fucked me bent over his desk while the wood bit into my skin. I remember the inside of the dingy hotel a little too clearly, the way the roaches scattered as I flicked on the light still makes my skin crawl nearly as much as him. We laughed as he assessed the broken radiator and stained sheets before taking our chances outside and fucking me in his car only a few feet from where I stand now.

"Hey!"

I nearly jump out of my skin as I turn watching the pretty slight brunette stomp towards me. She flicks her half-smoked cigarette at me. I jerk back as the lit end briefly makes contact with the sleeve of my sweater.

*What the fuck?*

My stomach drops to the dirty gravel as realization kicks me straight in the throat. My lips part in shock, my eyes flicking towards the open door of an abandoned SUV I could've sworn was empty just moments ago. The driver's side door is open as the ding ding ding key ignition sound narrates possibly one of the most anxiety inducing moments of my life. The overhead dome light is stuck on as three sets of wide eyes watch their

mother stomp so close to me that our noses nearly brush. The smell of cigarettes and wine on her breath adding to the sick feeling in my stomach.

*She brought the kids...*

Mrs. Ford's fiery glare never leaves me, not offering me a moment of reprieve from her anger, "You have some fucking nerve showing up to meet him!" She yells her voice nowhere near the soft elegant thing it was earlier today.

I open my mouth to speak, to tell her it's not like that but my words die on my tongue. Tears prickle my eyes, yet hers remain dry. I will them to stay put. She's the one that deserves to cry, not me. Yet she's not and I am.

"What? Nothing to fucking say you stupid! Little! Slut!" She screams, being sure to punctuate every insult as if I'm too dumb to understand her otherwise, "Have you any idea how you've destroyed my family?" Her words cut through me like glass, of course I do. Only I never meant for that to happen. My eyes flicker again towards the kids in the car, guilt gnawing at my insides.

"I didn't know." I blurt out, instantly regretting it when she takes another step forward sending her palm into the side of my face. The slap stings as I stumble back, bringing my hand to my reddened cheek in shock, "Are you fucking crazy? I had no idea he was married!" I scream back at her, "I was coming to tell him goodbye!"

She scoffs, "Yeah right up until you're spreading your legs again. I saw those perverted godless things he did to you in those disgusting videos!"

*Videos?*

My guilt parts, giving way to my anger and no small amount of humiliation... he swore he wouldn't record me. He promised. I take a step towards her my fists clenching before my eyes flick to the kids in the back

of the SUV. The little boy in the middle now in full hysterics. I unclench my fist, my hands shaking as I take another deep breath that doesn't do nearly enough for me, "Look you don't have to believe me but I am sorry. Your kids are crying, let's-"

I'm cut off as she spits in my face, the warmth of her saliva forcing bile to rise in my throat. I recoil from her wiping at the skin as she screams, "Keep my fucking kids out of your whore mouth and stay the fuck away from my husband!"

She half runs back to the vehicle as tears burst free streaming down my cheeks. I watch her unmoving as she slams the door behind her. Despite wanting nothing more than to run from here, to be anywhere but here. I stay put held in place by my shock, anger and ripe embarrassment. The back tires of the SUV peppers me with gravel. I yelp as the small rocks barrel into my flesh. My heart hammering in my chest, my breath starts to come in far too quickly and far too shallow. Like my lungs can't keep up with what my body is demanding of them.

I turn, my eyes landing on three waitresses gawking at the spectacle from the door of the diner. A frustrated cry leaves my throat. The humiliation burns bone deep as the shock wears off. I take off down the sidewalk, not really knowing why and without a destination in mind. All I want is to get far far away from that stupid fucking diner and this stupid fucking parking lot. I run, like I always have when things get too real. The abandoned boarded up buildings blur past me, their dark silhouettes mixing with the closed shops between them that have held on. My feet pound against the unlit broken sidewalk until my foot hits a lip in the concrete sending me flying forward, my knees scraping against the concrete. My lungs burn and my side screams in protest, begging me to stop running. I lift myself

brushing the dirt from my palms. My left knee seems to have taken most of the damage, adding a nice tear to my leggings. For the first time I look around me, taking in the empty downtown streets of Hulmont. I take a few steps forward half tempted to pull out my phone and call Josh. Admitting defeat.

*I don't.*

To be honest I don't even want to go home. If you can really call it that considering I'm out at the end of the month. An Uber is out of the question considering I definitely can't afford it. I'm barely going to make classes and working extra shifts at the grocery store as is. God forbid if I need to eat or sleep at some point. My eyes settle on the old Hulmont Theater, surprised it's still open despite the nearly abandoned parking lot.

And town at that. Hulmont is where you come to do all of the untoward things proper well-kept cities and towns won't allow. Seems fitting this is where he brought me. I was the embarrassing thing he sought to keep in the shadows of his shiny outward persona.

I bite back the feeling of unease that pools in my stomach as I approach the large dated building. My hand landing on the tarnished metal handle of the main doors. The teenager at the ticket booth stares at me apprehensively, letting me know he too probably watched the end of my little meltdown on the sidewalk.

"One ticket please." I mumble avoiding eye contact, only looking up when I'm met with silence. I can stretch seven bucks, right?

"To see what?" He looks away from me quickly pretending to be busy with the papers in front of him. I hadn't even bothered to see what's playing. Taking a step back I look at the lighted sign above the booth, giving up quickly when my eyes too blurry with unshed tears read what it says.

"Surprise me."

I hand over my debit card as he fiddles painstakingly slow with whatever behind the desk. My cheeks heating as two additional kids stare from behind the snack bar sat towards the back of the large lobby. I could've run back to the diner and had a soda while I wait for the bus for less than what this ticket costs me but fuck that. I am never going back to that diner.

"Theater four." He announces as he slides the ticket forward, rolling my eyes when I see the movie he picked. I nearly ask him for a different one but refrain. It's not like I'm here for the entertainment anyway. I start to step around the desk before stopping short, "Why are you guys open this late?"

One of the girls groan while fiddling with a wash cloth her hair pulled up in a messy bright blue ponytail, "Manager said we need to drum up more business so he's trying out late night showings. Only people it's brought in are druggies and couples that fuck in the theater rooms."

I press my lips together tightly before nodding and heading down the dim, green painted hall. Watching my feet track along the stained, red velvety carpet I nearly turn around and head back out.

*And go where? Sit in the dark in the middle of bumfuck nowhere Hulmont? No. That's like asking to end up on the ID channel.*

After a quick stop in the women's bathroom to scrub my face raw with the weird smelling soap from the dispenser, I finally get settled into a seat midway down the row. Unsurprisingly I'm completely alone. Grateful to have avoided the druggies and people fucking, although on any other night that might've been entertaining to a degree. The fucking more than the druggies. I run my fingers along the worn-down red seats, wondering if the people who sat in them before me were having just as much shit thrown at them. My eyes follow the deep purple lines painted on the two-toned wall

that I'm positive hasn't been updated since the early nineties, the main screen slightly ripped at the bottom. My skin breaks out in goosebumps as I struggle to pay attention to the movie trailers playing in front of me. After a while I give up, double checking the next bus comes through around three thirty. Triple checking the alarm I set to remind me on my phone as I pull my feet up into the seat, wrapping my arms around my legs as I watch the very basic opening to the self-proclaimed best romantic comedy of the year.

*Because that's exactly what I needed tonight.*

I swallow hard as unease creeps in, making my hair stand on end as it creeps up my spine. A strange electrified feeling of awareness. I whip my head around as if I'll catch someone lurking behind me, rolling my eyes at myself when I see I'm still alone. Being by yourself in an empty run-down theater at two in the morning is every bit as creepy as you'd expect. I wet my lips, trying to ignore how thirsty I am. The smell of popcorn nearly makes me head back to the lobby, even with barely being able to smell it through my stuffy raw nose. What makes it through the snot has my stomach growling. The longer I sit, my eyes blank and glued to the screen, the more my eyelids droop. Growing unreasonably heavy as I lay my head against my knees. Exhaustion kicking in despite my valiant effort to ward it off. A battle I lose quickly, every warning siren in my head telling me it's stupid to fall asleep here while I'm alone but the rest of my body doesn't care. I'm exhausted.

*I'll just rest my eyes for a minute. I have an alarm set anyway.*