



# Dying to Meet You

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**Category:** Romance

**Description:** When the life they've been building starts to fall apart, they'll need to fight their past demons and an unknown enemy.

Eden's betrayal by someone she loved

Matt's failure to stop the Camp Carroll massacre

Keir's manipulation and abuse in XIX

Blaine's sobriety

Caleb's excommunication from his faith and family

Hutton's sole purpose, the reason for his existence-destruction.

The person targeting them knows their weaknesses and exploits them fully. Not everyone will make it through this alive.

"I've been waiting. I'm dying to meet you."

(Please watch TW: This is Why Choose/Polyamory dark romance, Child abduction, kidnapping, past trauma, explicit language and steam, MM, MMM, MMFMMM, MFM, unaliving)

**Total Pages (Source):** 74

# Page 1

*Source Creation Date: May 20, 2025, 4:52 am*

## Chapter One

Here but by the grace of...

Eden

It never goes away entirely.

The harsh words I tuck to the back of my mind, the truth of my past tending to seep in when I least expect it.

“You’re nothing but an abomination. You were never meant to exist.”

Even when I think I’ve dealt with the trauma, something will trigger the vitriol. All those ugly feelings wash through me again years later. Will it ever fade away completely?

Closing my eyes and leaning back in my office chair, I take five deep breaths.

“...then Momma told me the Divine Goddess Alshara would need to okay it. Momma said...” I try to stay focused on my patient’s recollection, but the message I found on my desk this morning evoked the past in a dizzying manner. I should’ve delayed our appointment, but Iker requested it after remaining silent in group sessions for the two months he’s been with us. If he’s willing to talk, I can’t make him wait.

“I’m sorry, Iker, did you say she locked you inside the...?”

“Yes, inside the shitbox. Twice. The second time was because I forgot to approach the Divine Goddess on my knees.” Iker blinks his wide eyes at me. No one knows his exact age; his thinning silver hair and the deepening wrinkles around his mouth and eyes give the impression he’s in his sunset years. But the way he speaks and his body language are that of a child. The trauma he suffered during his formative years caused a halt to his maturing, mentally and emotionally.

“Please forgive the interruption and continue. You were telling me about your mother’s devotion to the Divine Gods and Goddesses in the Otherworld realm.” His terms for the backwoods of West Virginia where the cult of seventy people secluded themselves. While confusing, it’s an example of his struggle since he’s been with us at Horizon Wellness Center.

Out of the corner of my eye, I see my colleague Dr. Gregory Wallen leaning against the wall outside my office. “Mother used to tell me the way to favor was submission. But crawling on the rocks hurt so much.” Iker looks at me, his lip trembling. “Do you think that’s why it happened? I stopped being able to crawl to them.”

“Do you remember what I was saying in our group session? Manipulation and control are how cults operate. Your mother believed if she went against the Divine Gods or Goddesses, something bad would happen. That gave them control over her actions, and yours.”

I personally know something about the manipulation involved in cults. I grew up in one, making my current career a passion project as much as a calling. Counseling cult survivors is healing something inside me. Or, at least, I thought it was...

“You’re nothing but an abomination. You were never meant to exist.”

Several minutes pass as Iker tells me about the rules he, his mother, and his seven siblings adhered to. I used to get queasy listening to the stories of abuse. Even though

the indecencies he was subjected to were staggering, I've listened to similar and worse. Locked inside an overflowing outhouse, starved, terrified by threats, and cut off from the world for most of his life, it's a miracle he survived. Until he escaped a few months ago, when a passing motorist found him.

"Dr. Bradford, I listen to everything you say. I don't understand what you mean by that...manipulation? Do you mean like when Momma would mark us?" Iker and all his siblings were subjected to repeated beatings with a stick that had tacks glued to it. The scars are visible on his pockmarked arms and legs.

Giving him a weak smile, I say quietly, "Not exactly. The people in charge would trick your mom. Tell her lies that made her act a certain way." Another thing I can personally connect with Iker on. Years spent on high alert, because I never knew if I was safe, caused me to doubt my sanity. I take Iker's hand gently. "If they controlled all of you, they could get you to do their bidding." It's a slow process explaining what I mean to this tormented man, but he's patient while I break it down for him.

Ushering Iker to the door at the end of our appointment, he turns to me. "Dr. Bradford, I'm happy I talked to you." A tentative smile graces his face as he clutches my hand in his. "I knew you'd understand."

I wish I didn't understand so well. Even if I speak occasionally in group sessions about my experiences, I withhold all the twisted betrayals. The need to keep that close is with me every day.

The realization I came close to dying.

Nodding to him, I reply, "We can talk again next week if you feel up to it." I never want to press any of our patients. It's not easy to trust people after being in a cult. In fact, it's daunting to look at those in authority—doctors, law enforcement, teachers—with anything other than trepidation.

Iker says, "I'd like that." He bends slightly toward me, adding, "You're being watched."

My heart thuds to a halt. Watched? My startled look must cause him to rethink his wording. "Yes, your spirit is good. The Heavens will always look out for you."

The quick flush of heat to my face and held breath go unnoticed by Iker. The note left on my desk is making me more anxious than usual. Iker bows in my direction again before leaving as my colleague clears his throat, asking to speak to me.

Dr. Wallen accompanies me as I make my way out of the clinic. "You didn't get back to me. How are the kids adjusting?" Seven months ago, my family made the decision to foster three children who survived a house fire and were members of the Revivalist cult. It's been a daily battle for them to adjust, but none of us could allow them to live in the center or be torn apart from each other in the foster care system.

Sighing, I answer, "Zinnea keeps an eye on her brothers whenever she's home from school. She's the most diligent and serious eight-year-old I've ever met. Which makes sense after all she's been through. Zachariah sleeps under her bed, and the baby is just now eating better and sleeping for more than a couple hours at a time. It's...There are days it's taking a toll on us."

I wouldn't go back and make a different decision; those children are meant to be a part of our family. I believe that wholeheartedly. If only my husbands Keir and Caleb did. It's not that they don't care about the newest additions to our family, they just didn't want Waverly, Weston, or Warner to suffer ill effects from taking them in. So far, Waverly, our nine-year-old, has gotten quiet and secretive; Weston, our six-year-old, has become naughtier for attention; and Warner, our three-year-old...well, he's still the happy and giggly toddler he's always been.

"Understandable. Right? They've been through hell. Surviving that fire was only the

beginning. They need therapy. More than the center can possibly provide.” Is he telling me he won’t continue trying to help them?

## Page 2

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“Are you...are—” I stop in my tracks, turning to face my colleague and mentor as he tucks his hands deep in his pockets. He looks over my head at the trees surrounding the parking lot. He won’t make eye contact. Dammit. If he can’t make headway, our road to healing them is longer than I ever realized. “I won’t ask you to violate Zin’s privacy, but you don’t think it’s helping having her and Zach in therapy twice a week?”

His eyes are shining with unshed tears when he meets my gaze. “No, Eden. Zachariah will adjust eventually. But Zinnea, she’s...” Biting his lip and adjusting his stance, he says with a frown, “She’s presenting with multiple disorders. I’m never one to suggest separating siblings, but she could use some intensive therapy. Away from your household.”

In. Out. Count to five. Search for the right words to say to the man who helped me when my life imploded, who I was convinced could do the same for Zinnea and her brothers. Each expansion of my ribcage reminds me of Weston’s laughter this morning at our pygmy goat Petunia’s bleats making his little legs kick in delight.

Well, look at that.

All I need to do is think of one of my children. My every fiber centers when I focus on them. “You know I’m not taking Zinnea from our home. Do you have any recommendations for a psychologist who can work with her?”

He pats the breast pocket of his shirt before taking a pen out. Grabbing one of his business cards from his wallet, he scratches out a name and number. “I just met her at the conference Dr. Xiong and I attended last month. She specializes in childhood

trauma.”What a bleak career path, I think before correcting myself. One of my husbands chose that vocation before settling on being a high school guidance counselor at an alternative learning center.

“Dr. Constance Almari?” One of her journal articles came across my desk recently. Specifically, her theorizing about the Camp Carroll Massacre. Immediately, I discount her as a source of help. She was scathing with her take on the FBI’s involvement, and even more so about our building on their former land. Horizon Wellness Center relocated from Illinois to its current location in New York after a scandal forced its closing. Its new incarnation happens to rest on a location with a grisly and horrific past, the site of a mass murder.

The minutes it takes to reach my vehicle are silent. Dr. Wallen appears deflated as I fight for the right words. I’m not disappointed in his decision. I’m terrified he picked up on things I’ve missed with Zin. “You can call me anytime, day or night, if you need to talk. You...Your whole family took on a massive undertaking with this adoption. That can cause stress fractures in any family. In your case-”

I cut him off. “In my case, we have enough to deal with?” The wry smile dies on my face. He’s not wrong.

My drive home takes forty-five minutes, time I normally use to decompress, listen to case notes from other doctors, or simply crank the music to stop intrusive thoughts. By the time I see the large white farmhouse with a wrap-around porch we call home, my earlier worries about the note are pushed from my mind. It could be a poorly worded message or even a prank in bad taste.

Rolling up the driveway to our home, I notice the gate to the pasture where the rescue goats, donkeys, and horses are let out in the afternoons has clearly been left open. Oh, Weston. We try repeatedly to remind him it needs to be closed. Sure enough Petunia is eating what’s left of the hanging flowers on the porch, and Clyde, our one-eyed



dufus of an elderly horse, is standing with one leg stuck in a bucket near the porch steps.

Ditching my purse and messenger bag inside the car, I clap my hands loudly, calling, “Weston? Weston?!” Comically the animals only lazily glance at me before going about their business. Rounding up the ragtag bunch and securing the gate takes a few minutes. I’m wiping the dirt from animals waddling up against me off my slacks when Keir’s SUV turns off the road.

Even after close to seven years, my heart still picks up pace at the sight of him. If life hadn’t dealt him the ugly cards it had, he could’ve walked a runway. A stunning face, hazel eyes and a lean toned body that moves with a gait I can’t tear my eyes from make him irresistible. I never miss the second and third looks and attention he gets from men and women alike when we’re out. He’s striking. Even better, there is no one else with such a warrior’s heart. He’s saved my life in big and small ways since I met him.

Clad in his well-fitted gray suit, he gets out of the blacked-out Suburban, pulling his service weapon out to lock in a box mounted in his FBI-issued unmarked car. With a chuckle he yells, “I’m guessing Weston strikes again?”

The little monster comes ambling from the barn with a dripping ice cream cone, wearing oversized galoshes and a Rangers hockey jersey he’s drowning in. The sight of him causes me to choke down laughter. I can’t stay irritated with him long. “Weston, what have your daddies and I said about leaving the gate open?”

Wide-eyed he licks his ice cream before saying, “To not to.”

Keir walks our way. “Is that the autographed hockey jersey that was hanging in the barn office? Where are your clothes, buddy?”

Ugh. He's right. The galoshes are an old spare pair that sit in the tack room. "Weston, what happened?"

"Um, I was hiding from a ninja. Then...soshite nanika warui koto ga okimashita. That means something bad happened in Japanese. I fell into the horse water." The water trough sitting beside the barn in the animal enclosure is surrounded by a moat of water from having a six-year-old splashing in it. He blinks a few times at us before continuing to make a mess of his treat.

"Where did your ice cream come from?"

He points west of us. "Farmer Toad."

The sigh I let loose is from the very core of me. Our neighbor has been an ongoing issue for the past couple of months. He has been dubbed "Toad" by Zach because he is unfortunate-looking with a wide face and double chin. I'd attempt to reign in the use of the nickname more, but the man has made several unwanted criticisms of our family. He's been flat-out horrendous.

Keir quickly snags a clean towel hanging on a hook inside the barn and scoops the globby cone away. "Hey, Wes, we've talked about this before." He shakes his head as he continues, "No talking to any adults without Mommy or one of your Daddies around and absolutely do not accept any food or drinks from them. Right?" Squatting eye level with Weston, he wipes his face clean.

My hand smooths through Keir's hair, coming to rest on his neck. He wasn't much older than Weston is now when his family fell into a cult's clutches. His parents lost their lives eventually, while Keir was sex trafficked-abuse he suffered until he escaped as a teenager. His protective stance over our kids is only amplified by what he suffered through.

“Daddy K?” Weston rests his head on Keir’s shoulder. “Farmer Toad is bad? He gave me ice cream for pulling weeds in his garden.”

Keir clears his throat. “Wes, you aren’t supposed to leave this yard if we’re not with you. Not to Farmer...not to Todd’s house, not the vet clinic across the road where Daddy C is, not to your friends Hunter’s or Delilah’s houses.”

“Where’s Zach at?” Since coming to live with us, he follows either Wes or Zinnea around. Since Zin and Waverly are dropped off close to five, I would expect him to be on Weston’s heels.

With a shrug of his little shoulders, he wipes his nose with the back of his hand. “He’s scared of the ninjas.”

Weston’s imagination is unparalleled. It doesn’t help that Daddy H tells him stories about ninjas, while teaching him Japanese. Hutton has been doing work with a tech company located in Japan and overhearing him talk to his contact fascinated Weston. Immediately he wanted to know more. He’s a sponge, picking up everything Hutton teaches him. With Caleb he learns about animals and plants. With Matt, he’s getting life lessons. Keir is trying desperately to instill street smarts, and Blaine...well, he’s the wild playmate. Blaine stokes his imagination and revs up the hijinks. I just hold on for dear life, knowing we only have so much time before he’ll be an adult, no longer needing us this way.

Keir kisses his head. “Go find the clothes you took off.” We watch him happily skip back to the soaked pile in the middle of the tack room, while I wrap my arms around Keir’s waist.

## Page 3

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“I understand the need to lecture him. I do, but are we running the risk of making him paranoid about people he doesn’t know?” Keir frowns at my question, but I don’t want to steal his childhood away by talking to him constantly about the dangers in the world. Weston has always been an outgoing little boy. The thought of him changing is farfetched, but I don’t want to smother his spirit with rules. With reminders that bad people exist.

The note. I quickly shut down where my mind starts to head.

Sucking in a quick breath, I add, “I just want him to have what we never did-a normal childhood.”

### Chapter Two

This too shall f\*cking pass, right?

Blaine

“Nope.Untellmethat.”

Twenty minutes ago, I was ready to grab Eden’s hand and pull her into the bedroom. It’s been a miserably long week of waiting to get her to myself. Now, I’m stuck listening to my brother-in-law Chris while Keir slips out of the room with her. Fucker.

Rubbing my eyes while letting my head drop back, I try to channel a semblance of interest in his last conquest. The revulsion over his lack of boundaries heightens when

he launches into a story about his girlfriend shoving food inside her to push out while he records her. “I miss when people had shame,” I mumble to myself, which is rich coming from me. In fact, my wife would collapse laughing over that statement.

I guess I’m a hypocrite in addition to being a proudly self-proclaimed sexual deviant.

The kitchen door closes as Caleb kicks it shut; his arms loaded down with paper bags from the grocery store. “Need a hand, Big Gulp?” We can joke all we want about my best friend, but the dude looks like a superhero. Tall, broad-shouldered, muscles on muscles... He would be intimidating if he wasn’t always smiling.

Ending my call, I grab a bag from his arms. “I’d offer to help with dinner, but I wouldn’t mean it.”

He rolls his eyes as he sets the other three bags on the counter. “You were banned from attempting a meal again after you managed to blow up a pot of oatmeal. I still don’t understand how you did that. Those blueberry stains took forever to scrub out of the kitchen tiles.”

Oh yeah, fuck. Good thing I have no desire to put together a meal; that’s Caleb’s forte. Eden says Caleb makes a better mom than she is, only partially in jest. He makes sure we’re all well fed, the house is in running order, schedules are kept, the animals cared for, and the kids tucked in at the end of the day. It’s remarkable that as the youngest among the adults in our family, he embraces the responsibilities better than the rest of us.

A more compassionate part of me, the one immersed in psychology, understands he is constantly trying hard to prove to us and himself he’s “worthy” of being a part of our family. No amount of reassurance from any of us will remedy that. His excommunication from the FLDS Mormon cult he grew up in left its mark on him. When I step back and watch him with the kids, his tenderness and care with them

eclipses his sense of duty. That's when it's clear how incredible he is.

I'd even say there have been times throughout the years when I've questioned if I'm crushing on him. Too bad he's straight; there's not a queer bone in that body. We hear a tiny squeal from the hallway beside the stairs as Zachariah runs toward us, his Kool-Aid-stained dinosaur T-shirt pulled up over his mouth. "Daddy B, Daddy C...Weston is missing." Out of breath he bends forward to finish speaking. "The ninjas got him." I catch sight of Weston dressed in his white karate uniform with his finger over his lips to shush me. He peeks around the corner at the bottom of the stairs, his adorably serious-looking scrunched face almost making me laugh.

I scoop Zach up, resting him over my shoulder. "Huh, the ninjas took him?" I'm thrilled Wes and Zach have been close since laying eyes on each other. The day Wes spotted him at Horizon Wellness Center when he was visiting with the therapy dogs, he promptly befriended him, and that brotherhood is effortlessly flourishing. The skittish behavior I notice with Zachariah only makes Wes more protective over his new sibling.

If only Waverly and Zinnea were experiencing the same. At nine and eight, they're both mature beyond their ages, but Waverly has had the benefit of a large family giving her love, nurturing her interests, showing up for her dance recitals, and encouraging her drawing. Zinnea's only had trauma, so she has latched onto Eden strongly, and it's displacing Waves. There has always been a connection between Waverly and I, one I sense is crucial to her right now since Eden isn't seeing how Zinnea's needs are overtaking Waverly's.

Zach wiggles, his squeaky laugh caused by me tickling his sides makes it hard for him to answer me. "Y-yeess, they went up the fireplace." As Caleb grabs him away to sit him on the counter he adds in a whisper, "We're just playin'."

This tiny six-year-old, with white-blond, wispy hair, and a distinctively high-pitched

rasp of a voice gives us a shy look. “It’s the same ninja who lives in the trees.”

“Zach, the two of you haven’t been playing in the trees behind the barn again, have you?” Caleb asks.

We can hear Wes calling out a “Hi-yah, hi-yah, take that...hi-yah,” as he moves down the hallway toward the kitchen. “Teishi!” Since learning some Japanese from Hutton, Wes has been sprinkling words and phrases into his everyday conversations. The only reason I know he’s saying stop is because this has been one of his favorite words so far. He’s even named one of the new barn cats Teishi.

“Nuh-uh. Not since the wagon got stuck.”

Last week, the boys were making a fort in the woods when the red wagon they’d used to bring sticks got caught on a tree root. At the time, Hutton lost them on the cameras for ten minutes while he was on a phone call for work. His automatic response was concern that a breach in security had occurred, something he takes seriously enough to have high-tech cameras mounted all over the place that he keeps track of. He found them quickly, but it must’ve rattled him since we had a family meeting about safety again.

Every one of us lives with the memory of that summer years ago, when we could’ve lost Eden or the kids forever. Even if our resources have allowed us some peace of mind, we’re all watching our backs.

The boys resume their antics, with Zach hopping off the counter to chase Wes outside, narrowly missing a collision with Dodger, our grumpy-ass cat. I stretch my arms out with a groan. “I need to get into the gym or ...fuck, I need some kind of release.” Caleb half turns, opening his mouth to reply before shaking his head. “What?”

“I know that look.”

Ha. Am I that predictable? Once I noticed Keir and Eden slipping off together, I wanted to follow right behind them. It’s a constant battle to rein in my jealousy. The craving for intimacy with Eden exploded into an uncontrollable urge for sex when she took Keir’s hand to go upstairs.

Caleb turns to lean against the counter. “I’ll watch the kids. Go ahead.”

I search his face for any sign of the irritation I think he should feel. His time with Eden is just as important but he never voices it. If I were a better fucking friend, I would suppress this feeling and follow the boys outside, making sure the animal menagerie isn’t let out, or the boys don’t wander off. But call me a fucking flawed dickhead, I’ll take what he’s offering.



## Page 4

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“Are you sure?” His back to me already while he closes a cupboard door, I add, “I’ll owe you one.”

“Mmm? Guess who’s helping clean out stalls tomorrow?”

“Oh, nice. Look at that. You’ve got jokes.” I grab a kitchen towel to snap him with it. “Well, I’ll shovel shit tomorrow. It’ll be worth it.”

I have no doubt about that.

Finding the main bedroom door cracked open, I know I haven’t missed out on anything. We have a firm close-and-lock rule with the kids in the house if anyone is intimate. I knock lightly on the door, peeking my head in. Keir is standing at the window, and Eden sits on the edge of the bed. Both are fully clothed and looking morose. “Jesus Christ, here I thought I’d be interrupting some fun, but instead you both look like someone died.”

Keir’s eyes narrow at me. “It took you longer than I figured it would to end up here.”

Standing while removing her heels, Eden sighs. “I don’t want to rehash things, but we were discussing Matt leaving for the federal trial in LA.” Ah. Wait...

“Why wasn’t I included in this talk?”

Once upon a time it would’ve been me and Eden who commiserate about Matt being a workaholic, now Keir has gradually slid into my place. In so many ways he’s spending more time with both Eden and Matt than I am.

Keir folds his arms over his chest. “Before you start in,” his knowing smirk makes me feel a little feral, “I wanted to get Eden’s opinion on having a security detail here until the trial is over. I already know Hutton is going to be against FBI agents lurking around, but I figured no one else would mind the added protection.”

Presumptuous. Maybe I don’t want them skulking around and getting into our business. I’m not terribly fond of the fact Matt and Keir are agents as it is. “Sensational. So, you want them following us around or just hanging out at the house? Or should we just have them move in? I don’t know, we already have a dozen people living here. Maybe we could build another addition. I know...I know-” I’m being a petty asshole, but Keir’s infringing. Doesn’t he see that? Hutton, Caleb, and I are all perfectly capable of picking up the slack with Matt gone. Fucking dick.

Keir cuts me off with irritation. “It’s only for a couple months and they’d be watching the perimeter of the house.”

“Why now? Did something happen?”

Eden’s gaze drops to the floor. “Matt’s concerned-”

Keir cuts in, “I am, too.”

She levels a look at him for interrupting. “Matt’s concerned there is going to be retribution against him for the arrest of the cartel members. He won’t be here, but to them family members are also fair game.”

Moving past Eden to the bed, I lounge back with my hands behind my head. “Okay? Isn’t there always a risk when you’re dealing with the bad guys?” Just one more reason I detest both Matt and Keir being in the FBI. The job is dangerous for them, but they’re putting Eden and the kids at risk, too.

My heart twinges in response to the lost look in Eden's eyes. I know her better than she realizes; something's up. I've known her since we were freshmen at Belmont College. We've leaned on each other through unimaginable circumstances. But for some reason she's trying to hide what's happening in her head. I could guess it's about the kids or work at the wellness center, although she shares those things with me. Maybe I'm losing my place as her confidante, too?

Fucking hell.

As Eden and Keir quietly discuss logistics to this proposed detail, my blood boils. I imagine leaping off the bed and slugging Keir in the jaw, which quickly turns to pinning him against the wall. My cock is at full attention now, fucking pulsing out their names in Morse code at this point.

I pick up on, "...they know us. It'll be easier that way." Keir hugs Eden to his chest, closing his eyes and letting out a deep breath. "Both Harrison and Rivera won't need to ask a bunch of questions about our family arrangement."

Rivera? Fuck no.

That motherfucking little slimeball makes inappropriate comments about Eden all the time. Not to mention he drives Keir nuts with his "jokes"- about being polyamorous. That's who he's placing on the detail? Fuck that. "Are you fucking kidding me?" I sit up. "Jergen Rivera? The same fucking sleaze who suggested we 'pencil him into the rotation' with our wife? The one who caressed her back at a Christmas party? The same motherfucking dirtbag who wanted to know who sucks whose dick? That Rivera?" I clench my jaw, fists balled. If I was on edge prior to coming up here, now I'm ready to pounce.

Keir's face reddens. "He won't need to talk to anyone unless there is a problem. Besides, he'll behave better with Harrison along." No doubt. Steve Harrison is an old

friend of Matt's. Once the shock of our family wore off, he's been respectful, on occasion defending the way we live our lives. An added bonus is our kids, Waverly, Weston, and Warner anyway, love him. A bachelor pushing forty, he's dedicated his life to his career. With no family of his own, he even joins us on holidays.

"If I get arrested for assaulting an FBI agent it's going to be your fault," I respond with a smirk.

Both basically ignore my remark; further proof my presence isn't needed to discuss important issues affecting our family. I'm not okay with that. Clearing my throat, I try again. "Hey." Tugging lightly on Eden's hand to get her attention, I say, "Since when do we make family decisions without everyone being included?"

My deep distrust of all things governmental rears its head. "Right? We should all weigh in on this. Not just Keir because he has a badge." I can't keep the irritation out of my voice.

Not just Keir because he can disarm her with that smile, those damn twinkling hazel eyes, AND those incredibly strong hands...fuuucck. I bend forward in an attempt to tame my raging hard-on. Between my desire to provoke him and my need to nestle deep into my incredibly alluring wife, I'm losing my fight to be well behaved.

In my movement off the bed, I brush past Keir, my erection grazing his hip. He stills when I can't help but let my hand lightly brush his waist. Linger a few seconds, I debate grabbing him. Eden makes eye contact with me, her mouth falling open in realization, I've really gotten to the point that disagreeing with Keir in any sense turns me on.

Toxic as fuck? Maybe.

## Page 5

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All the criticism from Matt be damned. We use each other. Keir needs to let off steam and I get off on him being rough with me. It's not soft, sweet, or loving. When Eden joins us, we rein it in, but it's more like a fight fuck. Deliciously wrong.

It happens to be a turn on for Eden to watch.

But I need her more than I can stand right now. She's not sitting this out.

"Blaine?"

"Yeah, Ed?" Dropping my voice low, I reach my hand out to her. "It's been six days, seven hours, and about twenty minutes since I've had sex. Almost a damn week," I say, not even caring that I sound like a whiny asshole right now. The last time I went this long was rehab six years ago, when my sobriety was at the forefront of my mind, not getting my rocks off.

My connection with Eden is effortless. Without words we communicate with one another. Goosebumps erupt on my arms when she runs her hand down my chest, reaching her other hand out to Keir who gives nothing away. Not a clue what he's thinking. It's maddening to wonder if he's dissociating or even "giving in". His years of sexual abuse at the hands of perverse adults while growing up, make intimate interactions with him feel like jump roping in a field of land mines. Eden, Matt, and I let him make the first move with us. It's easier than triggering him.

Unspoken rules exist for us-he is no one's bottom, and he doesn't suck dick. If Eden wants him to restrict her airflow, he can't do it without someone in the room to prevent it from going too far. And if he starts dissociating, we stop immediately. It's

not perfect, in fact, the way he copes may be a problem, but he's been suicidal in the past. I'd rather he uses sex as an outlet instead of ending his life.

I'm not a complete dickhead.

Sometimes.

Just a filthy-mouthed, former pill popper with an insatiable appetite for sex. It just so happens that Eden, Matt, and Keir are too fucking hot to act with any restraint.

Cupping Eden's ass, I pull her close to me whispering, "Don't make me wait any longer, please. When I get cranky, we all suffer."

Keir snorts at that. "That's the truth."

I point his way. "Hey, asshole, we'll finish this conversation about your buddies staking out our home later. Right now, my dick is winning." He rolls his eyes at me turning to leave the room.

"Woah, woah...Where are you going?" I thought it went without saying I want the three of us together.

After closing and locking the bedroom door he leans back against it, arms folded over his chest. "I'm not going anywhere you jackass."

Sprung. Fucking hard as a rock watching him walk our way. Between his aura, which is sizzling hot, and Eden's confident sensuality, I'm so turned on I could come with a light breeze.

Eden unbuttons her floral silk blouse her eyes taking in each of us. I brush her long curly blonde locks off her shoulders. She's always been captivating but since her

pregnancy with Warner three years ago she's a little curvier, her breasts fuller. I know every inch of her body like she knows mine, our hands automatically moving to caress and touch explosive areas, the danger zones where all measured thoughts fly out the window.

Keir kisses Eden's shoulder, helping her remove the lacy purple bra I just had my hand inside while I squeeze her nipple. Her skin flushes rosy as our hands travel over her breasts. My body pulses with need. "There are far too many clothes on both of you," I say in mock irritation while tugging at the waistband of Keir's suit pants.

That's as handsy as I get with him anymore to entice him. Not that he needs much prompting since he smoothly slips out of all his clothes while I lock in on Eden. My fingers trace down her hips as my mouth teases her lower lip, feasting on her moans as Keir gently leans her head back against his chest. "You were saying something about clothes?" he questions playfully smacking my ass. "Your turn, B." Say less.

I don't give a crap that tearing my shirt off causes two buttons to come loose, or that I have to grab his arm to steady myself while I'm pulling my pants and boxer briefs off. What I do care about is the fix I've been looking for is going to be sated. Fuck, yeah.

Eden pushes me back against the slate-colored bedroom wall, just short of knocking me into a framed picture Waverly drew of our home. "Alright, I'm digging this energy," I say before nipping at her earlobe. "What are you going to do to me? Make it dirty...so fucking dirty."

There is no better feeling than seeing desire on her face, knowing she can make me quiver with that look alone, like the fucking goddess she is. My lips leave a red mark near her nipple. She sucks in a breath before with a ragged voice saying, "I want you on your knees."

She could order me to do anything right now. Beg? Pledge my eternal allegiance? Okay, that one I already did. She steps out of her pulled-down underwear. I drop quickly, Keir moving in behind me, his hand running through my hair. “Why don’t you put that mouth of yours to good use?” His voice is sultry as he continues, “Instead of constantly trying to provoke everyone.”

Fine. No one needs to tell me twice. With an arm hooked around Eden’s waist, I pull her in tight as my tongue licks up her pussy. Finding her clit I flick it teasingly before latching on. Her groan is preceded by her knees buckling. That’s right, baby. Her soft pants and squirming fuel me. Keir steadies her as I notice in my periphery, he’s fisted his veiny cock. Goddamn. I need that motherfucker.

Call me greedy, but at this moment I’m craving them both so much I can’t figure out what to do first with my hands. Two fingers ease inside Eden’s pussy. I smear her wetness on my hand, then reach toward Keir. He wastes no time letting go of his erection to place my hand on his length. The veins standing out across his groin while I work him are an impressive sight. Memories of love bites I put on those very paths of veins in the past make me smile.

Turning back to Eden, I run my teeth across her clit before sucking the skin above it, leaving a mark. Just a little something to remember this by.

“Mmm...Why does that feel so good?” she murmurs while running a hand through my hair. Keir leans over me to devour her mouth, both releasing moans that make my movements jerky as I stroke him.

Caught between them as they grope each other, I do what any self-respecting attention whore would do, I slide down to run my tongue over Keir’s ball sack before biting him lightly. “Holy...fuck,” he yelps pulling back to look at me wide-eyed. “Not nice.” But his cock gives him away, only engorging more.



“Sure.” Delivering him a cocky half-smile, I add, “You should give me a taste of my own medicine.” If only. There is not much of a chance he’ll do it, but hot fucking damn if he did.

He picks Eden up, her legs wrapping around him, forcing me to release him. I’m not much for watching without participating, but when Keir is involved it’s on his terms. I lean against the wall, running a thumb across my lips slick with Eden’s juices. She offers a hand out to me. “Come here...get over here.”

## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: May 20, 2025, 4:52 am*

“You heard her. Move,” Keir says sternly.

The main bedroom in the house is Eden’s. Occasionally we’ll join her. Okay, I’m always in here unless she tells me to leave. The bed is the equivalent of two California king beds together. Lots of space to play with. I’d be happy if we all slept in here, but Hutton is antisocial to the tenth degree, Caleb tends to leave to check on kids or animals, and Keir has moments he needs to be alone.

Even though we each have our own rooms, Matt and I spend most of our nights in Eden’s. My bedroom down the hall holds some of my belongings, like a glorified closet and that’s it. Considering the house belonged to Matt long before we met him, the main room should be his, even if he has his things in one of the tiniest rooms of the house.

These stolen moments between Eden and I, are keeping me sane. When days like today strike; high school kids talking back, administration pulling rank over my decisions, even anxiousness over our children adjusting to life I have this to get me through. My fix. Thinking of it this way makes me think of all the replacements addicts find for obsessive behavior, and I hate it. Though it might be true; I could be hooked on sex with them.

Fuck it. I’m not changing anything about that.

Laid out on the fluffy white comforter, with little red marks on her chest, inner thighs, and above her pussy, Eden looks transcendent. She hooks a finger at us, leaning up on her elbows. “I need to feel you both.”

Keir and I glance at each other as we crawl onto the bed with indulgent smiles. “Fucking hell...Do you understand just how damn sexy you are? No? Let me show you,” I say as I straddle her. My dick rests on her stomach as I lean down to kiss her. No one knows how to kiss like this. How she manages to share breaths with me, massaging her tongue against mine; and suckling my lips just right, is a mystery.

Moving back until the tip of dick is nudging her opening, I swipe a thumb slowly across her nipple. Keir runs his hand down my back before dragging his teeth across my shoulder blade. Christ. The sleeping animal inside me that loves his rough attention is perking up. “Like that?” he asks before gripping my hips.

He knows damn well I do. Sexy, taunting motherfucker.

We’re nothing but shallow breathing and noises as I push inside our wife, her little squeak fucking satisfying as hell. Keir leans over to grab lube from the bedside table. He runs his lubed finger over my puckered hole, then drizzles more over my crack. His hand runs over my balls. Anticipation makes me lose my rhythm. “No more fucking with me. Are you doing this or not?” I ask impatiently. I’m not lasting long.

Looking over my shoulder at him, he playfully smirks at me. “Hmm...maybe not. It depends. Are you going to behave?”

A laugh comes from Eden. “Who’s not being nice now?”

My thrusts are getting wild when Keir doesn’t even bother to ease inside me. He plunges deep and fast. He takes over while I lean back into him. “Fuuuccckkkk. Fuck me.”

“That’s what I’m doing,” he huffs out before biting my back lightly.

Readjusting to take his thick cock, I hold Eden to me as she half sits up. Keir finds

her mouth over my shoulder. It's a feat keeping ourselves quiet knowing that the kids are home, but we manage. Barely.

Keir thrusts into me with force causing me to shout, "Fuuucck...Jesus fuck." Eden presses her face into my shoulder as I feel her clenching around me, milking me dry. I'm surprised I held on this long as I join her. Seconds later, Keir wraps his arms around us both, his mouth pressed against my other shoulder as I feel him explode.

It's fucking everything. Pressed together, spent.

While I get washcloths to clean up, Eden lays in Keir's arms. He presses a kiss to her temple before sighing and closing his eyes. A strange passing thought occurs to me. He looks at peace. Much the same as when I've seen him with Matt. Why isn't that ever the case with me? Why is it primal, almost angry with me?

Stop it. Fucking just stop analyzing this.

If I'm being used, it doesn't matter. I have Eden and Matt-more than enough love and emotional support. I have my friendship with Caleb. I have the counsel of Hutton. I don't need more with Keir. I don't.

They're both heavy-lidded when I get back with the warm dampened washcloths from the adjoining bathroom. I slide onto the bed next to Eden. Kissing her cheek, I wipe the inside of her legs. "What time is it? I need to talk to Zinne. I wanted to catch her before supper," Eden says in a sleepy tone.

Keir takes a cloth from me, helping me clean up. "It's a quarter after five."

She sits up abruptly, "I've got to get dressed. Shit...shit." Up and rifling through her dresser for something to wear, she adds, "We need to talk collectively about Zin's therapy, but I need to speak to her first. Shit." She pulls a worn blue Belmont College

T-shirt over her head before tugging on a pair of black leggings.

Keir collects the washcloths before picking up dropped clothing from the floor. My eyes track him in his glorious nakedness. Jesus, I'm getting fucking hard again. "That doesn't sound good." His tone is screaming "I told you so." Eden pulls her hair back into a ponytail, not making eye contact with either of us.

It's bad. She's doing what she always does: deciding if it's bad enough to warrant disclosing it. That requires her creating distance between the problem and the way we may react to it.

"Hey, you need to talk to Waverly when you get a chance." Now is as good a time as any to bring this up. "She's feeling pushed aside."

Something I've felt a time or two in life. I can understand what she's struggling with.

"Oh?" She furrows her brows at me. "By whom?"

God, she doesn't want to hear this. "You."

Tears instantly rise in her eyes. "Me?" Her finger presses into her chest. "Really?"

## Page 7

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All I can do is nod.

“Eden?” Keir dons his clothes. Buttoning up his shirt he says, “You’ll figure this out. It’s a balancing act. It’s going to work out.” Coming from him means more. He was opposed to the idea of adopting Zinnea, Zachariah, and Zebidiah, thinking it would hurt our kids. Who knows what kind of ideas about the world the Revivalists put in Zinnea’s head. Luckily, Zach and Zeb are young enough that the effects won’t be as severe. But just the way Zin will break into scripture in a monotone voice creeps me out.

Fine. I’ll get dressed like the adult I’m supposed to be. With a groan, I get up to pull on a pair of jeans I’d left in a chair by the window. “Ed, honey, I appreciate you breaking the drought.” She shakes her head at me as she laughs. I turn to Keir. “Thanks for your service.” I salute him with a wink.

“You’re thinking about the military. You don’t salute someone in the FB-ya know what? Forget it. You’re welcome.”

Giving me a quick hug as she makes her way to the door, I whisper in Eden’s ear, “Tonight, just you and me? Raw, lights on, strong eye contact.”

“Mmmm.” She sucks her lips in before replying, “Count on it.”

### Chapter Three

As a society, we’re doomed

Hutton

Closing the program on my computer, I lean back in my chair. “With all due respect Ambassador Rassier, I am well aware what laws I would be violating by accessing the mainframes of their country. But that’s not why you’re calling me.”

There’s a silence punctuated by a clanging noise like the sniveling bureaucrat dropped something. “It’s not, Mr. Cross? Wha-what do you mean?”

“I wonder what spring in the Maldives looks like?” I drop the code phrase on him, fighting a smile as I imagine the man pissing himself. “Enjoy the rest of your day, if you can.”

On this particular victory, I almost want to linger on the line a few minutes longer to hear the man devolve into terror. He should. Now he knows I am the one responsible for his security breach and have all the information off his phone and personal laptop. It was all given to a global organization dedicated to stopping sex traffickers. If he doesn’t disappear his life is over.

The French ambassador with ties to several Asian governments has spent much of his career abusing his power and connections. Intel leaked to me from Min-jun, a highly skilled hacker located in Beijing, pinpointed him as a coordinator. Neither Min-jun nor I believe in falling under anyone’s authority. The corruption goes deep with all government agencies. Take the Federal Bureau of Investigation’s pockets of initiatives that run unethical studies, doing things the average person would be appalled by. Do good agents exist? Matt and Keir are among the few. But I don’t trust the agency or most of their employees.

Growing up as an experiment of theirs informed my strong opinions against them.

I’m no one’s monster or super soldier.

The sound of a crash coming from outside my office catches me off guard. “Weston, is that you?” After sliding my laptop into the reinforced drawer and locking it, I stride to my locked office door.

“Sumimasen!” Wes cries out ‘excuse me’ in Japanese as he races back down the hall outside my office. “Look out, Daddy H, the ninjas are coming!” He’s dressed in his karate outfit with one of his dad’s ties over his white belt and another wrapped around his head. He’s got something -is that a shower curtain rod? -stuck in the belt, which clanks on the floor as he runs.

“Weston, buddy, you’re not supposed to be playing in the hallway outside my office.” Not that our six-year-old whirlwind cares much for rules. Can’t say I blame him. Like father, like son?

As Zach comes barreling into the hallway dressed in old Batman pajamas of Wes’s, his eyes bug out. “Uh-oh.” Unlike Wes, Zach doesn’t want to risk getting in trouble. He lets the screwdriver he’s holding fall to the floor.

When I had the addition built on the farmhouse, it was with the understanding I could do my work here, secluded from the activity of the main house. But Weston loves being near me if he knows I’m home. Honestly, I let it slide most of the time because being his dad means more to me than almost anything else. Next to being with Eden, the kids are my world.

I’ll even admit to caring about the rest of them.

Not to their faces, but I can allow myself to acknowledge it. We’ve built a family that seemed unimaginable to me. That is worth more than the millions I’ve amassed or the millions I’ve gifted from my grandmother’s inheritance.

It’s priceless.



“Daddy H? Can I ask you something?” Weston pulls the tie off his head, whipping it around as he turns in circles. Zach watches on with trepidation.

“What would that be?” I stop him mid-spin. “You’re going to make yourself dizzy, kiddo.”

From spinning to now hopping up and down, Wes continues, “Do you know sign language? We have a new student who can’t hear...he’s deaf.”

“Deaf. He’s deaf, Wes.” I put a hand over my mouth to hide the small smile forming. “And yes, I know it.” One of the perks of growing up without popular culture is all the knowledge poured into me by my handlers.

Zach sits down on the floor, still intent on watching our exchange. At least he’s stopped being terrified at the sight of me. I could never tell if it was the scar on my neck or my build and height, but he would cower when I was around. “I want you to teach me sign language, please. Then he’ll have someone to talk to.” He looks up at me with his big blue eyes. Eden’s eyes. My heart swells to bursting.

“Yes. Of course.” Picking Weston up I give him a quick hug. “I’m proud of you. I’m really proud of you, kiddo, for thinking of that.”

## Page 8

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The double doors, which were cracked open at the end of the addition hallway, open farther as Blaine looks at us. “Dinner’s ready.” Scrambling up, Zach stands as Weston wiggles free of me. “Daddy C made your favorite tonight. Better hurry,” he says, clapping his hands together as he walks closer.

“Tacos?” Wes gallops past him, pulling Zach along by an arm. “Yes!”

Once the doors close, Blaine turns to me. “Newsflash, Eden is staying with me tonight. She’s slept in your bed for three nights in a row.”

Keeping my face as blank as possible, I stare him down. He fidgets before breaking eye contact. It’s mildly amusing that he thinks he can intimidate me. I’m taller, more muscular, and last time I checked, he still couldn’t fight his way out of a box. With his wavy hair, arrogant little facial contortions, and trim build, he is no slouch, but I don’t have any interest in how he looks. Just another frustrating thing to him.

“Cool, cool. How have you mastered both unfazed and annoyed at the same time?” he asks as he quirks his lips at me. “And just a heads up, with Matt leaving for trial, Keir wants to have an FBI detail watching our home.”

That’s a no. “Not needed.”

“That’s my take on it, but Keir’s got Eden on board with it. I think.” He’s scrutinizing my face while giving me news that takes my annoyance to anger, but there is no power in putting emotions on display.

During times like this, I shift to messages that were ingrained in me. Eliminate the

threats by any means necessary. I should be able to protect us all. How's that for hard to relate to? Eden and her grandfather are the only exceptions. With both I've been able to talk about the past. It's still uncomfortable sorting through all that's happened. To accept the truth. Roger, Eden's grandfather, told me the truth can be seen as an acronym: taking real understanding to heart. Fleeting moments of truth are painful.

Moving down the hallway together, Blaine continues, "Anyway, I figured you'd be able to talk some sense into Keir. The last thing we want to deal with is Jerger Rivera hanging around."

Unlike the rest of the guys, Rivera gives me a wide berth. His tasteless jokes and behavior are just weak covers for an insecure, unintelligent man. I got my message across early on, meant to both inspire and terrorize him—a reminder my history with incompetent FBI agents didn't end well for them. He was gifted with my case file. Since then, he barely looks my way.

The commotion coming from the dining room reaches us: the kids' chatter, the boys' laughter, dishes being moved around, barking from one of the dogs. I may treasure my solitude, another byproduct of a childhood lacking in the nurture aspect, but I need the commotion our family generates, too, sometimes. Blaine sits in a chair across from Eden while I stop by Warner's highchair to move his sippy cup closer. He shoves cut-up orange slices in his mouth while simultaneously humming, his little legs kicking at the table.

Keir looks up from his place next to our three-year-old little cherub. "My phone blew up. Rassier knows?"

"Expect a panicked call from dignitaries at the consulate. That web is coming down. They'll all be on the run soon."

He nods his head with a grimace. "Yeah. They'll come here. To the US."

Blaine hands a plate with two tacos on it to Zach while interrupting us. “I love when you speak in indecipherable jargon. Good talk, guys. It’s dinner time, could you put a pin in this?”

We all dig into the assortment of tacos, corn bread, and rice that Caleb has made as Eden looks over Waverly’s drawings. “You’ve done a beautiful job getting your great grandma’s expression just right. I may not say it enough, but you’re so talented sweetheart.” Faintly blushing Waverly tucks the drawings back in her folder before using her fork to deconstruct her tortilla.

Our girl, at nine, is busy with dancing, drawing, and all the animals. Eden said watching Waverly getting these opportunities heals her inner child. For me, I worry she’s too scheduled. Do we push her because she does well in everything she tries?

Everyone is talking over each other. Caleb tells the boys a story about a flatulent schnauzer at the vet clinic today, making them erupt in giggles. Warner plays a game of fetch with his cup, tossing it and clapping as one of us retrieves it. Meanwhile, Zinne sits slouched down in her chair, glowering, with her arms folded and plate untouched.

Caleb launches in about our new neighbor, who stated he is going to challenge the business zoning of the vet clinic across the road from our home, because he has a problem with the “lifestyle” we’re living. “The government would never...” he starts in. Yes, yes, they would.

Don’t underestimate the ways the government can and will weaponize policies when they want.

## Chapter Four

Make me

Eden

On days when I wake feeling an overwhelming sense of unease, I stand utterly still at the bedroom window staring at the clouds. The hope I bury in my soul that I'm doing good by helping others breathes calm over my anxiety. I know I shouldn't exist. It will be a stain on me forever, but it drives my purpose. I'll do my damndest to undo the damage caused by cults.

The note that nags at me is clutched in my hand. I just don't get it. It's over. The nightmare I endured growing up is finished. The truth of it all was revealed a few summers ago. Now this? Dread blooms in all its glory inside my heart. The words don't make sense in meaning, but what it alludes to does.

The crows would know why you need to die.

It's no joke. I've been trying to convince myself it was, but it's only delaying the inevitable—telling my husbands, because this sounds like a threat from the past we've left behind. I grew up in a cult shrouded in so many lies twined together, the pieces will never all fall in place. The crazy bitch I believed to be my mother had a boyfriend who believed the crows he kept would tell him what God wanted done. Spurred on by his meth use and a drive to torment us kids, he'd use the crows to scare us.

But that was a different life. He's gone and so is she. So, who could know this information and be using it?

Could it merely be a coincidence?

Right. Because every wacko uses crows as a threat. It's amazing how many arguments I make trying to justify why I shouldn't be freaked out. It's the real reason I'm not putting up a fight about the security detail Keir wanted; the Colombian cartel

doesn't seem as scary to me as this note written in inky block letters.

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Once Matt is back from the trial, we can deal with this. It's not like there aren't more pressing issues. My attempt at talking with Zinnea was a failure. She gave me lectures about the fires of Hell while pacing around her room. I wanted to burst into tears. Zeb started crying in the room next door causing her to race in. With her holding him tightly against her, I couldn't remove him. She was like a caged animal, making me deeply concerned over whether he'd be hurt. Gingerly, I placed my bent pinky finger in his mouth. He latched on, and the bleat of his cry tapered off. Finally, it convinced her I needed to feed him.

Calling Dr. Almari to schedule an appointment was easier, knowing reasoning with Zin is getting more difficult.

The house is hushed. Without the kids or most of the guys here, the absence of bustle becomes loud. I knock lightly on Matt's bedroom door. He came home late last night. I talked myself out of bothering him in the middle of the night, but he leaves next week. He's been working long hours, traveling between two offices to get ready for the trial. When we've crossed paths, he looks depleted. "Babe?" I rest my forehead on his door while knocking again. "Matt?"

He's yawning when the door opens, one eye squeezed shut. "This is the only acceptable way to be woken up." His arms wrap around me, a hand holding my head to his chest. I take a deep breath in, taking in his scent and grounding myself in his presence.

Sturdy. His discipline, grip on reality, and his intuitive nature. Just knowing he's here gives me a break from the maddening thoughts I've been obsessing over. "Can I lay with you? Just for a few minutes before I need to get ready for work." I want to climb

into bed with him, snug in his strong arms while shutting out the world.

He's painfully handsome. From the first moment I spotted him, I was attracted fiercely. Tall, dark hair, penetrating blue eyes. His smile makes my heart flutter. Not exactly the tattooed bad boy he portrayed himself to be, he's the most responsible adult I've ever known.

"You never need to ask, love." His lips find mine with a tender kiss. He nuzzles his nose into my cheek saying, "I've missed the hell out of you."

Same. He's my pillar of strength.

Wearing only a pair of worn black sweatpants, his warm bare chest draws my hands, smoothing their way without much thought down his happy trail. He chuckles lightly. "Is this actually a booty call?"

I hadn't intended that, but...

"Ugh, I can't help myself around you. You know that." Regardless of the lovemaking with Blaine last night, involving countless rounds of entertaining positions and experimenting with toys, being close to Matt draws that craving out of me.

Taking his time, he pulls an old T-shirt of Blaine's off that I'd slept in that says "Pavlov? Yes, the name rings a bell". Fitting since I've managed to condition myself to want their bodies whenever I'm close enough to touch them. His mouth grazes my neck before he moves to my right breast, teasing my nipple with a combination of licking and scraping his teeth over it making my back arch. His hands busy themselves helping me slide out of my no-nonsense cotton underwear. I'm kicking myself for not changing into something more enticing, but I know he couldn't care less about what's covering me.



It's a fruitless mission, trying to get his sweatpants down, since he has my eyes rolling back in my head before he's even made his way below my waist.

"How do you want me?" he purrs seductively into my ear.

Uh, you name it. Missionary, doggy, legs in the air, cowgirl, reverse cowgirl, lotus, standing... I can handle anything...anything. "Ooohhh...oh, yeah, that's the spot."

He rears back, taking his pants off, revealing he's commando underneath. His cock stands at the ready, his hand giving it a rough jerk before lowering himself over me. "Sweetheart?" He lays a hand next to my pussy, a thumb tapping at a lip. "You're awfully red..."

More like rubbed raw. Blaine and I got carried away. When he left for work, he was walking with a wince. Call me warped, but I like the marks, the feeling of being well used...the aftereffects to remind me of the act itself. Periodically throughout the day I'll smile to myself when I shift in my seat and feel the ache. The sting. Or I'll look at myself in the mirror shifting my shirt aside to see a bite mark or bruise.

"Uh-huh." I pull him closer to me. "It's fine. Really." On my knees now I focus on his lips, drawing my pointer finger and thumb together to squeeze his lower lip. "You asked me how I want you? Deep...I need ...no I want you deep and slow." I want to feel him pressed deep inside me, stretching and pushing until I can't breathe.

We're lying facing each other when he settles one of my legs over his waist, his cock dragging up my slit, letting our adjustment naturally rub at my clit. He looks me in the eye as I take his weighty length in my hand. Rubbing over his head the pre-cum spreads across my thumb.

When I put that thumb in my mouth to suck, he groans as his eyes flutter closed. With a shift, my other hand takes over the stroking, not stopping until I've run my

fingertips over his taint, a finger pressing outside his hole. “Baby? If I don’t get inside you, we’re going to have a mess.”

Feeding his dick into me, I pull him close, crushing us together. Quick kisses, out of breath, Matt takes control of our tempo, but I tell him slower. Slower to feel each movement, each twitch.

Time stands still. It halts entirely as I keep my eyes fixed on his. The intimacy shakes something in me, and tears threaten to spill. He kisses one of my eyes when I break the spell cast by our sustained gaze by squeezing my eyes closed, wetting my cheeks.

“I love you, honey,” he whispers roughly. His hands ease down over my buttocks to rest underneath, adding more pressure on his deep thrusts.

Opening my eyes back up, he leans in again to work his mouth over mine. We breathe each other in, our tongues teasing each other as my body winds to the point of exquisite tension.

Release comes with force, my limbs shaking slightly as I let my head fall back. “M-Maatt...oh, I-I’m...”

“That’s right, beautiful. Just let go.” He kisses my jaw. Our pace slows further, and I feel him pulling back.

“No, no...” My hands frantically pull at his hips to pull him back in. “Don’t stop...don’t.”

But that hadn’t been his intention.

“Hold on,” he warns before pulling me on top of him, fucking me from underneath with wild abandon. His face flushes, jaw clenched. “You feel like a dream.” His

rhythm flags when he remembers the evidence of my skin being irritated. “Fuck. Are you okay? Do you need me to slow back down?”

I am, but I suddenly want nothing more than to watch him blow. Nodding, I slide off him, my hands quickly taking hold of his length to bring him to orgasm. “Are you going to come? Hmm?”

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Words don't make it out of his mouth which has dropped open as he props himself up on his elbows to see me better.

Running my tongue over my upper lip, I continue stroking him, but I know how much Matt loves a blowjob. I may not be the best in the house that honor is held by Blaine, but I will give it my all. Swallowing down his girthy nine inches causes me to gag briefly before I settle on massaging my tongue over his tip and working his cock with one of my hands.

I sit back just in time to see the jets of cum shoot out, using the back of one hand to wipe at my mouth. Lying back down atop Matt with his cum covering his abs, I kiss the side of his mouth. "Now we need a shower. Sorry, I couldn't help myself."

We both start to speak. "I wan-" I start while he says, "I shou-"

"Go ahead," I say through a laugh.

He cuddles me close, tucking my head under his chin. "I should let you know a couple things. I was going to tell everyone tonight at dinner, but since you're here right now..." He scoots back to sit up further taking me with him. "I've been working on delaying leaving for LA. I'm not technically needed to testify for two weeks, but for some godforsaken reason my subpoena has a different date."

My relief over him not leaving for a couple weeks is cut short by his next revelation. "But since I'm leaving later, I've been made aware of a string of copycat killings in Indiana and Pennsylvania, a possible serial killer."

It's always a trade-off. Safe from one tragedy and flung into the next. That's been his job since being promoted to department head. His role is to supervise offices in Pennsylvania, Indiana, and New Jersey. At first, all the traveling was the worst part, but now his safety being in jeopardy wins out. I understand Keir being at the New York office was his reasoning for taking the promotion to other field offices; he never wanted even a hint of impropriety to affect Keir.

"I'm not liking the sound of that," I reply as carefully as possible. He shouldn't feel the need to manage my emotions over this.

"Three cases in a week of killings that are..." He squeezes me before continuing quietly, "They're leaving The Realists marks behind."

My sucked in breath and shaky denial don't even begin to show how rattled this makes me. First the note, now this. "Matt? That's..." Words escape me.

We were healing. Weren't we? That summer didn't define us anymore. That stupid study may be our origin story, but it doesn't mean we have to relive it all over. Right? How is this even possible?

"We've kept tabs on the dark web for mention of the group, but other than a couple vague messages, their activity seemed to have died out. I don't know, Eden. If I've learned anything, coincidences are rarely that. There's an anniversary coming up."

Camp Carroll. The start of my story.

"Matt, I have to show you something." I quickly pull the T-shirt back on to grab the note I'd tucked into my purse. I come back with it as he's scrolling through his phone. "This was left on my desk at work a couple of days ago."

His jaw drops as he looks up at me. Reading it again, he says gravely, "You

should've called me immediately, Eden. Right away."

I agree, but I was busy denying what this is. I can't tell him that, though, because it makes me sound like I've lost my mind. "I'm telling you now."

"Who else knows?"

Making a face, I admit, "Just you and me. I thought maybe it was...a joke?"

He gets up, pacing the room while he sends a text, muttering, "A joke? How is that funny...?"

While I beat myself up for taking the note too lightly, Matt outlines his plan for protection. The irony: He didn't know Keir's plan yet came up with something similar. Only this one doesn't include Rivera. One small consolation. Instead, he calls Keir's superior asking for Harrison and Bristow the two agents Matt has known the longest. Both are familiar with Camp Carroll and The Realists.

"We'll get through this. We will. You need to be careful. In fact, start seeing patients remotely again. Just until we sort this all out." I'd considered that when the note spooked me. My time at home right now could help Zinnea, too.

"We can't stay on lockdown here indefinitely. And what about you? Are you going to work remotely again?" Please say yes. He always downplays his risks.

I know the answer by looking at his face. Looking back down at his phone, he says, "I leave for Pennsylvania tomorrow to get briefed on the latest killing."

So much for the illusion of peace I'd built in my head. It's back...that dark cloud of suspicion. Waiting for the evil ghost that lives in my head to come alive is going to shatter me.

I can't lose my family. If one of those cult members is coming for me, I hope with everything in me no one else becomes collateral damage. They can take me, put an end to this madness. But if they mess with anyone I love? That could be the start of my villain era.

The office building where Dr. Almari practices has fancy stone floors, potted ferns, and gold sconces. Abstract artwork dots the pewter fabric-covered walls. The air smells like cinnamon. We're ushered into the lobby by a harried-looking nurse wearing dark-gray scrubs.

"She's running behind schedule. Her last appointment was..." Spacing out momentarily she adds, "Never mind. She should be with you in a few minutes."

Zinnea has had the same grim look on her face the whole way here. "Did you see the yogurt shop next door? We should stop there when you're done talking to Dr. Almari. What do you say? I used to love frozen yogurt. We always called it froyo..." I realize I'm babbling nonsense because I'm ill at ease. Can she see how hard I'm trying?

The door swings open, and a steely-eyed middle-aged woman with cropped spiky silver hair comes in, adjusting her glasses. Her outfit is a cross between Bea Arthur circa Golden Girls and your average grandma playing bingo in a housecoat. I'm caught off guard by the frown cast in my direction before she chooses to ignore me. Greeting Zinnea she says in a haughty manner, "Hello, I'm Dr. Almari. And you are?"

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We follow the doctor into her regal office.

Zin shrinks away from her while sitting in one of the overstuffed leather office chairs. Her voice is almost indiscernible as she answers, “Zinnea.”

“Speak up, please. No need to watch your volume here.” She circles the desk to set her glasses on it. “I’m hoping we can be friends.”

Maintaining my composure, I speak up, “Her name is Zinnea, and I’m her guardian, Eden Bradford.” I stand to shake her hand, but she still disregards me.

Again, addressing Zin, she says, “We only have two hours a week together. To make that helpful, you will need to talk. Loud enough for me to hear you. Do you understand?”

I don’t like her. My initial misgivings are only fortified by her off-putting sternness. Also, could she at least acknowledge I’m in the room?

I clear my throat, continuing, “Dr. Almari? Could we start over here? Maybe ease into this differently. Zin-”

She cuts in, turning to glare at me. “Do you need a moment?”

Floored, my mouth opens and closes a couple of times. She may be in the running for the top three rudest people I’ve ever encountered. Considering the life I’ve had, that’s saying a lot.



She sits on a leather chair angled towards Zin, addressing me in an icy tone. “This appointment is not for you. You are not my patient.”

Still shocked, I manage to say with a slight shake to my voice, “With all due respect, Doctor, I’m her guardian. She’s a child, and when she needs an advocate or someone to speak on her behalf, that’s my role.”

Zinneah sits up suddenly, looking between us. Then in a strong, clear voice, she says, “My name is Zinneah Abbott.”

A reptilian-looking smile flits across the doctor’s face while ignoring everything I said. “Good. I think we’re going to do great work together.” Her tone switches to dismissiveness with me. “Wait in the lobby.”

I don’t move for a solid minute or two, debating whether I should grab Zinneah’s hand to leave while flipping this old bat a one-fingered salute. “The lobby,” she says more firmly, pointing at the door.

What happens next must be a side effect of the shock. I get up and move robotically to the well-appointed lobby, sitting next to an espresso machine while staring at the rainbows made on the wall from the crystal chandelier. What an absolute bitch. How is this helpful to Zinneah? Maybe Dr. Wallen made an error in judgement; money seems to blind him at times, hence his long-standing relationship with the Lassiter family, who are as crooked and evil as they come.

Counting in fives and fantasizing about an outstanding clap-back at the doctor, I wait out the hour-long appointment. The nurse from earlier calls me over to her desk. “Dr. Almari is asking you to step in while she has your daughter return to the lobby.”

Oh, by all means. Anything her highness wants.

I don't bother being courteous when I enter the office, standing a foot inside the door. She doesn't seem concerned that I'm not taking a seat. "Dr. Eden Bradford," she states, her tone belying some disgust. She caps her pen while looking up at me. "I could have your license pulled."

"What?!" I should have honored my impulse earlier to leave.

"I don't know how you were licensed in this state to begin with. I make a point of looking into all the parents and guardians who bring kids to me. Do you understand the word ethics?"

My freaking spine reasserts itself. "Excuse me? Ethics? You do see the irony of asking me that when you just told me you were digging into my business, right? What type of moral principles do you have?" My face is red-hot. I can feel my heart pounding, but I don't stop. "You could 'have' my license pulled in the state of New York, huh? Does that mean I could use the people I know to put you out of practice? It wouldn't be a loss to the behavioral health field. Your demeanor is atrocious."

She's not the least bit humbled or put in her place as she retorts, "The people you know? Like the Lassiter family heir? Was that the reason you became involved with a certain patient during your grad school study? Must've been blinded by the dollar signs."

I've been accused before of engineering our relationship by strangers who don't know us. I had no idea who he was; she's just trying to work me up. Taking a calming breath, I attempt to fix my facial expression. "Dr. Almari, under the circumstances I think Zinneah would be better off seeing another psychologist."

I'm halfway through the door when she says, "No. You'll bring her back on Thursday at the same time."

The gall of his woman. “Why would I do that?”

Turning back to meet her eyes, she gives me a cold look. “If you don’t, I will see to it that all the children in your home are removed.”

I regret not recording our conversation. She’s gone directly from terrible to horrendously vile. “Y-you...” Stepping back into her office I close the door before saying, “On what grounds?”

“Ms. Bradford...or is it Ms. Davis?” No one has called me that in years. I don’t miss her dropping the title of doctor from my name. “I don’t care for people like you. You think you’re entitled to do as you please in the name of past trauma. You’ve violated patient-doctor boundaries by carrying on a romantic relationship with not one, not two, but,” she sneers at me, “three patients. You must’ve paid someone to get your current job at the Horizon Wellness Center, because you don’t even bother to show shame for your egregious behavior. Now, you’ve pulled three more small children into this situation. Caleb Smith, Keir Marcus, and Hutton Lassiter could not see through your wiles, but I won’t allow the Abbot children or even your children, to suffer in that environment.”

“Cross...His last name is Cross, not Lassiter. Furthermore, no court system would ever remove our kids from us. They’re loved and well cared for.” How is this happening right now?

“You’re nothing but an abomination. You were never meant to exist.”

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And just like that, the progress I'd made is broken, shattered like a cracked pane of glass in a windstorm. Her words cut through me.

"A person with your past is not capable of healthy relationships. I'm well aware of what happened at Camp Carroll. I've written journal articles about it." Is she oblivious to my reaction to her threats? Now she's mentioning work she's done like I give a flying fuck? "The best thing you could do for yourself is seek therapy and stop this charade that you're qualified to help anyone."

My entire being is vibrating with anger.

Acceptance of our relationship didn't automatically happen within our own families. My grandparents came around because they love the kids and I; Matt's family pretends it's normal; Blaine's parents would love for him to run away with Matt and Waverly while the rest of us disappear. Keir, Caleb, and Hutton were robbed of family and resources. Did that alone influence their decisions?

"She'll be back on Thursday. Not because I have any faith in your abilities after this exchange, but because I won't risk the wellbeing of all our kids. It would be devastating to us if you followed through on your threat. Don't feel proud of yourself, though. You've just made an enemy of me; when all you had to do was be a professional."

I hold it together while getting frozen yogurt. I manage to drive home, making idle chit-chat that Zin doesn't respond to. It's not until I'm locked in my ensuite bathroom that I breakdown, gulping down sobs as every insecurity I've ever had rears up to attack me: useless, unloved, unwanted, thrown away, unworthy, loose, unethical, lied

to, used...an abomination.

## Chapter Five

Hand to my heart

Caleb

“

...in God’s name I pray. Amen.” The Church of the Good News has emptied out. Reclining back in the pew, I hear a vacuum cleaner somewhere in the building. Lately, I struggle making it to a service. Squeezing the bridge of my nose, I close my eyes, searching for an answer. God’s voice is harder to hear. I can handle being shunned by my FLDS family, and I can live with running away from the prophecy. I can’t lose God’s guidance, though.

“Caleb? I didn’t realize anyone was still here.” Standing in the open doorway to the sanctuary, the new church secretary, Becca, wrings her hands.

“Sorry, I’m heading out.” Becca walks beside me to the main doors. “Do you lock up by yourself? Is that safe?” If I’ve learned anything from Hutton, it’s to assess all situations for risks when it comes to women or children.

She chews on her lower lip while pulling the pink cardigan she’s wearing tighter around her. “Um, I, I...” Blushing, she focuses on her feet.

“I only mean...” Good job, I’ve succeeded in making her feel bad. “With the break-ins around here recently...”

She’s still studying the floor while I open the door, only to hear sirens in the distance.

Illustrating my concerns perfectly. “Tell ya what, I can stay until you're ready to go.” I’d rather not since I promised the boys we’d read from *The Adventures of Robin Hood*. Last night, they insisted ninjas were infiltrating the merry men. I’m looking forward to another rowdy time settling them in for bed.

Becca looks up, her face still reddened. “You’d do that?”

While she cleans the glass leading into the kitchen area, I wind up the vacuum cord. Other than occasionally greeting other church members, I’ve never had the opportunity to become familiar with them. Our family is busy. Between the rescue animals, the kids, and helping at the vet clinic as a vet tech, it gets hectic. To break the awkward silence, I tell her about our rescue horse that kneels to eat, showing her a couple pictures on my phone. It seemed like a good topic, since the horseshoe keychain hanging off her purse says, “Life is Better with Horses.”

“I’ve never seen a horse do that,” she replies, “and I grew up on a farm with rescue horses. Is that your son in the picture?” Standing a few feet from our Palomino mare, Huggie, is Weston dressed like a cowboy. That was the phase he went through last spring.

“Yes. That’s one of them. Our six-year-old, Weston.” I smile to myself, thinking about how much he cares about not just Huggie, but all the animals we’re helping. “He’d camp out in the pen with the horses if we let him.”

She’s surprised to hear we have six children as we continue to talk. I keep explanations about our family to myself. Not because I’m embarrassed but because I don’t know how to explain it to a new friend. I’m married, but I’m not. I’m polygamous but not exactly. I’m a dad, but not biologically. Sometimes, it’s easier to avoid specifics.

“I don’t think I’ve met your wife. Does she come to church with you?” Thankfully, I

have my back to Becca, pulling a garbage bag from one of the trash bins near the kitchen, because I freeze. She hasn't noticed her because Eden has never been here.

I try to sound unbothered. "You wouldn't have seen her. She doesn't attend services here." Does that make it sound like she goes somewhere else? Because that's a lie. I'm not trying to bend or break the truth. "I should make myself clear...She has different beliefs than I do."

We both carry full garbage bags from the building to the dumpster near the backside. Becca softly says, "That must be difficult." Her hand lightly rests on my arm as she goes on to ask, "Do your kids come to church?"

"No. Not because my wife doesn't want that. I..." Wiping a hand over my mouth, I stare at the highway in the distance with the sun setting. "I have a past problem? I guess it could be called a problem with the religion I grew up in. I want my children exposed to as many ways of thinking as possible so they can decide their own path."

Becca cocks her head before saying, "Do you read scripture? I would suggest looking at the Gospel of Matthew. The Lord warns of false messiahs and prophets sent to deceive. As a parent you might want to arm them with the word of the Holy Spirit; so they're not led astray."

She means well. Changing the subject back to the rescue animals, I'm not forced to reveal a part of my reluctance to bring the children here is convincing the rest of our family it's a good idea. The only person who could back me up is Blaine who was raised as a Catholic, but his experiences with "religious" people have not always been positive because he's bisexual.

As she climbs into her gray hatchback, she smiles at me warmly. "Thank you for all your help. I don't know many people here yet, so it was nice to talk with you. There is an adult ministry group meeting on Sunday after service. You should join us. It's a

small group of six people, but I think that'll allow us to grow closer with God that way."

I don't commit to attending. My connection with God has never felt dependent on other people; not my uncle, the leader of our FLDS Holy Brotherhood sect; not my father; not the minister of this church. It's felt like a spark in my soul that lately, has been flickering.

Waving to her as she drives off, I stop dead in my tracks. I prayed to the Lord for a sign, asking Him to make my way known to me. I love the family I now belong to; Eden and the kids are my heart. God's voice drifting off has me questioning if I'm making the wrong choices, so I asked him to direct me. Becca mentioning false prophets takes on a whole new meaning. Is God warning me of something?



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Offering a prayer, I fold my hands and say, “Gracious Lord, we give you thanks for the blessings of the food we eat and the love we have around our table. Thank you for our home, family, and friends. Thank you for our health, work, and play. Open our hearts to your love and help us be blessings to those we encounter. We ask in your name. Amen.”

I hear Eden say, “You can be mad without being mean, Waves.” Dinner is tense. Matt grilled steaks, and Hutton threw together a salad. Blaine feels the need to tell me there’s complaining because Matt didn’t do it the way I do, and Hutton put too many tomatoes in the salad.

Once we’ve all dished up, Waverly throws her fork down onto her plate before stomping away. On her way past Zinnea she loudly says, “Just because you don’t have any friends doesn’t mean you get to tell lies to mine!” The message of our meal’s blessing seems to be going unheard. By everyone.

Blaine leans toward me. “You got home later than normal...” He proceeds to fill me in on what I missed prior to supper. Wes and Zach filled the bathtub near their room, tossing in rolls of toilet paper to see if they’d absorb the water. Waverly came home from school angry, Zinnea told her friends she wets the bed, though I can’t imagine why she’d say that. Matt needs to talk to us about something heavy that has him distracted, and Eden has been quiet. According to Blaine, suspiciously reserved.

“Sounds like it was eventful. I stayed to help lock up the building with the new church secretary. She appreciated it.” Warner’s sippy cup is launched, striking Zach in the side of the head. While Matt pulls the crying five-year-old onto his lap to look him over, Keir washes Warner up, telling him not to throw things. He’s three; he’ll do

it again.

Wes grabs Zach's hand as his crying turns into sniffing. "Hey, Zach, wanna hear a joke? What's brown and sticky?" He giggles to himself as he shakes Zach's whole arm in excitement.

I speak up, "Wes, let's not-," I don't want to encourage talk of poop at the dinner table. Blaine is ready to put his hand over Weston's mouth.

He yells over everyone, "A stick! What did you think it was?"

Just like that all the pent-up tension disappears as everyone left at the table starts to laugh. Even Hutton who rarely cracks a smile. "Did you hear me? Who's the secretary? Is it the weird chick who smells like a cross between mildew and wet dog?" Blaine asks as he flips his fork between his fingers.

"Come on...be nice." I can't help laughing at his description. Leave it to him to remember those details from one of only a handful of times coming along with me to church. "No, that was the choir director. Becca just moved here. Get this...She was raised on a farm that did animal rescue."

Blaine drops his fork, his eyes narrowing at me. "Uh-huh, sure. Let me guess, she's single and has a crush on you, Big Gulp."

"No, it wasn't like that." Not to mention, I'm married. Looking down at my wedding ring designed with my birth stone, I twist it out of habit. It's on the tip of my tongue to remind Blaine of my status, but I drop it, like I do many of the arguments I have in my head with him. I'm closer to him than I am Eden's other husbands, but he drives me nuts. "She's aware I'm married. It's possible to be friendly with someone without it meaning something else."

It's in this moment I make the decision to join the adult ministry group. Why can't I have a friend outside the family? Everyone else does, except Hutton, but he's not wired that way.

Blaine's abandoned our conversation in favor of teasing Eden. Typical.

I'm settling back against the pillows as Eden enters the room with a bag of popcorn tucked under her arm and two strawberry milkshakes. "Got your favorites." Her voice is hoarse, and the jovial tone sounds forced. With her reddened nose, glossy eyes, and her earlier reserved demeanor, I'd be an idiot not to notice she's upset about something.

"Angel? What's wrong?" Taking the shakes and sitting them on the bedside table, I fold her into my arms.

A ragged breath leads to full-body sobs. Picking her up, I cradle her close to me. A lump forms in my throat, and tears pool in my eyes. I hate seeing her upset. I'd rather absorb every last bad emotion threatening her than see her suffering. "Eden, angel, tell me what's going on."

It could be anything. Lately, the problems have been plenty. Was it Waverly's outburst at dinner? Maybe it's our next-door neighbor building a large sign in his yard facing our property, which is sure to be mean. Matt is leaving soon, and his absence disrupts the balance in our home. Her grandfather Roger is having health problems. It's likely all of it. "Angel?" Kissing her forehead lightly, I implore again, "Tell me?"

Swallowing thickly while wiping her cheeks she bites her lip before replying, "Can I ask you something? Please answer honestly..."

"Of course."

“Do you think ...Do you feel...uh, how do I word this?” She drops her face into her hands, shifting away from me slightly. Muffled, she continues, “Do you ever feel like I pushed you to be here? To be with me? That the way we met caused you to make decisions you wouldn’t have otherwise?”

Not this again.

Every few months she has a crisis of conscience, regretting the fact we met while she was a graduate student doing an internship with cult survivors. But how would our paths have crossed otherwise? I was an eighteen-year-old Holy Brotherhood Mormon who was told I’d be the next prophet before I ran, and she was a twenty-four-year-old college student looking for answers about her past. Worlds apart in life experience. Each time she questions it; I’m forced to examine it again. To make the argument that the start of us doesn’t matter. But each time, it weakens. I find myself indulging in the same doubts. Do I belong here? I want to...

“Eden, why is this coming up...again?”

“You’re not answering me.”

Because the answer isn’t easy. It’s not definitive anymore. I may have fallen out of favor with God because I’m living a lifestyle that could be displeasing. Her expression of hurt when she looks at me causes me to say quickly, “No. Whether our story started in the bookstore the day we met, or God placed you and I in the same place at the same time...we would’ve found each other.” Do I believe that as strongly as I’m asserting? Not anymore. Not after church this afternoon. That realization only makes me feel guilty. I’m letting Eden down, God down...our family down.

## Chapter Six

That was dark, I apologize

Keir

I let my phone ring while staring down at the paperwork on my desk. Disbelief holds me captive at the police reports, statements, and attached photos spread out in front of me. Good god. Is this really happening again?

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The impulse to find Eden grabs hold of me.

It was over. The memories of what I did that summer come back full force, like a gut punch.

I don't regret it. I'd make the same split-second decision again. But there was a change inside me I'm just grasping. Life is so damn fragile. I've seen it leave people I love and people I've despised. It's snuffed out so easily.

My career as a special agent with the FBI working on sex trafficking cases is owed wholly to Matt. I knew where I wanted to help, but didn't have the tools to make it happen. He advised, supported, and at the same time cautioned against it. My mentor. That dynamic became more over time. I started to look at him differently. A dark, dirty part of me I suppressed...dammit, I tried...longed to feel loved by him. Held in his arms. Lusted after by him. When I admitted it to myself those same suicidal feelings from years ago came back.

Ending my life felt easier than giving in.

My identity is so shrouded in what I was forced to do for years. Impulses I had to hurt anyone touching me sexually would appall me. I'll never let anyone inside me anally again because of all the scarring and pain I dealt with. So, I get rough when I dissociate during the act. Even with Eden...but especially wise-cracking, cocky Blaine.

They think I don't realize how uncomfortable that side of me makes everyone. Matt still doesn't believe I need him that way. I see it in his eyes when we're intimate. The

sex with Blaine makes the guilt inside me build. I'm using him. We both know, but it continues to happen.

Then there's Eden. She's my soulmate. We can say everything with a look, never uttering a word.

I have this incredible, complicated, priceless life now. That summer seven years ago was the beginning of my life. Everything I endured prior to that was a mere dream. A bad fucking dream.

I won't lose my family, my chance to live a life I'm proud of with the only people I love like this. Both Caleb and Hutton are like brothers to me.

Losing even one of us...I'd stop trying to hold on during the bad stretches.

I get ribbed by my partner, Rivera, about being hung up on my past. "You're still working through that? It happened a long time ago." In therapy, I've learned my brain is on constant alert to send a warning, so it doesn't happen again. That extends to people I care about. I'm never making Jergen Rivera grasp that. For a survivor of abuse the memories make it seem like it was yesterday.

A technician ducks into my open office door. "Guy out front wanting to talk to you, sir." Our office isn't easily accessible or easy to find. We're located in an inconspicuous, secure government building.

"Past the checkpoints?"

"No sir, at reception. He asked for you by name."

I take my time strolling through checkpoints while looking at my cell phone. No word from home. I'm not expecting any visitors, our division doesn't deal with the

informants, and, due to my status as active undercover, my name shouldn't be known in general.

Uh, a little disturbing.

We have a camera at the last checkpoint stationed in the reception area. I take a hard look at the screen. Zooming in to look at his face, I do a double take. For fuck's sake. "Can you call Rivera? Send him to interview room eleven down the hall."

The confused civilian guard nods before picking up the phone.

Stepping into the reception space with the FBI logo emblazoned on the marble floor, the intern working the desk suddenly tries to look busy. I say firmly, "Follow me." If the man dressed in jeans, a blue T-shirt, and sneakers thinks I'm being forceful in tone, he doesn't flinch in the least.

We both sit in the gray-on-gray-toned nondescript closet of a room. No table, just four black faux leather armchairs and a sickly fern in one corner. The room is monitored by guards and is wired for sound and video. It's one of fifteen like this here. "How can I help you today?"

"You Special Agent Keir Marcus or what?" His accent is strong Long Island New York.

"Before I answer that, how about you tell me who you are?" He's not taking charge of this meeting.

There's a loud tap on the door before Jergen lets himself in. He tosses his tie over his shoulder, then smooths his thick black hair back. "Don't mind me over here. Thought I'd join the party."



The male doesn't react other than glancing Rivera's way. "I'm a paid messenger, man. Can I talk to Agent Marcus or what?"

Interesting. He obviously doesn't know what I look like.

Rivera's biggest flex is pretending there is no urgency or issue. He reclines back in his chair, ankles crossed.

I tense up when the man reaches into his back pocket pulling out a thumb drive. He goes on to say, "Just need to pass this off to the guy. To Agent Marcus."

"I'll make sure he gets it." Putting my hand out to him while tilting my head toward the male. I silently implore Rivera to look at where my eyes are trained.

"Can't do that, boss. Need to make sure it gets to Agent Marcus. I have strict instructions. You understand?"

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All gas, no brakes.

“Because you’re a paid messenger,” I repeat. “Here’s the thing.” I scratch one of my eyebrows as I lean toward him. “Did you drive here today?”

None of his bravado slips as he replies, “Why do you care?”

Rivera moves to the door in case the guy tries to bolt. “I take it you did?”

He shrugs before grunting out, “Yeah? So?”

I can tell by the pinpoint pupils alone. Sighing, I shake my head. “It’s a ballsy move to deliver a message to law enforcement high on who knows what.”

He snorts a laugh in derision, “I’m not.”

Pulling on a glove from my pocket, I pluck the needle he has tucked behind his ear. “You’re literally wearing evidence.”

While Rivera, who is trained as a drug recognition expert, runs tests on the man, I flip my badge out, demanding the thumb drive from him. He mumbles to himself, “Fucking prick.”

He’s passed off to another agent after being cuffed for transport to the county jail. Turns out our messenger has a record full of past offenses ranging from petty misdemeanor drug charges to a felony charge for drug distribution. Whoever “hired” him to deliver the message chose a thug with an obvious mob affiliation. Why? I

don't believe he was here with any other purpose than what he stated. But until I see its contents, I won't know.

My partner, Jergen, claps me on the back as we walk back to our offices. "He didn't like you much." Laughing at his own comment he continues, "People usually fall all over themselves around you."

Do they?

Matt once said if everyone likes you then you're being inauthentic, you're dead, or you're throwing a party. One of his many wisdoms I've internalized. I don't give a fuck if the guy didn't care for my interaction with him, my need to be liked greatly diminished once I became an agent. "Could you work on his connections? I need to get Hutton the thumb drive. I'm not opening this without him."

"Good call, my man. That guy is a legit genius. Remember that code IT was running on Sirat's case? He dismantled it in three minutes." Rivera holds the door open to the property room. "They're still pissed at him for doing the job five of their best and brightest couldn't crack for two weeks."

There isn't anyone else I'd trust more with this drive. Odds are, he'll be able to trace source material quickly, too. There's a reason he's sought after by billionaires and heads of state.

"Our mark is projected to land on US soil tomorrow afternoon. Where is the team with staging for surveillance?" Anxious, I fold a piece of cinnamon gum into my mouth from the pack I keep on me, needing to relax the tension in my jaw from clenching it during negotiations this morning. "We need to head him off before he reaches San Diego."

Rivera screws up his mouth. "We need to pin down his contact on that. The dude is a

waffler. Tried to get all up in Sirat's feelings with that old adage. Damn, how'd it go? Imagine being bitten by a snake, and instead of focusing on healing from the poison, you chase the snake to understand why it bit you and to prove that you didn't deserve it. Went all philosophical on Sirat. You think you've seen him angry...whew..."

No, you chase the snake to cut its head off and prevent it from biting others.

Rivera is a blabbermouth, and he loses me while I get as angry as Sirat may have been. He's one of the best team members we have; we've spent many sleepless caffeine-fueled nights of frustration on stake outs together. I'd trade Rivera for Sirat in a heartbeat.

"...give into the demands of a fucking terrorist cell." I look over at Rivera as he continues his diatribe about a developing issue within our government. The dark underbelly of the CIA, colluding with a faction of the FBI, is back up to its old tricks. "Tell your husband to crack down on that bunch of assholes in Washington D.C. who sit at their desks diddling themselves. He has more pull with his latest promotion."

I could tell Rivera every day until retirement Matt doesn't take suggestions or orders from me. He's not to be purchased or influenced. Jergen still regards our connection as beneficial to me; just one of the many irritations I have with him.

"He's got his hands full. What we need is less bureaucratic red tape; so we don't have to sit on our hands while marks continue to traffic children that slip through the system's cracks." Like Chris, my brother-in-law. Like...me.

When I let the memories in, a rage in my core fuels me, driving me to push back harder at the obstacles. It calls on the part of me destroyed by the past.

How do you destroy a monster without becoming one?

## Chapter Seven

### Picking Battles

Matt

The bureau becomes involved in crimes when they have a national impact of significant harm or when our expertise is needed. Serial killers who cross state lines are one of the many types of cases we take over. My position as a special agent, second in charge to the Northeast division chief of the bureau, is to work closely with intelligence analysts to neutralize threats. That's the public friendly explanation. In reality, I have eighty-three field agents who work for me, and I'm bogged down with a pile of bullshit tips. The handful of cases actually needing my attention are starting to evolve into a dangerous arena where action is needed.

The newest one has personal implications.

Camp Carroll.

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Even mentioning it can start the nightmares up again. The grisly scene is still vivid in my mind. The biggest failure of my life. Souls lost weighing down my heart. I tell myself we were set up to lose, the tip came in too late on purpose, but it makes no difference. It changes nothing.

This new threat has me scared.

No one could waterboard that information out of me.

There isn't time or space to let fear settle in my mind. The note Eden shared with me was one more reason leaving for LA felt like a bad idea. All eyes need to be on Eden and the kids. If history has schooled me about anything, it's distractions come with purpose. The trial subpoena happened to have an inaccurate date and there is nothing but problems trying to rectify it.

I don't trust it. My gut feeling is we're being closed in on.

My thoughts are interrupted by a knock at my office door. "Got a minute for coffee and a rant about my nipples dick joke of a boss?" my brother-in-law asks as he plunks down in a chair. My sister jokes that her husband, my best friend, likes me more than her, but we just understand each other better. He gives no fucks about expectations placed on him (not unlike Blaine), and I have a strong sense of duty bound by loyalty.

"That's a wild place to start."

"I can never get you on the phone anymore, your whole family is too busy to get together, and frankly I miss you taking part in our Saturday scrimmages. Showing

those little fuckers how it's done." He coaches hockey in addition to teaching earth science.

Ten minutes fly by while I listen to a long-winded story about the stipulations placed on his job; before he gets serious. "Eden okay?"

"Yeah?" Knowing he isn't one to be sensitive about nuances doesn't make me feel sure about my response.

"Here's the thing," he starts while cracking his knuckles, which he does when nervous. "I was getting gas the other day, and she pulled in. We talked a bit, then I was behind her the whole stretch of county route eighteen on my way to work until she turned off for Cobleskill Parkway going to Horizon Wellness Center. I saw a blacked-out SUV pull behind me after the gas station. Rode my tail the whole way to that turn off and followed behind her. I wouldn't think much of it, but I'm pulling into work when she calls me. She was kind of out of breathless, asking if I saw that SUV and if I got a plate number."

Fuck.

"Did you?" She never mentioned any of this to me.

"No, I didn't think to look at it. I asked if she was okay, but she played it off. She's not much of a liar, though. She sounded kinda freaked out."

Unlike my wife, I've had to get comfortable with telling lies. "Probably wanted to report the driver for tailgating or bad driving conduct. I wouldn't worry about it." I smile like it's no big deal, but my mind races. Is she being followed?

Walking him back out to the lobby, he starts in about wanting to see me on the ice. "Bring the kids so they can practice skating."

“You’re not going to give up, are you?”

“You know me, I don’t go down without a fight.”

“Ah, the thrill of victory, the agony of defeat,” I quip while shaking my head at him.  
“Maybe I can make it work when I get back from LA.”

“...you said to not to,” Wes says to Blaine when I enter the kitchen where he’s spinning on a kitchen stool.

“That’s right.” He leans back against the counter with his arms crossed. “Do I need to tell you that, honey? You know the goats don’t belong inside.” Hearing me come in, Blaine turns to look at me. “We had goats chewing on the curtains in the living room. It’s been a fun day.” Sounding exasperated, Blaine rolls his eyes.

“Daddy M!” Wes hops down, running and diving at my legs. Zach peeks around the corner to wave at me.

Pulling him up into my arms, I notice he’s gotten into my ties again. One is tied around a belt loop of his pants, another around one of his upper arms. “How was school today?”

Zach pipes up, “I throwed up.”

That’s our household. No day passes quietly or without hiccups, not that I mind. I’d never give any of it up. Blaine cleans the stair step Zach lost his after-school snack on while I usher him to his room. The entire way Weston comforts him. “It’ll be okay. Do you want Roscoe to keep you company?” That’s the teddy bear he’s had since he was a baby. That bear has been passed around the family when Wes wants to make someone feel better. He’s a damn sweet kid. Babbling starts to come from Warner’s room while he wakes up from his nap. Wes shouts to him, “Be right there, bubba!”



This wakes up the baby. Zeb's cries set off a more urgent sounding holler from Warner. Four kids all vying for attention.

Crap.

Blaine rushes into Zach's room. "Now all hell has broken loose." I could remind him about his language, but we lost that battle years ago.

The last time Zachariah got sick, a month after they were in our care, he was terrified we'd be angry at him. His bio mom convinced both him and Zinneah the devil was trying to unleash through them causing their sickness. The only way to fend the evil off was to further abuse them. It's heartbreaking what they had to endure.

"Wes, buddy..." Blaine redirects when he sees he's dragging the step stool from the utility closet out. Halfway down the hall he informs Daddy B he's helping with Zeb.

We manage to get everything under control. Zach is in bed asleep with a temperature, Wes is vacuuming a rug downstairs, Zeb is fed a bottle, and Warner's being carried around by me, a chunky fist gripping my hair. In those twenty minutes of activity my worries about Eden having a stalker keep running through my mind.

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“Have you talked to Eden today?” Bringing up she stayed with Caleb last night could spark a discussion from Blaine riddled with jealousy, but I take the risk anyway.

He burps Zeb, then looks me dead in the eye before actively avoiding answering my question. Picking up a funky-looking piece of art shaped like a duck from the table, he says, “What in the paper-mâché voodoo is this shit?”

“In other words, she did and you’re keeping secrets or she didn’t, but you know there is an issue?” Come on. He acts like we don’t go through this same dance every few weeks. One of them will be upset, they cover for one another, I can tell, but instead of just including me I’m forced to press them.

Then they wonder why I share more information with Keir. I’m not choosing favorites; I get shut out.

He rubs Zeb’s back while digging around for the pacifier that fell on the couch, mumbling, “I know about the note.”

Good. All of us should be on the same page. It’s more effective for protecting her. “Tomorrow morning there will be a security detail of agents here.” The incredulous look he gives me prompts me to cut him off before he gets going. “Period. We’ll take all the help we can get. With the anniversary of Camp Carroll coming up, the note, and the copycat killings...we need to be careful.”

For seconds, Blaine’s mouth is in a stern line. I watch as he steps my way.

I’m caught off guard by the effect watching him move toward me has. He’s been

busy in the gym. I can see the bulge of his biceps through his shirt, the plumped-up curve of his ass, and the raised veins of his forearms.

Sweet fucking damn. If it's possible he's getting even hotter. I'm acutely aware of how long it's been since I've had him.

Smiling into the kiss he lays on me, he says, "Standing on business, huh?"

I wish it weren't the case, but I've grown to rely on my intuition. The resurgence of The Realists would be devastating, but a copycat cult or killer isn't any better. "I am."

My hand finds the back of his head, pulling him in tighter for another kiss. The effect is a rod-hard erection. But there won't be any indulging tonight; I have work to do and phone calls to make.

## Chapter Eight

Sounds stable

Eden

My quickstep through the wooded area around the center are fraught with anxiety. The last place Nialak had been seen was near the exit at the back of the building. I'm ready to turn back when I come around a tree and almost trip over him lying in the fetal position striking his head with a stick.

Kneeling next to him, I try to be soothing. "Can I have this? Nialak...can I have the stick? Please? Let go of it, that's it. That's it." I sit cross-legged next to him, tossing the stick away from us. Other than a couple small scratches he appears physically okay. "Can we talk about it?"

With a halting voice, he says, “I-I-I’m bad.”

In varying degrees, this is the sentiment shared by many of my patients. Their self-worth was destroyed by the control inflicted on them, the lies they swallowed, and the acts they were forced to partake in. When the belief system they ascribed to starts to fall apart, they see themselves in a negative light.

“Nialak, what makes you think that?”

Take apart the instilled thoughts, strip away the lies and the patients can start to rebuild. Hopefully. There are times it doesn’t work. Some patients find living in the real world too daunting, and they return. Or take their lives.

I listen to him as he struggles to find the words, to tell me why he thinks he’s a bad person. It’s a fight to keep my own brutal thoughts about myself out of the mix. Dr. Almari’s words are still tearing me up. Her nasty assessment of me called forth the voice I hear in my nightmares.

“You’re nothing but an abomination. You were never meant to exist.”

Dr. Wallen finds us sitting next to the towering oak, Nialak still balled up. “I can take over here if you’d like. You have a call from home.”

I stand after a nod to him. His extensive work using hypnosis with Nialak could come in handy right now. When he gets stuck at a low point, talking him back to reason is difficult.

“Well, please pray for my husband Blaine. He had a tickle in his throat, dry eyes, and the thermometer read ninety-eight point six this morning. He feared the end was near.” I’m kidding, but between Zach getting a stomach bug, Blaine starting to feel under the weather, and my current hypervigilance because of that note, I need to find

some levity.

Dr. Wallen chuckles. “I can take your last two patients if you need to leave.”

On the walk back, it hits me-why would they call the center? I have my cellphone on me. Looking at it, there are no missed calls. A pit forms in my stomach. This feels suspicious...intentionally unsettling.

The blinking red light on my desk phone indicates a held call. I pick the receiver up with a shaky hand. “Hello?” I hold my breath briefly before saying, “It’s me. Is something wrong?”

I almost hang up. Then I hear, “Eve?”

No. No, no, no.

Keep calm, don't freak the hell out.

"You have the wrong numb-"

"I don't think so. It's you." The chilling amusement in this man's voice worsens my shaking. "Eve...I'm dying to meet you."

How does this person know a name I was called briefly at the start of my life? A name synonymous with the doctors playing God at Camp Carroll. With the horrors subjected to a girl that never should've been. "You're an abomination. You were never meant to exist." My stomach bottoms out.

The call lasted seconds. I sit with the dial tone, the phone frozen in my hand.

I'm reduced to a child, panicked over an inescapable destiny. If it were just me, I wouldn't feel half as afraid, but it's not. Hutton, the kids. A frenzied feeling roots in my bones.

They're playing with me. This person has information about my past, but if they mean to hurt me, they will use me as they take the people I love away. Just like the leader of The Realists planned to do once before.

Gathering up my purse, I'm on autopilot.

A note; a phone call; a strange, dark SUV...Could I be letting it all lead me to a

conclusion that's far-fetched? No. Matt thinks there is a copycat serial killer. We should've listened to Hutton by retreating to an isolated, off-the-grid location. He knows better than the rest of us what The Realists are capable of doing.

## Chapter Nine

### Not playing around

#### Matt

When I purchased this property fifteen years ago, I had planned to renovate the farmhouse, maybe flip it afterward. It's grown into a home, though, and not just because it's massive with the additions Hutton insisted on paying for. Our kids are entrenched in every part of it; their handprints on the cement pad where we have a basketball hoop, their favorite hiding places in the barn, the treehouse we built them, and the storage under the main staircase where they stow away prized possessions. I spread out the map, showing Steve Harrison, one of the agents enlisted for added security, where the cameras on the property are. We've been friends since training together. He was with me on the Camp Carroll case.

He scratches his chin. "You're wide open back here at the northwest corner of the property where the tree line breaks."

Until now I never worried about that. Hutton has rigged up cameras all over the place with motion sensors. All the bells and whistles. "I know. My neighbor will never allow you to stage on his property line though. The guy hates us." More like he is a homophobic zealot.

Harrison raises his eyebrows. "Did you investigate him? He just moved in a couple months ago, right?"

“Hutton did. Turns out he’s just a very bitter, angry and judgmental old dickhead.”

“That sounds like a good time.” Harrison makes notes about schedules. I stress the importance of having one of them with Eden when she’s at Horizon Wellness Center.

“Got it.” He tucks the map, notes, and his phone into his inner jacket pocket. “Tell me again about this copycat case...What did they have in common?”

As we walk back to the house I detail it to him, “They look like suicides, but each scene has ‘Time is Now’ written in blood on the wall, there are connections to the Bradfords or Lassiters with each of the four, and -shit, I can’t believe I even doubted it’s related-there’s a crude symbol for The Realists found drawn on a piece of paper near them.”

Connected to Eden’s and Hutton’s families.

It’s time to go back over those killings six years ago and to anyone ever connected to The Realists. I need to speak to Chris. I should’ve called him before now.

Harrison waves at Eden as she comes to stand on the wraparound porch. “Hey, Doc.”

“Steve, come join us for dinner. There’s plenty. Caleb made barbecue ribs and corn on the cob.” She smiles brightly at him, looking more ravishing than anyone should in an oversized Belmont sweatshirt and leggings, her hair pulled up in a high ponytail. “Don’t be shy. Besides, Wes wants to show you his new karate moves.”

He shrugs. “I can’t say no then.”

Chapter Ten

Shhh, just let it happen



Blaine

We've been home from the dance recital for mere minutes when Waverly stomps away to her room proceeding to slam her bedroom door. She's nine. I thought we'd have a few more years before teenage behavior took over.

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Fucking excellent. I make eye contact with Eden, both of us sighing. “I’ll talk to her.”

I find her lying face down on her bed in her last dance outfit—a metallic silver bodysuit with tinsel on her arms and waist. The slicked-down bun on top of her head is starting to lean, her blonde curly hair coming loose. Learning long ago that waiting her out works better than asking her questions, I keep my trap shut. When I sit at her desk, I notice she’s put some of her framed pictures face down. Peeking at them, my heart sinks. She’s with Eden in those particular photos.

I’m certain her mom has no idea how deep her problems with Zinnea are becoming; partly because she’s so focused on making sure all the Abbott children acclimate into the family. But in reality, only one is having a problem: Zinnea. Eden said she sees the child she was in her, but I think she’s projecting. The woman I know has always been overly kind, overly accepting of everyone. Though she started to shut more people out during college, she was never mean. Zin has a biting judgy tone when she speaks.

“Dad?” Waverly sits up, taking a deep breath through tears. “I don’t want a sister anymore.”

I wasn’t prepared to hear that. My mouth opens and closes a couple of times before responding, “Oh, sweetheart...Waves, you don’t mean that.”

“Yes, I do. Zinnea told me on the way out to the car God doesn’t like showy people. I laughed at her, because she says stuff like that all the time, but then she pinched my arm really hard.” Pulling her sleeve back I can see the reddened mark above her elbow.

I've reached my limit now, and I'm pissed. It's one thing to keep spouting her brainwashed garbage, but now she's physically hurting others. "That's not going to be tolerated. I'm so sorry, honey." After a quick hug with Waverly, I'm stopped from finding Zinneba by Caleb.

"Let Eden handle it." He shifts to allow the boys to run past, who are following Dodger into the bathroom. Warner is in his arms, grabbing at his ear while asking for animal crackers. "Both the girls need her to mediate."

On the scale of one to ten in emotional intelligence, I'd say I score a solid six and a half, but my giant best friend may be bypassing me.

Super-agent comes to the rescue, aka Keir, striding past us looking for the culprits of the animals getting out of the pen. Warner sees him, lunging in his direction. Anytime Keir is within eyesight of him, he needs to have his attention. Just like his bio dad. Fuck...I don't want to let myself dwell on that right now. Not much I can do about it, anyway.

I'll never be Keir, all broody and serious.

"Careful," Keir calls out as he catches him mid-wiggle from Caleb's arm.

Looking up to see Matt come around the corner from the stairs, cradling a sleeping baby in his arms causes my damn brain to stop. Fuuuck. Okay, is dad porn a thing?

Four of Waverly's fathers made the recital; Hutton is out of town meeting a client. I overheard more than one conversation about us during the show. "Oh, I agree. I'm picky as hell but I'd crawl over broken glass just to look at him." That was said by one of the mothers when Matt walked toward our seats.

Her friend replied, "Look, I know he's married, but Christ almighty that man inspires

inappropriate thoughts. Hell, they all do. Eden, teach us your ways.”

Mid-turn to look at them, I heard her friend respond, “Riighht, no way is she keeping them all happy. I’m sure we don’t have the real story.”

But it didn’t end there, because the negativity was picked up everywhere. On the walk to pick Waverly up from the staging area, I heard one of the fathers mutter under his breath brushing past me, “Fucking homos.” If Matt hadn’t grabbed my arm shaking his head, I would’ve taken the assault charge by punching him. One of the competition dance coaches couldn’t stop staring at Keir before she could be heard saying, “I don’t get it. He doesn’t look gay. None of them do.” A teenage boy standing with his friends near the entrance to the building cracked under his breath, “The orgy family. That’s a well-used hole.” His eyes tracked Eden, who was covering Zach’s ears.

That’s what life has been like since our neighbor Todd began a campaign to get rid of us. From yelling slurs at us to saying inappropriate things to the kids, and now huge signs pointed our way. We could get a harassment order against him, but Hutton would rather quietly destroy him.

I get it—we are unconventional. My mom is still confused about the relationships we have, even after I tried to dumb it down for her. Matt’s sister says it best—No one is “gay”. We’re all on the spectrum, except Eden, Caleb, and Hutton. Eden is all about us (dick only), Caleb is only into Eden, and Hutton is obsessed with Eden, completely ambivalent to us. My relationship is only physical with Keir...not like any other one he has. I allow myself to be roughly handled, bitten, scratched, hit, choked...I allow it because it exorcises a need he has to rid himself of images of his past and the cases he works on.

But lately...it’s not enough anymore.

Both Matt and I tread carefully with Keir's sexuality. We're never sure if he's making the choice to be intimate with us, or if it's because of the conditioning he had being abused and trafficked. It turns my stomach, even considering it's a possibility.

With Matt, it's undoubtedly love-passionate, deep, fulfilling, and gripping. Love. Almost on par with my feelings about our wife. Almost.

She's still the only one I would fall apart for, lose everything and everyone for. Fuck it, I can say the same for Matt. But Keir makes me frustrated. I want more...I want him to see me as more.

Matt holds his finger to his lips to keep us quiet while we're discussing the girls. "This goddamn nonsense she keeps spouting is getting old," I say to Caleb in particular, because he has defended her behavior in the past. The Revivalist cult's religious doctrine is as strict as the FLDS Holy Brotherhood. He knows the tactics used to mess with their heads. The abuse, the repetition of "rules", the negative reinforcement.

Dodging Warner's grabby hands, Keir says, "Therapy isn't helping. That's obvious. Eden should be the one to address it."

I can't hold my tongue, because ...well, I'm an asshole. In a snide voice I say, "Oh, thank you, Keir, for that level-headed, common-sense, critical thinking take. Caleb already said that."

"Blaine," Matt scolds. "Was that necessary?"

Is it necessary that Keir give his opinion all the damn time?

Big Gulp interrupts Matt's attempt to shame me into being nice. "Last night she rocked in the corner of the room, repeating, 'And the smoke of their torment...' It

was pieces of the Book of Revelations scripture. A description of Hell. He drops his head before adding in a somber voice, “She’s stuck in that mindset. Eden will get to the bottom of it. I know she will.”

At what price? I don’t want my wife delving into Zinne’s psyche only to suffer reliving her past. For the monster haunting her to grow in strength. “Agree to disagree, then? Eden hasn’t had the time to heal...just shy of seven years is not enough time. She’s taking a huge risk trying to help her. We all are. If she’s pinching now, what’s next? Does she strike one of her siblings? What about fire? Hell, for all we know she started the house fire that killed all the Revivalists.”

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They all talk at once because of my accusations, but do we know how it started? Now she's talking about smoke and fire? Jesus Christ. "What in the book of Sega Genesis do we do about an eight-year-old psychopath...if that's what we're dealing with."

"Shhhh," Matt loudly whispers. "Enough."

He can certainly command attention. My inner whore sits up, taking notice immediately. Yes siree.

"Eden's already taking her to see another psychologist Wallen recommended. In the meantime, let's do our best to keep the girls separated. Can we agree on that at least?"

"Mmm... 'spose," I say noncommittally.

"Yes." Keir nods

Caleb clears his throat. "I think so..."

Spur of the moment, Keir and Caleb gather the boys together for a trip to the children's museum. Zinneah is having a visit with Dr. Almari, and Waverly is shopping with her great grandmother. That just leaves Eden, Matt, and me. It's a rare occurrence. Maybe that's why I'm feeling pent-up sexual energy like mad.

But Matt is pacing his fine ass around the yard on his phone.

Eden is washing clothes.

I can fix that. With a smirk forming I grab the clothes hamper from the room I use so sparingly there is only a pair of sweatpants, a couple pairs of underwear, and a towel in it.

Whistling the theme of Mission Impossible, I join Ed in the laundry room located off a short hallway from the kitchen. She's sitting cross-legged on a stool, looking out the window with an open book in her lap. "Hey, beautiful. I came to help." ...you out of your clothes.

My mission, should I accept it-which I fucking do-is to get both her and Matt horny. What does it say about me that the prospect is overriding any sense of responsibility right now?

I like last-minute plans.

Like the time I raw dogged a trip to NYC as a teenager. No Broadway plays, didn't try street meat, never found love in Central Park. Just hopped in a cab, popping Xanax while seeing the sites out a dirty taxi window and the fog of my high.

Jesus...Unbidden romanticized thoughts about using keep popping up. I don't fucking like it.

Arching up in a stretch, Eden looks over her shoulder at me. "Help? Nah, I'm spacing out in here more than anything else. Just finishing up a load of towels."

My body never fails to react to her, that slow reach up and the sleepy recline causing a rush of blood straight to my cock. "Oh, chores?" My eyes travel over her as I bite my lower lip. "There are better ways to spend the next hour or two."

I have my work cut out for me, since the smile I get back is weak and distracted. She's used to me teasing her. I don't think she knows I mean it. She's dressed in a



flannel covering a plain white T-shirt, a pair of black joggers, and fluffy socks. Every damn piece of clothing is coming off.

Singing nonsense lyrics to familiar tunes to myself, I hear her laugh. “I’m just going to throw these in.” Dumping the articles of clothing from my hamper, I then take off my gray sweatpants I had put on when we returned from the recital and toss them in the washer. “These, too.” Already shirtless, I have my back to Eden while I stand in front of the washer naked.

Which is my favorite when I’m in her presence.

“Hmm, this feels like an invitation,” she says through a laugh. “Plus, you just put a pair of black boxer briefs in with a light pair of sweatpants. Okay, move please.” She lightly pushes me aside. “And a pair of red underwear. B...” She sighs.

This just won’t do. “Baby...Ed...” I brush the hair falling from her messy bun away from her neck, giving her a light kiss on a pulse point. “Leave the fucking laundry alone. Pay attention to me.”

She rests a hand on one of my ass cheeks. “I see you.” The sultry twist to her voice tickles my brain. “I always do, and as for attention?” I suck in a breath as her hand slides over my hip bone inching closer to my cock. “You don’t need to ask for it. You never do.”

But I’m not looking for a quick release.

No. This is about winding her up.

Drawing Matt to us.

Stepping out of reach, I walk closer to the window facing the backyard, where Matt is

still engrossed in his phone. “Ed, I want you to get rid of those clothes.”

My sexy wife has no inhibitions when it comes to showing her body. She doesn't shy away from our eyes on her...or exploring every naked inch. Clothes fall away, and I catalog the marks. They stir a primal itch inside me: a hickey on her upper thigh (me), a thumbprint bruise on the side of her breast (Keir), a bruise with a couple teeth imprints (Keir), a red mark on her left hip (me). I reach out to run a hand under her breast. “There'll never be enough words to tell you how much I want you...need you...crave you...”

Those stormy blue eyes move over me, her mouth falling open as my chest rises with short pants. I could take her right now...wrap her around my body, fill her, breathe her in completely. But that's not happening...not yet.

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My cock is at full mast, but other than brushing it with my arm when I reach for her, I'm not laying a finger on it. Keeping Eden in view, I move to stand in the window where the drapes are wide open. Other than a camera mounted by Hutton outside on the porch, no one outside our yard can see me. Not that it would stop me. Being watched is its own turn-on.

If Matt looks toward the house, he'll see me standing naked in the window looking at him, my dick resting on the windowsill. Eden moves in my periphery. "What are you up to, B?"

"He's been distracted lately, huh? Staying in his room..." I lean my hands on the upper part of the window, making my cock drag back on the windowsill. The pressure gives me a tickle in the back of my throat. A breeze could make me cave. "Should we give him a show?"

Opening the window, I call out, "Agent Scholl!" He whips around toward the house. It's a still day in the high sixties, but a shot of heat flashes through my body as he stalks toward the back door while pocketing his phone.

"Close the window, Blaine. Now."

Eden giggles next to me as she moves in front of me. "I think we need the airflow," she calls in a taunt.

He picks up the pace. When we hear the back door shut, I nip at Eden's earlobe while whispering, "Got him."

Matt closes the door to the laundry room behind him. “It’s not safe to stand naked in front of a window. We don’t know who could be around.” I can’t take him seriously when he’s pulling his shirt off. Fuck my life, that man has the perfect trail leading to the prize he’s packing.

“Uh-huh. Sure. Some of Wes’s ninjas?” Eden folds her arms under her breasts, causing them to spill over. I can’t help myself. Leaning over, I swipe my tongue across a nipple. “Mmmm...B, more of that please.”

My heart is my throat, when Matt frees his cock. The bounce as he moves has my gaze pinned on him. Come here you beautiful son of a bitch. Once he’s within reach, I put a hand against his chest to stop him.

Call it edging...or inspired torture. I leave both my lovers standing near the cracked window. Returning to the washer, I lean back against it with my ass resting lightly on the edge. My cock pulses in my hand as I stroke from base to tip. Once...causing Matt to pay closer attention. Twice...Eden’s small moan lights me up. I pleasure myself in front of them, stopping them both more than once as they try to get closer. A foot to Matt’s chest, a hand grabbing Eden’s waist.

“Fuuuck...oh, fuck, fuck...” Spurts of cum shoot out hitting my leg and Matt’s ass since he’s moved close again.

Did it abate that surge of neediness I was feeling? Fuck no. If anything, my desire to make love to Eden and Matt is only stoked hotter. But my mission was to start it, and they can finish it...now, or...

“Meet me in the gym?” I’m pulling a pair of washed shorts from a stack on the nearby counter. “Quick.”

Our home gym is nothing short of outstanding. Hutton filled it with all the latest

equipment when he built his addition. I'm sprinting down the hallway laughing to myself when I hear them both behind me, cursing. "You little shit," Matt says as he closes the gap in just his underwear. Eden is next to him in her flannel shirt and nothing else.

I couldn't be fucking happier.

"You started this, and you're finishing it," Matt demands gruffly. His dick is still hard, and that look in his eyes is full of hunger

Fucking yes.

I'll own it.

Sure.

If they want to think I'm responsible for getting them hot and bothered before we're even in the gym it makes no fucking difference to me.

The end result is the same. Absolute motherfucking ecstasy.

Winking back at Eden, I can't help delighting in her flushed face. "You're welcome, sweetheart."

Movement is flurried. The three of us move as one. "Give me that dick," I bite out before grabbing Matt.

"Slower, slower...oh my god." Matt reaches out, grabbing the equipment next to him. "I want you looking up at me, sucking me off." His hand brushes through my hair before he catches my lip in his. "Suck. Me. Off."

Eden kisses my shoulder blade. "You heard him. Take a knee, babe." As I do just that, she leans over, taking Matt's face with one hand and giving him a kiss that causes him to stumble forward slightly.

Off the charts chemistry. This is my nirvana.

Matt looks down at me massaging his thick cock with my tongue as I move him in and out of my mouth. My lids are lowered as I look up at him. One of my hands moves to work my own cock. Eden breaks the kiss with Matt, breathless. "I want you both. This waiting is driving me crazy."

Matt eases himself away from my mouth. "Come here, B." I don't need any encouragement to follow his every move. "Eden, honey, over here." He sits at a lat pulldown machine, readjusting his balls before hooking his finger toward me. "Climb on."

"Wait...let me get you ready," Eden purrs next to me. She pushes me back toward Matt so I'm sitting in front of him. Smiling, she kneels in front of me. Using some of the cum from my release she rubs my tip, her tongue and spit wetting me further.

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She spits into her hand before telling me to lean forward, then she works two fingers into my puckered hole. Matt does the same. Both take turns getting me ready to take him. “Enough...I need to feel you inside me. Fucking stop, I said.” I shove Matt’s hand away as I lower myself onto him, using a hand on the pulldown bar.

My exquisite fucking wife watches us as she stands in front of me fingering herself. But I want to be the cause of her orgasm. “Nope. No way. Get the fuck over here, Ed.”

I help her sit on my lap, legs wrapped around us, shifting her forward so I’m filling her. Movement is jerky to start, but then we get a rhythm. Matt’s groans make me feel fucking feral, combined with the sweet huffs of air and noises from Eden. I buck back against Matt until he takes over with his hands around my waist under Eden’s thighs. “Stop trying to top from the bottom, you fucking troublemaker.”

I look back at him with half a smile. “Why? You like it when I’m acting up.”

He fucking does.

My motherfucking queen goes first, shouting, “Yes, I want every last drop. Yes...” Her spasms bring on the waves of euphoria. Matt’s thrusts go harder, and he’s spent inside me in seconds. We’re clinging to each other, a sticky wasted mess, when I say, “I just want you both to know I have an unhealthy obsession with your damn fine asses. That’s all.”

There is laughter as we slip off one another, but I wasn’t joking. I’ve never had a doubt that we’re endgame. My life, my love is theirs for whatever time we have on

this earth. Eden Bradford and Matt Scholl...fuck, maybe even Keir Marcus...my body, my heart, my soul are at their disposal.

## Chapter Eleven

Are these dire circumstances?

Eden

Group started late this morning because the coffeemaker stopped working. That's how today is going-an appliance is stopping my productivity. "I used to be an amazing dancer. Would you like to see me dance?" Deanne asks as she does every group. One of the other survivors snorts.

"No. Yesterday it was no, last week it was no, session before that no. No, no, no," Jack asserts before smacking his hand onto his leg. "Are you nuts?"

I should've taken the day off.

"Let's refocus, okay?" Taking a seat in the circle of chairs, I try to get things back on track. Deanne ignores us all. She spins around the chairs using one of her hands to swish her long skirt around while humming to herself.

When Morrie launches into his sailboat story, he gives a variation of in each session, the anxiety from this morning carries my thoughts to all the strange activity lately. This morning on the way to work, I knew I had an agent following me, but a growing unease has made me leery of each passing vehicle, strange cars parked in the lot at the wellness center, and my desk phone ringing sets my heart galloping.

"Thanks, uh, thanks for sharing, Morrie. Let's...okay, Deanne? Deanne? Please have a seat." The struggle to be present mentally right now as I silently count to five while



tapping my foot is a struggle. “We have a new member this week. Would you like to introduce yourself to everyone?” The young, redheaded man who asks to be called Juno hasn’t said much in our two private meetings. His records show he lived in a commune in Arizona called The Family International. He wandered away from them near a bus station, asking them to call for help. He’d been sexually abused most of his life, he was malnourished, and half his teeth were lost. Yet through it all, he insisted we need to save his family. I’ve made notes to pass along to Keir about the trafficking they are involved in.

Juno shakes his head. I’m disappointed he isn’t feeling like participating, but I’m not at my best today so I don’t try to encourage him. “Let’s go to our next group member...”

Again, my mind can’t stay tuned in completely, drifting from the middle-aged woman who wants to be called Starlight talking about the “tennent of the most high God.” I interrupt her when it sounds like she’s trying to recruit members to the Western Skies cult instead of working through her deprogramming. “I think we’ll pick this up next session. We’re going to end a few minutes early today.”

“Because of the stupid coffee maker,” Jack affirms, nodding his head.

He can think what he wants. I need to get my head together. Each step back to my office is punctuated by a sense of doom. Matt took a call last night that victim five was found in the Realists copycat killings. It was a former neighbor of my grandparents. “Steve, I’m heading home early today.” Agent Harrison is my personal security detail for the day. He probably thinks I’m a basket case. In all the years we’ve known one another, I’ve never acted jittery or anxious. Not that I can remember, anyway.

He nods at me with a frown. “Did something happen?”

I mutter, “Yeah, no coffee.” I laugh at myself lightly.

“Pardon me?” I didn’t think he could hear me, but at this point he may as well know I’m nervous about everything that’s been happening.

Shutting my office door, Steve raises an eyebrow at me from where he’s standing next to it. “Doc?”

“Listen...I should tell you I have a funny feeling I’m being watched. It doesn’t make sense to me, but...Do you know what I mean?” I rub my hands over my face.

That nagging feeling I’m not being careful...

Steve isn’t a big talker. At least, I’ve never heard him say much. He nods at me. “Doc, I’d say if you think that, chances are high you are being stalked.”

Now I’m the one questioning what’s being heard. “Y-you think I am?”

Slumping into my office chair, I unload all the things bothering me about Matt leaving for LA, the murders, the note, the phone call. He listens with little reaction. He’s ever the FBI agent-giving me no indication what he’s thinking. Matt does the same thing. Keir is the only one who lets his emotions play across his face when talking to me. I fear years on the job will eat that away.

“A year and half ago I did a stint in the Midwest following an activist who had a stalker. He swore up and down that this person was responsible for dead birds being left on his car. He’d get phone calls with dead air...there were a half dozen weird things happening, but my bureau chief wanted to pull us. He was convinced the guy had a screw loose. Until we found him decapitated near his vehicle one morning.”

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I gasp, a hand flying to cover my mouth.

“I’m not trying to scare you any more than you already may be. I believe you. A stalker moves in the shadows. But Matt did the right thing by getting protection for your family until he can sort things out.”

What if he isn’t able to? What happens if Matt and the agents working for him can’t find the person doing the killings, making the threats?

My heart feels twisted in my chest.

I can’t spend the rest of my life feeling like this.

### Chapter Twelve

#### Cowboys vs. Ninjas

Caleb

My Thursday afternoons are spent at the clinic, but I’m distracted on my walk across the road when I see Weston talking to a man walking a dog a few feet past our driveway. When I call out the man picks the dog up and quickly walks away to a waiting white car. “Wes?! Wes!” Dropping the toy he’s whipping around, he runs my way.

“Daddy C, can I come to the animal clinic today?”

I squat down next to him, stilling him with a hand on his arm. “Weston, who were

you talking to? Do you remember what we told you about talking to strangers without an adult with you?"

"To not to." He scratches at a bug bite on his arm.

"Who was it?" The car is gone, disappearing while I was admonishing Weston.

He picks his truck back up. "I dunno know. He asked me if I knew how to get to...I don't remember now."

No adult asks a child for directions. Not without another purpose in mind. "If you see that car or him again, I want you to run away from it. Come find me, any of your other daddies or Agents Harrison or Bristow. Okay, buddy?"

He makes a face before saying, "Was that a bad guy? Like the ninja?" His current preoccupation with ninjas is cute, but I'm ready for his next fascination. This one is wearing thin.

"Wes. He could be. Just find one of us, alright?"

We're in a rural area. There are no close businesses other than the vet clinic across the road, and an orchard two miles away. We don't see random cars travel this back road often. This doesn't sit right. "Ready to go check on our furry patients?" I ask him while pulling him onto my back. "As long as you don't put suckers in their kennels again." This kid is keeping us all on our toes. Hutton always knew he would. A ball of energy, spirit, and personality.

He's my biggest smile each day. My heartiest laugh.

Once we've entered the clinic, I fire a text to our group chat about what happened with the stranger. Hutton responds first saying he is checking cameras. Keir calls me.

“How long ago did that happen?” He snaps right into agent mode. “I’m on my way home.”

“The guy is gone. I didn’t get a good look at the car. It was a small, white four-door car.” I’m kicking myself for not being more observant.

“Plate number...any part of it?”

“Sorry, I panicked when I saw him talking to Wes.”

“What did he look like?” I hear the door of his vehicle shut and his engine start. “Anything?”

Shoot. No. I remember the dog more than him. “Hutton’s looking at the cameras.”

My exchange with Keir leaves me feeling useless. If this man wanted to hurt our child or gather information to hurt anyone else in our family, I failed in getting details about him or his car.

Cutting up strawberries for fruit salad, I hand one to Warner in his highchair. “Try this.”

He smacks his lips. “Mo..want mo.” For three years old he knows or can mimic most words. He even delights in singing and dancing along to music being played. It seems like his favorite to shout out when he’s getting crabby is “Daddy K.”

Blaine walks through the door, a look of exasperation on his face. Rolling his eyes he says, “I could be developing a big ole ulcer. I had a student ask me during a meeting with their probation officer if they had to pay attention the whole time. Then I had a whole ass conversation about skinny legends, predatory divas, and literal slay with two students who wouldn’t leave my office...fuck, don’t even ask. I’m still

confused.”

He absently picks up a whole handful of the cut fruit, shoving it in his mouth.

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“Are you an adult?” Eden jokes as she comes in with Zeb on her hip.

“Yeah, but not on purpose.” Blaine replies before kissing her on top of her head.

My heart lifts just seeing Eden. One of my favorite things about her is she leaves people better than she found them. Myself included. My life, who I’ve been able to become, is largely because of her support.

How can I even question if I belong?

Agent Steven Harrison and Agent David Bristow both come to the door. Matt strides through the kitchen to answer it. Holding the door open, he quietly speaks to them, pointing over his shoulder, then gesturing outside. We look on as the lightheartedness is thwarted by the seriousness of our situation.

The suspicious activity earlier today.

Hutton could see the man, but not the car in the camera mounted on the mailbox post. He sent still photos to Matt and both agents. Not that a nondescript balding white male in wire framed glasses is going to be ID’d that way. We all know to be on the lookout away from home for him.

“Down, down now. Pwees...Daddy down.” Warner pumps his legs. I think we can get rid of the highchair in favor of a booster chair. It’s time to accept he’s growing older.

“Okay, little buddy, where are we going?” Blaine sets him down on the floor.

But his attention is taken by Keir coming in from the front of the house. “Daddy! Daddy! Up, up, up.” A look of relief passes over his face as he squeezes Warner to him.

“Where’s Wes?”

Hearing his name he comes skipping into the room, Zach on his heels. “Wanna see our fort?”

“Let’s sit down and talk first, Wes.” Pulling him onto his land next to Warner at the counter, Keir continues, “Do you know how much Mommy and your Daddies love you?”

“Bigger than the world,” he says proud of himself, spreading his arms wide. “I love you, too, Daddy.”

Blaine and I share a look. Keir is getting choked up. He clears his throat, his voice thick. “That’s why we have rules. To keep you safe. Those rules are for Waverly, Zinneah, Zach, Warner, and Zeb, too. All of us need to listen to the rules.” Zach nods enthusiastically with wide eyes perched in the chair next to them.

I’m just realizing even though he follows Wes around, we didn’t take the time to discuss strangers with him after this happened. He was at therapy during the incident, but I worry he’ll feel less cared about because of that. “You too, Zach. Right? If you see any strangers, you need to get away from them and find us,” I add.

“Uh-huh, like when the ninja comes?”

My smile falls slightly. The cowboy phase can come back any time now. “Yes. Any stranger.”



Leaning into my side, Eden adds, “Just like we practiced when we went to the park the first time. If you can’t find one of us, look for an adult with children. Tell them you need help.”

The agents decline eating dinner with us, reminding us that they’re on the job. After Wes runs back from the kitchen to hand them paper bags with snacks in them, they both leave to patrol the property.

Hutton FaceTimes Keir about work matters, causing Wes to jump into the camera frame a few times to ask him questions. “The transcript of the message is in an encrypted email I sent you. That’s not the important part. There is a tracer code attached; it was done by someone who has some knowledge of complicated code. In that code...is a warning or threat. Take me off FaceTime before I continue.” His voice is getting irritated.

But now, we’re all paying attention. The hand holding Eden’s fork is shaking. I put my hand on her knee. Keir turns his camera off before swiftly leaving the table. Both Matt and Blaine follow him out the kitchen door. “I thought we’d have a nice meal,” I joke weakly. “The kids seem to be enjoying it.” Waverly runs her fork over the marinated chicken breast with her lower lip sticking out. Zinneah hasn’t touched her silverware where she is seated at the opposite end of the table. The boys are more focused on their toy cars than eating. “I’m kidding...”

“It’s delicious, I just don’t have much of an appetite, sweetheart,” Eden says in a hushed voice.

God, give me the words of comfort she needs. Instead, after a few more minutes in silence, we clear the table as the kids scatter. I put music on while loading the dishwasher, a routine I’ve come to look forward to, making the chore fun with our little dances and off-key bellowing of lyrics. She’s not going for it tonight. Even my awkward, made-up dance moves don’t make her crack a smile. “Tough audience

tonight, angel.”

The plate she’s loading gets set on the counter as she forces a smile on her face. “The worst.” She wraps her arms around her middle tightly. “We’re in danger. Real danger, Caleb.”

“I know.” The safety we felt in the bubble of life created here in New York feels like it’s worn away. Everyone is on edge. Putting a hand out to her, I pull her into a hug, saying quietly, “Lord, I surrender my worries to You. Guide me in Your wisdom, and may Your presence light my path. In Your hands, I find comfort and assurance. In Jesus's Name, Amen.”

We hold each other, swaying to the music playing. I imagine what it would be like to be alone. Just Eden and me. The kids. It would be simple. No outside threats from work the FBI does, no revenge from Hutton’s clients’ adversaries, no drama from Blaine...simple. I’d have my nights lying next to her in bed. We’d show more affection in public. I’d have a fighting chance to get Eden more receptive to church. Simple.

Monogamy. Isn’t that the way God would want it?

The prophecy of the FLDS Holy Brotherhood would have me believe that polygamy, one husband and as many wives as possible, is God’s way. That never felt right, especially when I saw my uncle taking ten- and twelve-year-old wives. Why would God not want Eden to have five husbands who love her, protect her, and are loyal to her? If polygamy is right for a man, it should follow that it’s right for a woman, too.

My habit of playing with my wedding ring catches her attention. She runs her hand over the stone, tenderness in her expression as she says, “I love you. No one calms me like you do, and no one else ever will.” It’s like she is reading my mind. Or God is speaking her truth to my heart? I’m her safe space. It’s not simple, this life we’ve

built. But I can be her calm in the storm.

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Words to a song playing cut me. “Aw, pitter patter, it’s just my heart, why does it matter?”

That’s the real truth: My heart doesn’t matter as much as anyone else’s in this family. I will always put them first.

### Chapter Thirteen

That anxiety though...

Eden

My anxiety has written an essay with cited sources of all the damning reasons why I should be freaking out. All the angles danger could come at us from. The ghosts of the past taunt me with memories, reminding me not to trust anyone. Not even myself.

Wrapping myself around Caleb, I rest my head over his heart. He feels the shift turning slightly to pull me in closer. “Don’t leave yet,” he says, smoothing a hand down my back.

“Mmmm,” I moan. “I don’t want to.”

After taking turns reading Robin Hood to the boys before bed, I followed him to his room. A surprised look, then a showering of praises followed. Doesn’t he understand his attractiveness? More than a pretty face, which he has, or well-built body, holy yes check, he brings me to my knees with his pure heart. His innocent outlook, the sweet dancing in the kitchen after supper, his love for the animals and our kids. He is a

treasure beyond my wildest dreams.

If our family has a glue, it's Caleb Smith.

“Uh, baby?” My face heats as I snuggle in closer, his impressive erection flush to my thigh. Every fiber of my being melts into a puddle at the thought of making love to him. He takes “our bodies are temples” to the next level by worshipping our union, always leaving me limp and weak with an ear-to-ear grin.

We may have snuggled up falling asleep after some murmured talk, but I don't intend to leave this morning without having him.

Oh, yeah ...my ovaries just high-fived themselves with the look he gives me. His hand uses mine to run over his cock while his nose nudges me gently to give him access to my lips.

I slide on top of him, a hand caressing him through the gap in his boxers. His head falls back against his pillows. The way he sounds, the tendons in his neck protruding and the way his hands gently move me...it undoes me.

He sits up to pull off the T-shirt of his I wore to bed. A delicious groan is elicited from him as he latches his mouth on one of my nipples. Sucking lightly, he teases it with the tip of his tongue. “Put me inside of you,” he says in a ragged voice, his hands occupied with my breasts.

No encouragement needed. My pussy is throbbing in anticipation. I rub myself against the length of him before feeding him in a couple of inches at a time, wiggling to fit him in. I redirect his mouth to mine, whispering words of love to him as I take him. “Baby...love...sweetheart...sunshine...” The words fall apart as I'm unable to catch my breath.

My grinding on top of him becomes fevered as I cling to his upper arms, my eyes on his. He takes over guiding me on him, my moans having to be muffled by his chest when I break eye contact. We don't last long before pleasure is wrung from me, my toes cramping in a curl. His last thrusts before bursting make my teeth clamp down lightly on his pec. Drool-actual damn drool- wets my chin.

Lying next to each other, our hands don't stop touching, the loving words don't dry up as we luxuriate in each other. I apologize profusely for the mark I left on him. We never do that. It's more a product of passion when I'm with Blaine or Keir.

My hand covers it, thumb pressing down. "I couldn't help it...sorry."

He smiles at me. "I didn't hate it."

## Chapter Fourteen

If you say so

Blaine

Being a guidance counselor has very few perks. Let's be honest...it has no real perks, only perceived ones. Like thinking I'm the cool guy among all the adults who don't get what being a misunderstood teenager is like. I dress better than the rest of the staff that much I know. "Had your phone taken away again, huh, Brayden?"

The burly kid with a stocking cap pulled down over his mullet skulks into my office with his hand out. "Mr. Davenport, I need my phone back. I need it for work."

"Third offense in a week, though. Right, my man?" I know he does DoorDash deliveries and needs his phone to do it, but I can't just let it go unaddressed. "You could have a seat. Don't give me that look. I came out swinging for you last offense."

Sit.”

We’re interrupted twice: Once when one of the sophomore girls who gets low blood sugar rushes in to grab a handful of candy from one of my desk drawers, then again when a junior male on the basketball team wants to complain about a test score in his geography class. That was in ten minutes. All day long they flock into my office. It used to seem like a badge of honor, like “the cool, popular guidance counselor gets us”. Fuck that shit. Now I feel like I’m being played.

A feeling I’ve grown more accustomed to all the time.

I’m locking my office door to make a couple phone calls after Brayden finally fucks off when I see a baggy with differently colored pills on the floor by the lockers outside my door.

Grabbing it quickly, I shove it in my pocket. Drugs run rampant around here at the alternative high school, but we don’t find them often. The only find I’ve ever had was a couple joints left on the ledge of a mirror in the men’s restroom. I run my fingers over the shapes of the pills. Fuck my life, I remember this...the miscellaneous pills I’d pop to escape.

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Flush the fucking things. Walk your ever-loving, fucking ass into the nearest restroom and toss ‘em. Now.

Now.

But I don’t. I let them remain in my pocket while I call my brother-in-law, Chris. Pick up, please pick up.

“Yo. Any word on the whole cult thing?” That’s how he answers his phone. But at least he did.

“Hi?” I chuckle indulgently at him. “Nothing new. Still have agents watching the house and Eden. I’ll let you know right away if that changes. How are you? Any weird shit going down?” From his location in southern Illinois, he would be on the radar of the lasting cult members since he never moved after that summer seven years ago. Tried like a motherfucker to get him to. He’s got more stubbornness than Hutton and Eden combined.

“Nah. I haven’t been online much lately. Did I tell you about Sugar?” I let him give me more details than necessary about the new stripper he’s dating. His roster consists of strippers, aspiring strippers, or topless servers.

Pulling the baggie out as he talks, I count the pills. Two longer yellow pills, two greenish-blue round pills, four white pills with a number on them, and six I immediately know are Adderall. Jesus Christ, the space-cadet feels I’d have rolling on a couple Addys with a couple oxy. That foggy, disconnected nothingness. A break. A mental check-out.



I choose not to tell Chris about the drugs, spending the rest of the day in a debate with myself. The addict assures me “I can throw them out at any time”, they’re just in my pocket in case I need them. But, fucking hell, I don’t need them. I start toward the restroom half a dozen times to get rid of the contents of the baggie, each time making the argument I should hold onto it a little longer.

In case. In case what though? I want to relapse causing problems in every relationship that matters to me?

It’s the picture of our family on my desk that makes me decide to hit an Alcoholics Anonymous/Narcotics Anonymous meeting on the way home, mentally berating myself for not having the strength to toss the pills.

We have a possible psycho hunting us, but instead of being a source of strength for Eden, for anyone in our family, I’m wondering if a pill might make it better. Stop the fear from creeping in about losing any of them.

Eden texts asking me to pick up Waverly from dance. I call her back. “I think you should do it.” Not just because Waves needs time with her, but I need that meeting. Fuck...yeah, I do.

“Zinnea needs to be picked up from therapy at the same time.” She sighs. “Switch? You pick Zin up and I’ll get Waves? That would work.”

Fucking fantastic. Not only do I dread having to make conversation with our scary little evangelist, but now I won’t be able to get to a meeting. But Waves really needs some time alone with Eden, not that I’ve talked to her about it. Life has been coming at me like a freight train recently.

“Text me the address.” Stuffing the pills back in my pocket, I tell myself I’ll get to a meeting tomorrow morning. First thing. “Hey, before you go...Waverly misses you.

I'm not telling you how to parent..." I don't need to; she's better at it than me. "Maybe stop somewhere and talk?"

Eden has already thought about making time to get ice cream or doing a painting project together. Once the call ends, I lean back in my desk chair. Biting my fist I let loose an agonized yell. Between the door being closed and my hand muffling it, it goes unheard.

I left the pill-popping, drunk, irresponsible grad student in the past. I did. Why can't I fucking throw these damn pills away?

Rain pours down in sheets. The only sound in my car is the windshield wipers or turn signal. Zinne sits eerily still, hands in her lap, eyes straight ahead. I want to like her...care more for her than just a kid in trouble but fuck she is creeping me out. "You don't want your cupcake?" I'd stopped getting a package of treats, hoping she would be more forthcoming.

She shakes her head.

This is going so well. Not. "Yeah, it kind of tastes like someone messed up." I make an exaggerated face before pressing the one I took a bite of into the bakery bag.

She doesn't react. Not a giggle, not a hint of a smile. She's a tough cookie. For some reason I keep trying to get a response from her. "When Eden and I were in college we caught a friend of ours mixing boxed cake with his hands because it said 'mix by hand' in the directions. Gross, right?" Well, okay, I was the one who did that when I was high...fuck. Just one of many times, Eden cleaned up a mess I made.

I ask if she's warm enough, whether she wants to listen to music, tell her she can adjust her seat...I try damn hard to engage her with no success.

Maybe I'm doing this wrong. When it comes to her brothers, Zach and Zeb, she hovers protectively. Discussing them could draw her out. "Zinne, is Zach still sleeping under your bed at night?"

Her soft mumbling forces me to turn the radio off, "What was that, honey?"

"He sleeps on the floor next to Weston." The sadness in her tone makes me look at her in my periphery.

"Are you comfortable in your room?"

We roll to a stop at an intersection, and she speaks a little louder this time. "God will come back and whoever is not found written in the Book of Life will be hurled into the lake of fire."

It's chilling to hear this small child spout such dastardly sounding things. Her lips are shaking when I look down at her, ignoring the opportunity to make our turn. Thank god no one is behind us. "Zin, what makes you say that right now? What does it mean?"

Those pills are screaming at me to toss a couple back right now.

Her chin lifts in defiance. Looking me in the eye she says, "I don't want to die like everyone else in our house."

## Page 27

*Source Creation Date: May 20, 2025, 4:52 am*

Charming kid. I nod at her speechless. Her cult programming is so ingrained, she doesn't know how to separate reality from make believe.

She leaves my car without a look back once we park in the driveway. The pills are removed from my pocket, locking them in the center console. I know I don't want any children coming across them, but I also don't want to part with them yet.

What the fuck am I doing?

### Chapter Fifteen

#### Unpopular opinion

#### Hutton

Homeforoneday, and my cell phone never stops. I turn it off, tossing it onto the desk. With my laptop open to the program I wrote for the FBI, I scroll through layers of the dark web, typing in the buzz words "Realists", "Lassiter", and "Time is Now". Nothing new comes up...one message is a "call to arms" by a remaining cult member located in Pennsylvania who works as a grocery store stocker, another message asking for information on the Lassiters, and the cryptic "I'm dying to meet you. Signed "the last of the true Realists". That is the only message I'm concerned with.

Why? Because the same encryption methods I've perfected, the same code I use that is not duplicated anywhere in the world, is used with that message.

It can only mean one thing: The FBI is involved on some level. My code was leaked

by the people I've worked with. We thought those involved had been prosecuted. Others were met with mysterious ends as they cleaned their own house.

And they want me to know.

I put nothing past an organization built on secrets and lies; that undergoes covert operations and uses people like a commodity. Matt and Keir may try to be "good guys", but they are at the disposal of crooked politicians and evil masterminds. The day they both realize that the better off we'll all be.

Duplicating the code, I scramble it, working on an unbreakable encryption. Now that I know the enemy thinks they have one up on us, I'm going to blow that code up. Think again.

When I turn my phone back on to seven messages waiting, the phone starts to ring again. It's coming from one of the untraceable phones a client has. "Mr. Cross?" a tentative man's voice asks.

"It's the only number programmed on the phone, Imad."

"Oh yes, yes. How are you? Our weat-"

"No. I despise small talk. It's either posturing or pretense. I can't stand either one. It's a waste of time. Do you have the intel I need? If not, I'm disconnecting."

Sounding properly cowed, the brigadier general of the Syrian Army gives me what I need. "Toss the phone in a fire." With that I hang up.

Turning to another laptop, I locate the file marked "the fund", selecting the next person on the list and pulling up their bank account to transfer four hundred thousand dollars into it. A message left for the bank...deposit by Anonymous. There is a four-

year-old boy lying in the hospital after surgery, his parents working two jobs with a baby on the way. I pay the medical expenses, then drop the cash in. Joan Lassiter's money will be used to right some wrongs. The old bird won't ever know, unless she's seeing the action from Hell. The sense of balance has me deciding to keep this up after her inheritance is gone. With millions banked up, approaching seven figures, it's more than we can spend in our lifetimes. There is no shortage of people who need help but won't ask.

That's where "Anonymous" comes in.

I half smile, thinking about Weston's and Zach's fascination with Robin Hood lately. The only difference is I don't need to steal to do the right thing.

Agent David Bristow appears in my office doorway. "Hutton, Steve and I want to show you something out on the property."

The middle-aged, moon-faced agent purses his lips before adding, "Do you have some night vision goggles? If not, I can grab a pair from my gear." I routinely survey our camera feed from my phone when I'm away or on my screen in the office. Whatever they want me to see shouldn't be a surprise to me.

The revulsion I feel at the mention of night vision goggles is maddening. My earliest memories are stained with the terror of being hunted in dark woods by men wearing them. "I'll pass. I have a flashlight, thanks."

He shrugs a shoulder. "Follow me. It's a few yards from the treehouse."

I'm a good foot and half taller than Agent Bristow at six feet seven inches tall. Neither that, the muscle I've packed on, nor the nasty scar across my neck have ever made the man look or shrink away. I still don't trust him, but I can respect the ice water that must run through his veins. "Lead the way."

It's pitch black in the tree line once we veer away from the house. I switch the flashlight on, the ping of a memory echoing in my mind. Could've been the mention of night vision, or maybe it's all the talk of the Realists, but a cold sweat breaks out all over my body.

We approach one of the cameras I had placed, the light on it indicating it's operational. Bristow taps my arm. "Right over here." Several feet up on the trunk of an elm tree is another camera, one I've never seen. It's the size of a deck of cards, black and sleek, the green light solid on the bottom of it. I yank it off the tree before shoving it in my pocket. I want to disable it, but not before I take a closer look in my office.

"Not yours then?"

"No. Any others found on the property yet?"

We talk about getting a couple local officers to help them sweep the woods and check over the buildings. He calls Steve to update him. "I'll be in my office taking this apart," I tell him patting my pocket.

## Page 28

*Source Creation Date: May 20, 2025, 4:52 am*

My head starts to pound on the walk back. The resurfacing memories are disorienting. The timing couldn't be worse. The phrases, the orders...

"You will do our bidding."

"You won't be stopped."

Eden sees me stumble as I open the back door and she runs to my side. "What's wrong?" Alarm is written all over her face.

My nightmare is hers. There is no way to tell her the past has woken up from where I buried it, that the brainwashing tactics and the words they tortured me with are coming alive again, because she's already scared. I see it in her eyes when she thinks no one is paying attention. I want to take her hand, but my normal tendency born of the way I grew up to fear germs is intensified right now.

She follows me back to my office. "What were you and David doing outside?"

I don't answer her as I put the camera on my desk using a switchblade to pry it open. It's hardly high tech, a middle of the road surveillance trail cam. I clip a wire to ensure the perpetrator can't get access to my cellphone, then I pair it to my phone. A clear picture shows me staring down at it, Eden next to me with a worried expression.

There's no tracing it. Nothing more to gain by keeping it in use, I cut the rest of the wires, take the chip out and toss the whole works in the garbage can by my desk.

She starts to say, "Hutton? Wha-" Her hand rests on my arm causing me to back



away. “Hey...” We’ve come a long way. Six years ago, she knocked down a barrier I had set up. Now my skin crawls thinking about touch...about being near another person.

But this is Eden...my Eve. Her safety and well-being are the only reasons I’m alive. Hers and our kids’.

“Oh no, oh my god...Hutton, you have to talk to me. Why did you pull away? What’s going on? What did you throw away?” Her rapid-fire questions don’t help. Her eyes fill with tears. “Hutton.” Carefully, she places her hand on my bare arm.

I stare at it in disgust.

Get control. This is Eden.

“Hutton?” Her voice cracks as the tears spill over.

“Eden...” Closing my eyes I continue, “Don’t touch me. I’m...I need a minute.” There’s no telling her I was triggered. I’d rather she thinks I’m being moody.

Backing away, she sits in a chair by the door. “I want to stay with you tonight.”

Perfect. A whole night avoiding contact with her while I sort out what this all means.

“Do you have to?”

“Yes. Did you forget I know you? I know you’re not okay. You can’t hide anything from me.”

While she deals with Blaine complaining about the sleeping arrangements for the night, I grapple with what happened in the woods.

“You don’t need to stay in here,” I reiterate while stepping back into my bedroom from taking a shower. The whole time, I scrubbed until my skin was red, trying to talk myself out of the way I’m feeling.

Eden isn’t being coy in the least tonight. She left her hair down, stripped naked. I can’t tear my eyes away. The urge to pummel Blaine and Keir at the sight of the blemishes on her skin is strong. She claims they feel good, but how do bites, bruising hands or scratches feel pleasurable?

Without a word, I climb under the covers with my back turned. Denying her was not in the cards a couple of hours ago, but now I’m hoping she stays on her side of the bed. “Hutton? Do you feel it, too? It’s like they implemented a fail-safe to eliminate us.” Her voice is choked up. “None of them could use us the way they wanted. Maybe this is their plan?”

She only understands a piece of this.

“Eden, if I arrange it would you and the kids go into hiding? I have a place that’s completely secluded and off the grid.” An ache spreads through my chest at sending them away until it’s safe...weeks, months...even years. We couldn’t go with them. They’re watching us all, so there would need to be diversions. But I could keep them safe if they went.

Her voice is warbly when she says, “It’s the Realists...it has to be, right? I’m not leaving you. You will physically need to knock me the hell out and tie me up. I’m staying wherever you are. If it’s them...if-” She swallows a cry. “They’ll want you as much as us.”

I don’t say it out loud, not to trust anyone. I tried that years ago, but Eden isn’t built that way. She wants to see good in everyone, even after the violations to her trust. I know because she still looks at me with love.

“Don’t cry. Please don’t cry.”

Turning over, I use the edge of the sheet she has pulled up to wipe away tears from her cheek. “I want you,” she whispers. “Please, please, love...”

Her glistening blue eyes pierce my heart. I can’t make myself move closer to her, my hands now fisted under my pillow, paralyzed at the thought. Skin to skin, the sweat, bodily fluids...I’m at war with myself. The phobias are winning, my dick only semi-hard.

*Source Creation Date: May 20, 2025, 4:52 am*

“Can I touch you? You don’t have to touch me.” She’s been in the same place with me before. I thought we’d mastered this obstacle.

I haven’t resisted a touch, hug, or kiss from anyone in our family for years. I still wear gloves doing my work, but that’s more for covering my tracks. “No. Go to sleep.”

Perplexed, her face scrunches up. “Are you punishing me for the marks? I know you don’t like them, but we’ve talked about this before. We have children together...biological children. You and I. No one says a word about that. The marks are no big deal.”

“It isn’t about Thing One’s and Thing Two’s savagery. It’s not. Go to sleep.” I flip back over before I let her do what she wants, causing me enough discomfort it’ll hurt her further.

She wouldn’t be Eden if she listened. I feel her breath on my neck. Bristling, I hold myself still. “We’re not scared kids anymore. We’re wiser now...we’re married now. I want you to tell me what’s going on and why you’re acting like this.”

“You aren’t going to sleep, are you?”

She firmly replies, “Not a chance. Now talk.”

Groaning, I lay on my back, focused on the ceiling. “It’s not sexy to talk about how I’m imagining what a breeding ground for bacteria a mouth is. Or thinking about our...juices mingling.” The impulse to gag is stuffed back down.

“Ahhh.” She moves back a few inches. “Did something happen to bring those feelings back? Because last week you were lapping my ‘juices’ up like it was the nectar of the gods,” she jokes lightly.

“Did you have to remind me of that right now?”

Teasingly, she pulls the covers down until my groin area can be seen under my sweatpants. “Did you know that you’re so hung, this is what most men look like hard, but you’re not even a little bit, are you?”

“Go. To. Sleep.” I pull the covers back up. It’s bad enough that she’s next to me completely bare, but I’m so messed up in the head I can’t do anything about it. Now she needs to point out I’m not getting turned on.

I lay next to my wife, listening to her breathing until it evens out and slows, ensuring she is asleep before I relax. But sleep eludes me because my brain wants to revisit Camp Carroll and hyperfocus on loose ends. I’m so distracted by my thoughts I don’t realize I’ve moved in bed until I hip check Eden.

She sighs before throwing her arm across my waist in her sleep. I suck in a breath freezing. Her head moves to rest against my arm. It’s Eden...it’s Eden, we’ve fallen asleep countless times with me inside of her after coming. It’s Eden.

Squirming she throws a leg over my thigh. I battle the impulse to shove her away in favor of another shower. I am in control. It’s Eden.

An image of Eden lying lifeless in front of me comes to mind. It’s realistic enough that I sit up suddenly. Her eyes fly open. “Shit...I’m sorry, Hutton.”

It takes seconds before I realize my hand is on her waist. Dropping it, I take a deep breath. “I’m going to take another shower.”

Leaning my head against the cool marble tiles in the shower, I close my eyes to another unbidden image of her lying in that summer rental years ago. No...it's not her. It's the one person I never wanted to think about again for as long as I lived. The door opens, but I keep my back to the shower door. "Hutton, can I come in?"

I reason that covered in soap is better if we're going to be close right now. "If you have to," I respond gruffly.

She lathers her body up with my cedarwood bodywash, her hair held up with one hand. I take a washcloth off a bar, offering to hold her blonde locks up while using it as a buffer.

"May I?" She squirts more soap into her hand before pointing at me. I relent, giving her the washcloth to use. The first caress across my chest makes my dick twitch to life, growing heavier as I harden. My balls draw up, needing release, while she pays attention to my ass with loving hands rubbing and squeezing.

"You did this on purpose, didn't you?" My voice is ragged as I lean against the wall to keep my footing.

By the time she's dropped the washcloth to fist my erection, I'm not obsessing over germs. She strokes until streams of cum are on her chest. She wipes her hand through it, mixing it with the soap suds.

"Feeling better?" Her cheeky little smile is enchanting. Strangely enough, I do feel more like myself. More in control.

Pulling her in, I say, "I don't know how you did that, but I'm ready for round two..."

Chapter Sixteen

Spray paint and a purpose

Keir

Mattisonhisway back home even though he was halfway to his office. Bristow and Harrison felt the need to call him about our neighbor Todd's latest move and our lovely wife's countermove. "You didn't need to bother him about this." He was crabby when he left, and this won't help.

Harrison walks our way, a grim look on his face as he gets off his cellphone. "Did you hear the news yet?"

*Source Creation Date: May 20, 2025, 4:52 am*

I've been awake less than an hour. Give me a damn break. No, the news doesn't factor into my day. I hear enough on the job to make me disregard most of what filters through to news outlets. "What's that?"

"Remember Dr. Michael Wells?"

How could I forget? How could any of us forget him? His involvement with Lawrence Hutton and the Realists became well publicized with his arrest. "Of course."

"Documents and directives were found in his offices through a search warrant done on that doctor from Cedars Sinai who was caught doing medical experimentation. Sounds like there is another Camp Carroll-type situation they detail."

My stomach dips as he tells me this.

Between the message on the thumb drive courtesy of the Realists and now this, that dark cloud hovering is growing in size. I'm not opposed to Hutton's idea of removing Eden and the kids to a safe location, with the caveat that we join them. What little time I get with them is too precious to cut off for an unknown time frame. "Were you involved with the preliminary investigation into the tip on Camp Carroll?" I've never asked Matt anything about that time period, knowing how it affected him.

Harrison rubs a hand over his chin as he sighs. "No. I was involved in the raid along with Matt, but the tip was mishandled. You really should ask M-" He stops himself when we see Matt approaching. Lowering his voice, he says, "Matt requested all the case files. You really should ask him about Halcyon."



Matt stops dead in his tracks.

Fighting for my life not to laugh as he turns to look at us baffled, I put my hand over my mouth. By the looks of it a lawsuit or aneurysm is going to happen soon. Thankfully, Eden will know just how to spin this. The large twelve-by-twelve-foot wooden sign is spray painted with: “Hey Neighbor, what are the loopholes that allow you to get away with f\*\*ing all those a\*\*holes?” To be fair, it sounds catchy. Plus, he’s only making himself look bad, not us. He’s well aware of the fact children live here. Eden took a can of spray paint from the garage, putting an X over “you” and replacing it with “me” sprayed above it, then added lines through letters of the swear words. If he decides to report the amendment to his sign, then he has to deal with the original message being harassment and a hate crime.

“What the hell is with this guy?” Matt says, his face flushing red. “I want the sign down. Now.”

Eden sees Matt with us through the kitchen window and comes rushing out of the house. “Hi, honey.” With quick steps she moves in front of him. “The sun is out. The birds are chirping. My common sense has returned. As Caleb would say, ‘I’m now walking with the Lord.’” She laughs uneasily at him. “Matt, honey?”

I get being furious; I’m not happy about what the guy did either, but his irritability lately is rooted in something else. “I’m sure I can persuade him to remove it.” Kind of. It’s still better that I make contact than him. “Cooler heads prevailing type thing...”

The crackpot in question comes into view on his riding lawn mower. When he sees us, he raises his hand over his head, the middle finger proudly shaking at us. What a miserable human being. “I’ll handle it,” Steve says shaking his head. “None of you should set foot on his property.”

It's decided we should all go inside while Steve and Dave pay him a visit. I snap a couple pictures of the sign on my phone before following Matt and Eden inside. "...day so far. What's going to happen next? What we need is a tall privacy fence." Matt paces around the kitchen ranting.

Eden's fingers curl through mine. I give her hand a squeeze back. The best thing to do when Matt is upset is to wait him out. Once he loses some steam, he checks his phone. "Damn it, I was waiting for that call. I have to run." He stops short, looking at Eden with a smirk. "You need to stay out of trouble." Kissing her quickly he then turns to me, "And you need to return Hutton's call." After laying a soft kiss to the side of my mouth in distraction, he's off.

Matt and I haven't had a private moment to talk for a couple weeks. I'm trying not to take it personally, but I am. There hasn't been intimacy, nor does he talk to me about any of his cases. There haven't even been any check-ins about mine. Steve mentioning I should talk to him about Camp Carroll shouldn't have felt impossible. Are we growing apart? "Hmmm, bye?" I say after he's out the door.

Halcyon. Why does that sound familiar? Fat chance I'll have an opportunity to ask Matt about it since he's putting in eighteen-hour days lately, then crashing in his room...alone.

"I wasn't trying to start a war with our neighbor but come on..." Eden blows on her coffee leaning back against the counter. She's wearing my favorite color on her: royal blue- it makes her eyes shimmer and spark. Her simple, flowy dress hits mid-thigh. A part of me wants to go in late, dragging her off to bed and being selfish for a while since I'm always sharing her in the bedroom. It's rare we spend time alone. "I know that look," she says teasingly.

"You have no idea how much I want to stay, but I'm meeting with a federal prosecutor in forty-five minutes." My parting kiss is no peck. Lifting her off her feet,

my lips prod hers as our tongues collide. Left short of breath, she pulls at my arm as I start to turn to leave. “Tonight?”

Please say yes.

She dumps the rest of her coffee in the sink winking at me. “You better believe it. Just us?”

“God, yes.”

I’ll take the bitching from Blaine; he can sleep solo for one night. His selfishness doesn’t trump my need for our wife.

## Chapter Seventeen

Sweet friendships refresh the soul

Caleb

Strains of the choir’s last hymn drift down the hallway to the meeting room.

The space is open. Children’s drawings are taped to one wall, a tray of stale-looking cookies is on the counter, and beat-up folding chairs are set up around a wobbly-looking table. Becca waves at me from where she’s seated with a Bible open in front of her.

I hadn’t bothered to bring a Bible with me, not even sure if I’d go to the adult ministry after. “Caleb, what a nice surprise.” Becca pulls the chair out next to her. “I’d hoped you would come.”

The elderly male leading the study stands near a sink putting his weight on a cane.

He's nodded my way in the past, but I've never spoken to him. When he begins to talk with a lisp, I lean forward like it will help me understand him better. "We' come, wets gwo ower..." I find myself hoping he's not doing all the talking today, then blush at the mean thought crossing my mind. It's a challenge to make out what he's saying. Thank God Blaine isn't here with me.

*Source Creation Date: May 20, 2025, 4:52 am*

Next to me, Becca begins to giggle under her breath. Relieved I'm not the only person finding some humor in the situation, I smile at her. The other five people in the room have their heads down scanning over the topic verse. The only way I can decipher what's happening is Becca pointing out the highlighted verse. "And whatever you ask in prayer, you will receive, if you have faith" (Matthew 21:22).

If you have faith. My prayers lately have turned into pleas. One constant is a prayer asking God to move in Eden's heart, that she would suggest coming with me to church. But she seems certain on the subject, telling me organized religion is too cult-like for her taste.

We take a break halfway through the study. I'm bored out of my mind. There are no deep or thought-provoking insights. Other than the leader of the group, Becca is the only other person who speaks up. Being my first time, I don't want to jump in. "Your wife didn't make it?"

"I didn't ask her to come with me."

Becca bites her thumbnail while looking down at her Bible. "Oh? Why not?"

I could give reasons why Eden isn't here. Tell her my wife thinks I've traded the FLDS Holy Brotherhood for The Church of the Good News, or my wife doesn't believe in God because her childhood made her distrust blind faith.

Instead, I say, "She's having a hard time lately. Coming here would just add to it."

"Church is a place to lay your problems down. To give them over to God," Becca

says with wonder in her voice. “I’m so sorry she doesn’t feel that way. It must be tough on you.”

I wouldn’t describe it like that. I’d love to know Eden believes in God’s salvation, in an afterlife. Sharing this part of me with her would make me feel more secure in our family. But I don’t feel like I’m suffering.

Becca continues, “You said she’s having a hard time. Is she sick? Sorry, I suppose that’s a bit personal. I don’t mean to pry.”

My friends...scratch that, my brothers Matt and Keir must be rubbing off on me. It does feel too personal. I change the subject as nicely as I can. “That’s not it. No. Tell me about where you grew up.”

I learn Becca is the same age as me, and she moved here from her parents’ animal rescue in Indiana after leaving an abusive ex-boyfriend. She talks and I listen. I tell a couple of stories about the kids. “...then he asked what the ticking sound was in my truck. I told him it was the turn signal so other cars know we’re going to turn. He tells me they’re never going to hear that...”

“You’re so funny,” Becca says laughing. “You really are.”

We find ourselves whispering and talking throughout the last part of the study when the leader asks people to pair up for an activity. We are being asked to share a Bible verse we like. “Mine would be ‘Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends,’” Becca says. “I miss my friends from home so much. But...we’re becoming friends, right?”

It feels good to have a friend my age who isn’t part of my family. “Yeah, of course.”

“Your turn. What Bible verse would you choose?”

Mulling it over, my brain latches onto the memory of studying the Bible with my half brothers and sisters. Being made to memorize parts cherry-picked by my uncle, the prophet, warning of destruction, death, and suffering if we didn't obey. None of it was particularly liked by me. Then I remember a verse I do like. 'So do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with my righteous right hand.' From Isaiah 41:10.

Walking to my truck with Becca, she asks if she can text me information about a concert the church is having next month. I give her my number, telling her if she wants help locking up again to call. We live fifteen minutes from the church. "Thanks again for coming to ministry group. You made it so much better," she tells me before saying goodbye.

My heart feels lighter. It wasn't the group; it wasn't even the scripture; it was knowing I have a new friend with so much in common with me.

## Chapter Eighteen

No wistful pilgrimage

Hutton

HorizonWellnessCenter, built on the grounds of Camp Carroll, is the last place I ever want to set foot again. With Eden working here, though, I don't have a choice. Steeling myself for the drive past the unused cinder-block rows of housing surrounding grassy commons where eighty-six cult members were slaughtered close to seven years ago, I avert my eyes. They were poisoned, then had their throats slashed. I was one of those people-the lone survivor.

I look in the rearview mirror at the thickened pink raised skin across my neck. The scar. A daily reminder I cheated death. Or, at least, I was made to believe I did so I

could be weaponized against their enemies.

But they didn't think I'd ever find my Eden. They didn't think I'd save our kids.

I can't thank the FBI for much, but the bumbling they did when I was in protective custody put me at the same place as Eden that summer seven years ago at the original Horizon Wellness Center in Illinois. Matt's underestimating me at every turn gave me space to pull away mentally. The ghosts on these grounds have no hold on me.

Not anymore.

Harrison, Bristow, and Matt are meeting with the sheriff about our neighbor. I'm in favor of taking a different, more effective route with the man-force him out financially since he's renting from a trust. But I was overruled. For now.

Not wanting Eden driving to work on her own, I dropped her off. Now back to pick her up at the end of the day, I need to take this opportunity to show her hidden areas on the property. Places to hide, to get away if needed. The threats could be nothing, but the anniversary of the killings is eight days away.

With purpose I stride into the main building that looks more like a ski lodge than a mental health facility. Typically, I make it a point to move quickly, staring blankly at anyone who makes eye contact. A look of challenge keeps most people away; not a lot of people dare engage in pleasantries that way.



*Source Creation Date: May 20, 2025, 4:52 am*

“...could not stop saying it. Sure, I was a real joy to be around.” Eden laughs lightly before going on, “We should be able to do that. I appreciate it.”

Filling the doorway, I see her at her desk on the phone. A small smile plays at the corner of my lips as I take her in, dressed in a fitted white dress shirt, black dress pants, and heels. She fingers the chain of the gold necklace the kids gave her for Mother’s Day last year. When she looks up at me, the grin lighting up her face makes all the worries I have fall away for a few moments.

“I need to wrap this up, but we’ll meet tomorrow and go over the treatment plan for him. You’re the best, bye.” Once she’s disconnected, she clasps her hands together on the desk, giving me her full attention. “You’re early.”

“I want you to come with me.” Holding my hand out, I tip my head toward the door at the end of the hall. “I need to show you something.”

She makes a face at me. “You already showed me the bunker near the abandoned labs, the tunnel running from the lab to the old parking ramp, the crawlspace in the ramp, and the old guard shack emergency hatch. What more could there be?”

When we built, I should say, when the foundation I started rebuilt Horizon Wellness Center, many of the old structures remained intact and untouched. I didn’t want to cover what amounted to a gravesite. A memorial was erected near the lab building, and most of the other buildings were cleared out and locked up tight. “I know. I never wanted to bring you to this particular place. It’s...unsettling.”

“Super,” she cracks with an eyeroll. “Let’s skip it then. I’d rather head home.”

I would, too. But preparing her for the worst-case scenario is necessary, even if it means I'm stepping back into my nightmares.

Walking hand in hand to the back exit of the building, we pass Dr. Wallen. When he tries to stop us, his attention is snagged by a thin, pale woman with a third eye either tattooed or drawn on her forehead.

"There is an old house near the lake." I point in the distance to where a part of the roof can be seen through the thick trees. "That's not where we're going but use it for a reference."

"Little bird, how fast can you run?"

I'm startled by the memory, her scratchy, babyish voice ringing out. But I can't let it stop me. "If, for any reason you need to hide in a place no one else knows about, look for that roof and head toward it. Come on." I give a light tug to her hand before we're making our way through the brush and trees. The late afternoon sun obscured by the woods isn't helping with the clawing alarm growing in my chest.

I swore I'd never set foot in this space, condemning it to the far recesses of my mind. A bird call in the distance makes Eden jump. "We're almost there."

"Stop, little bird, turn back."

It could've been the human skull nailed to the tree or the fading Realist symbol on the rusting door hanging on by its hinges. Maybe even the way the atmosphere feels darkly charged. Eden lets out a scream, pulling her hand away as she stumbles backward. I should've warned her, but I forgot just how...ghoulish this place is.

The shed no one left alive, with the exception of us, would know about.

It would appear at first glance to have melted into the rocky base of the hill, overgrown trees shrouding most of the roughly hewn wood slats. They don't conceal the dark blood splatter staining a portion of the door, though.

I can't make myself enter, the air leaving my lungs in a fell swoop.

"Little bird, fly away. They'll get you," her soft childlike lilt warns me. Suddenly, another voice pounds in my head...the malicious snarl unmistakable.

"They've been dying to meet you."

"Hopefully, you'll never need to come here. Let's get back. Let's go." My panic causes me to move Eden a foot back before grabbing her hand, doing double time back to the main building of the center.

Eden's voice is quivering when she asks, "Hutton, w-what was that?"

I can't talk about this right now. Memories press down on me, the voice awoken in my head making me want to rage. This was a bad idea. Her terrible, taunting nature digs into my thoughts. I neglected showing Eden the second spot, which would've taken us through the shed, but there was not a chance in hell I was stepping any closer, much less inside.

"H-Hutton?" Her hand grips mine tightly as I pick up the pace to get back.

"Hell...that place is hell. But no one else knows about it. I hope you never need to use it." I kiss her hand before looking her in the eye. "Just in case. It's just in case."

That was my tormenter's "special" place where, in demented fits of rage, she'd beat and torture me. Hell on earth. She'd use anything learned about me in testing against me. The physical beating was the least of it.

## Chapter Nineteen

### Worst nightmare

#### Eden

Everything this morning feels off. From Weston missing the bus because he had to check on Petunia, the goat who is recuperating from a leg surgery, to Harrison and Bristow discovering trees the neighbor has been cutting down near the property line. Blaine is giving everyone the silent treatment, Hutton is avoiding any discussion about the shed of horrors on the center's property, and...simply put, my anxiety has me distracted.

*Source Creation Date: May 20, 2025, 4:52 am*

“Get your backpack, Wes. I need to find my keys. Where did I put them?” I just had them in my hand. “We need to leave soon.”

“Okay, Mommy. Can I give this to Petunia first?” He holds up a banana. This kid...I swear his compassion is a complete wonder. With his sweet angelic smile, he adds “I’ll be fast.”

“Wes, honey, you were already out there. That’s how you missed your bus to begin with.”

Caleb walks in from the living room shaking his head. “No more treats. You gave her an apple when you woke up. Mom’s right, you’re going to be late if you don’t go get your backpack.”

“Mornin’, angel,” Caleb says before kissing the top of my head. “I can bring Wes to school if you want. I’m not needed at work for a couple of hours.”

It’s tempting, but the school is on my way, and I can drop into the counselor’s office regarding Zinne’s refusal to leave the classroom for free time. “I’ve got it.” Finally finding the keys I left inside the refrigerator when I grabbed my coffee creamer, I shake my head muttering, “Unbelievable.”

Peeking out the kitchen window, I see Wes galloping around with a stick, still no backpack in sight.

Caleb looks over my shoulder. “I’ll move him along. At this rate, he should be at school by lunchtime.” He chuckles under his breath. “Before I forget, Zeb has a temp.

I know he's teething, but he could be getting sick. I laid him back down after his bottle. Hutton said he'll keep an eye on him after I leave." I'm thankful he's able to break away from work to do it. I have a full day of patients today, and Zeb can't go to my grandmother if he's not feeling well.

I set my purse, messenger bag, and keys down. "I'm just going to look in on him. Be right back."

"I'll round our kiddo up." Planting a kiss to the side of my head before he walks out the door, Caleb adds, "This may take a few minutes."

Likely. Weston can turn any task into a twenty-minute ordeal. He goes on side quests, starts to relay stories, and, before you know it, he's changed into his karate outfit to show you, his kicks. Which I wholeheartedly love about him, but it makes schedules tough.

With a flushed face and little snorts from congestion, Zeb is asleep. I run my hand over his forehead, smoothing his fine, white-blond hair away. Warm to the touch, it's clear he's not feeling well. I make a mental note to call and make an appointment for a doctor's visit.

I'm checking the time on my cell phone as I'm descending the stairs when it rings. Keir's name lights up on my screen.

"Did you see your flowers this morning?" he asks. I was greeted by a huge bouquet of flowers on the kitchen counter, a mix of two dozen red roses, white lilies, and daisies with assorted greenery. Stunning.

"I did. Warner was trying to feed them to the dog." I love hearing his laugh ring out. "What's the occasion?"

“Does there need to be one?”

We continue to talk while I pull on a pair of flats, pocket my keys and take a last look at the flowers. “Love ya, but I need to go. I have a six-year-old to deliver.”

Caleb is leaning against the side of the barn on his cellphone. “Where’s Weston?”

“Wasn’t he in the house grabbing his backpack? He said he would be right out.”

Ugh...I turn around to go back inside, calling for him as I go. “Weston!?” Racing around the house calling his name, I double-check his bedroom, growing irritated with him.

Caleb opens the back door and calls, “Eden? He’s not in the barn or the animal pen. I’m going to check the treehouse. He and Zach were playing there yesterday, so maybe he left his bag there.”

After fifteen minutes of going back through the house and finding his backpack on the floor in front of the family room sofa, I’m feeling slightly sick. I race back outside to find Caleb coming back alone from the treehouse.

Weston wanders off when he gets caught up playing but it’s not like him to ignore us calling for him.

This time is different.

He knows not to leave the property without telling one of us.

My heart quakes as I see his little redPaw Patrolsneaker in the ditch. “Caleb? Caleb!”

Running toward the road, I look over my shoulder as he races behind me. “Call

Hutton...get Hutton, please.”

To whatever power runs this show on earth, please don't do this. Not again. We won't survive it.

## Chapter Twenty

Palpable pain



Matt

This meeting should've wrapped up fifteen minutes ago. Instead, we've taken the path of regulation violations the state agencies committed when handing off the last copycat killing. "All I'm saying is the ninety-nine percent effort with one percent results is a bullshit waste of time. Nothing has been streamlined. Nothing has been cohesive."

When the police captain attempts to speak, I add, "Not to mention it shouldn't take four hours to make contact with us when your investigator requested it." Running my hands through my hair then gripping the back of the seat in front of me, I take a deep damn breath. I'm agitated, really fucking over the lack of follow-through.

Six killings in four states. We're no closer to any answers than we were on day one.

"Agent Scholl, I will personally call you directly with any updates," the captain says with a sheepish look on his face. "In real time."

My name is called out as I'm walking back to my office, going over patterns from the killings in my head. "Scholl? Hey...Matt." My secretary, seeing she's got my attention, jumps up with a frantic look on her face. She is usually unflappable, so this can't be good.

"Yes?" I'm dreading her response since I have a list of things a mile long that need my attention.

"Call home. Right away."

Pulling my silenced phone from my pocket, I have several missed calls from Caleb, Hutton, and other local numbers I don't recognize. Not one from...fuck. Fuck. Nothing from Eden?

We should've acted sooner on the threats Eden's been getting. If something's happened to her, I'll never forgive myself. Goddamnit. I fight back tears before I know if my suspicions are right.

She's been in danger. Why the hell haven't I stayed closer to home?

Before I can dial anyone back Harrison's number comes up as an incoming call. "Matt? You need to come home. Get here quickly if you can. Your son is missing...Weston is missing."

The news hits me like a bomb going off.

I've been focused on Eden as a target, but if they grabbed one of our children...

There isn't a way I could've prepared for this.

I'm on the phone with Harrison while sprinting to my vehicle. "What does that mean...missing? What were you and Bristow doing? The cameras...Have you looked at the cameras?"

"Keep your head clear, Matt. We'll find him." He doesn't answer the questions I shoot at him. "Get here safely."

My head is reeling. Where could he be? Would he venture onto our neighbor's property again? Or did he go across the road to the vet clinic to check on the animals in the kennels? Would he get in a stranger's vehicle?

We've had numerous safety talks with the kids. Weston more than the others because he's endlessly curious and gets carried away by whims.

I can't let myself consider he may have been abducted. That doesn't happen under the watchful eye of FBI agents, a father overly concerned with safety who puts cameras all over, a mother whose brother disappeared at eight years old...it doesn't. Does it?

My fervent prayers, bargaining with God, and fighting back an onslaught of tears last until I pull into the driveway. Four police cruisers, two unmarked FBI squads, and a dozen or so people with two K9s are all in front of the house.

Agent mode kicks in immediately, barking orders and taking charge. If I let myself think like a father, I'm going to be worthless. I'll crumble completely. Harrison sees me stalking toward the house and heads me off. "Hutton is pulling up every camera feed, and Bristow is speaking to your neighbor. We have a search team organized..." He rattles off information while I search for Eden in the crowd.

"Where's my wife?"

He scratches his head frowning. "Uh, look I tried to reason with her, but she wouldn't listen...She's out in the woods looking for Weston. Keir went looking for her."

"I wouldn't wait around, either. You and I both know time is crucial. Where are Blaine and Caleb?"

He waves away one of the police officers before telling me Blaine is with Hutton, and Caleb is at the vet clinic searching every nook and cranny with members from his church.

"What happened? Tell me what happened," I say to Steve through clenched teeth.

He relays Wes missed the bus because he was in the animal enclosure checking on Petunia and giving her a treat. Steve and Dave were on a foot patrol around the perimeter of the property when their phones alarmed because three cameras near our neighbor's property had been damaged. They found the trees down and were dealing with that. "It was around half past seven this morning when we found the trees. Made contact with the guy after pounding on his door for ten minutes. I suppose we dealt with that until a bit after eight."

Then he goes on to tell me Hutton called him around half past eight, when they were gathering the destroyed cameras, asking them to get to the house because they couldn't find Wes. "At that point, he was streaming all the backlog of footage to figure out...to see if he had any footage of him leaving."

He doesn't say it, but we both know damn well.

*Source Creation Date: May 20, 2025, 4:52 am*

My son didn't wander away. He was taken.

Weston was kidnapped.

"What did he find?" I pivot to go inside, and Harrison follows me. "Jesus fucking Christ, I can't believe this is happening." I say the last bit to myself, but he hears me anyway.

"I know." Harrison claps a hand down on my shoulder. "I know, Matt. We'll get him back."

I lose some of my hope when Harrison says, "When Hutton accessed the videos, all cameras south-facing, where the road is, were blacked out at 8:16 a.m. A complicated code, designed by Hutton, overrode them. They don't go back online until 8:55."

"What the fuck do you mean designed by Hutton?" This makes no sense.

Shrugging a shoulder with a grimace Harrison replies, "I don't understand computer shit. He said a code he developed, originally for the FBI, not only appears to be hijacked, but they've altered it enough he can't tell where it is coming from. He said it's nearly fool proof."

"Nearly?" God, please help me here, I'm trying like hell to keep it together.

"Yeah, nearly. He said he'll do it, but it could take too long."

We walk into Hutton's office, which is crowded with people. I immediately note a

hole in his wall that wasn't there a couple days ago, a dented trash can on its side near a wall with a litter of garbage around it, and a smashed monitor lying near the desk. Looks about right. I've seen his rage...This would unlock that like nothing else, other than losing Eden.

Blaine says, "Sure. Looks like you're doing a lot and nothing at the same time." The uniformed officer's face reddens at his snide comment. "Have you talked to the nutcase next door yet?" He stands up taller with his arms across his chest. "All you've managed to do is stand here asking us the same questions over and over again."

I know I should intercede when Blaine gets started. He tends to let his mouth get him in trouble, but I'm more focused on finding Hutton in the throng of people huddled around his desk.

When Blaine spots Harrison and I, he abandons the officer to start in on us. "I see just how important having your agents here was. Couldn't even keep our six-year-old safe. Good plan." His eyes are reddened, drying tears on his cheeks. He pushes past me before I say a word. "I'm joining the search party. Fuck this pointless standing around with our thumbs up our asses. Fucking morons."

There's no sense trying to stop him.

I'd rather be combing the area with as many people as possible. I shout at him, "Make sure everyone has Wes's picture."

"That's already done," he yells at me, giving me his middle finger behind his back.

"...no, it doesn't. Cuts out, going black at 8:16 a.m., then back online at 8:55 a.m.," I hear Hutton explaining to a plain-clothes detective with gray hair. A county badge hangs off his belt. "The cameras were effectively shut down, and there is no getting

back footage the cameras didn't capture." His tone is flat, steady.

We make eye contact, and I see the agony. He's holding himself together carefully to get things done, but I recognize his pain. I feel his fucking pain.

"We have a timeline then," I add, coming to stand next to Hutton. "I'm one of Wes's dads...Matt Scholl." I shake the man's hand.

"Agent Scholl?" he asks, giving me a strong shake back. "We briefly met a few years ago on the Martinetto case. I'm sorry we're meeting again under these circumstances. I'm Detective Sam Nealy."

There isn't much to go on.

Bristow and Harrison can vouch for our wack job neighbor, they were with him over the property damage. The vet clinic to the south of our property, off the same road, doesn't open until mid-morning today. There were no staff there. They have an old camera that is grainy at best but is pointing toward the ground doing a great job of recording the gravel lot near the building.

His description is given: six years old, Caucasian male with dark brown hair, blue eyes, dimples, wearing a blue sweatshirt with light-blue stripes, black jeans, and one red Paw Patrol sneaker...the other recovered on our property. His picture is messaged to the search group's phones. We have neighbors, volunteers of the sheriff's department, family, and friends, a group of sixty-three people and two search dogs, all combing the surrounding five miles.

In my heart, I know he's not going to be found close by. If he's been taken by the person threatening Eden, they'll be long gone.

Our kids. I stop listening to Nealy's rundown of a press conference to turn away. We

need to tell the rest of the kids. But first...I need to see Eden.

“Has anyone seen Eden?”

Harrison speaks up. “Not since she went into the woods. Keir was only a few minutes behind her though.”

I keep dialing each of them rushing to the backside of our property. I need to get to Eden. In every missing child case, I’ve ever had the misfortune of being involved in, it’s the mother who is struggling the most. And for Eden this is going to bring back her brother’s disappearance.

Pocketing my phone since my calls are all going unanswered, I start to yell her name. “Eden?!”

Close to losing my voice from all the shouting, first to Eden and then Wes, I stop. I pick up the pace past the treehouse, where Weston used one of my ties to hang an action figure. The tears spill. I can’t keep it in anymore.



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*Source Creation Date: May 20, 2025, 4:52 am*

My sweet, fun-loving, energetic boy. My Weston.

What the fuck are we going to do?

Chapter Twenty-One

Torn allegiance

Keir

This can't be happening.

"Honey, hey...hey." I catch up to her as she runs at full speed past a property marker toward the creek north of us. "Eden." My voice is restricted by the tears I can't stop.

I left the house this morning after telling Weston I'd take him to his karate class tonight. "Really? Promise?" His fierce hug is followed by, "Can I give one of Mommy's flowers to my teacher? She was sad yesterday." His face lights up when I tell him he can before he skips off to pluck a white daisy.

It's normal that Weston would want to include others, be kind, giving, do thoughtful things...

As Eden slips further away calling for Weston, I bend over letting a roar of frustration and devastation loose. I know the statistics. If he isn't found within two hours...

The urge to vomit is so overwhelming, I almost buckle. My experience in child

trafficking only fuels my terror over what my son could be going through. We need to find him. My god, we have to find him. I straighten back up, pushing past the alarm. Faster than I've run in my life, I tear through the high grass toward the creek. "Eden?! Wes?! Weston?!"

Dissociating...I know I'm starting to because I'm shutting down emotionally. I'm moving through swaying grass that reaches my knees. My arms pump as I call out for Eden and Weston. I stop feet from the creek, the rocky edge more exposed due to the near drought conditions we've had for the last two months. The running water and the swish of the tree branches are the only sounds as I spin in a circle, hoping to catch sight of Eden.

This isn't happening...It's a dream. It's not real.

Not real.

I hear distant voices calling out to Weston, a chorus of desperation. A numb, surreal feeling starts taking over. I see Eden's footprints heading east along the muddied creek bed of the receded waters. "Eden!? Please stop, honey!" Don't stop...don't stop looking.

I finally catch up to her where the creek jags northeast. There is a fallen tree that makes crossing the creek necessary to continue. She's down on her knees sobbing. "Oh, baby." I fall to my knees next to her, pulling her into my arms. "We'll find him, we'll find him."

But what if we don't?

The world shrinks to a pinprick.

It's us, clinging to each other for dear life.

“My sweet boy...my baby boy,” she cries out through sobs. “Someone has him, Keir. He’s gone...”

I don’t respond, too choked with tears.

This isn’t real...it’s not real. Wake up, wake the fuck up.

Suddenly, Matt is steps away, a tormented look on his face. He swoops down, wrapping his strong arms around us both and burying his face in Eden’s hair. “This shouldn’t have happened...” He’s damn right it shouldn’t have. But this feels coordinated...the trees down, the cameras off...maybe even Wes missing his bus. We just don’t know yet.

Could this be the copycat killer? Is it the person threatening Eden? A person retaliating against Matt, Hutton, or me? Or is it all unrelated?

I clutch one of Matt’s forearms, and we share a look over Eden’s head. My normally unflappable, steady force of a husband looks...lost.

Matt talks us into going back to the house. There is a search party out, and Hutton is going through all the camera feeds for any hint of suspicious activity. We can be of more help there. Each step going back causes me to shut down, going numb piece by piece.

I never understood when a veteran agent would discuss the fatal flaw of making cases personal. I do now. All those cases we’ve worked undercover, behind the scenes setting up takedowns where children were being abused. I made them personal. It was revenge on evil people like the cult leader of XIX who used people for profit. Greedy, soulless motherfuckers who get off on controlling and breaking children.

But in doing so, I relied on disconnecting emotionally. My default reaction is coming

into play now. I'm in a fog.

I miss most of Matt's words to Eden, his arm still wrapped around her waist while we walk back. "...call them. Kathy will keep them with her. I have agents at their home. I don't think we should tell them exactly what's going on yet."

"What? What do you mean?" I shake my head. The encroaching fog is not clearing. I need to get a grip.

*Source Creation Date: May 20, 2025, 4:52 am*

“Kathy and Roger will pick the girls and Zach up, and they already have Warner and Zeb. I asked them not to say anything about Weston. If they ask where he is, they’re going to say he is busy. Just...that he’s busy.”

Eden’s mouth drops open, and I stop walking. “No.” Shaking my head I continue, “No, absolutely not. No.”

Eden sucks in a breath before she says, “They should know. We can’t lie to them.”

Matt turns to us. “I don’t want to scare them. We’ll tell them...just not yet.”

His need to protect people by withholding information is a dangerous trait. I’m not fond of it, and it’s bitten him in the ass before. “No. We tell them, all of us together, after school. Before they hear it from a classmate or the news.”

Eden’s crying again, a shaky arm wrapping around my waist as her head leans back against my chest. “I agree,” she says firmly. “No lying.”

I don’t even need to poll the other three adults in our family. Matt will lose.

Eden pauses near the gate to the animal enclosure, tears falling and her arms folding over her middle. “Matt, Keir.” Her voice is trembling. “Look.”

She bends down to pick up a piece of paper stuck in the mechanism. Her gasp causes us both to close in quickly. Matt takes it from her hand, showing me what’s written. It’s a white piece of standard paper with writing in block print: “One down. We will cleanse the Earth of you. Remember, we’re dying to meet you.” The last of the true

Realists.

Matt takes the paper by the corner edge, careful not to contaminate the evidence further. A slew of curse words unfurl from him. I'm dumbstruck.

There's no mistaking what's happened now.

They've claimed responsibility.

The Realists...the cult we'd determined died out in the years since Number One was killed. They've rallied. They've come after Eden and her offspring.

Great, gulping sobs overtake Eden as she sinks to the ground. My reactions feel stymied by my inability to put it all together. As I'm reaching her, Matt already has her cradled in his arms, the note pinched between his fingers and is stalking back to the house. "Get Harrison and Bristow." He looks back at me. "We have a problem. Someone in the search party is a part of this."

"I will. But not before I get someone on Waverly and Warner." We're already searching for one child; there is not a chance in hell I'm risking them, too.

## Chapter Twenty-Two

Who thought this was okay?

Hutton

The blood in my veins rages in agony. I'm barely holding my anger in. We should've been more careful. Hell is coming to their doorstep. They've messed with the wrong family. Turning to face Matt, I spot the picture Weston drew of ninjas and goats I'd taped to one of the computer modems.

“The FBI will only get in the way,” I say through clenched teeth. “I’ll find whoever is responsible and when I do no government agency will be looking over my shoulder.”

If they think they can hide behind code I created as a type of insult toward me, breach our security by dropping a threat here, and lay a single finger on our kid...they don’t know me.

I was built for destruction. That’s my whole purpose.

Matt pushes the bagged note toward me on the desk in my office. “This is what we’re dealing with. Do you understand they’ve been killing people connected to the Lassiter and Bradford families? Making threats, letting us know they know where to find all of us...work, home. They have your code figured out. What am I missing? You think you’re going to single-handedly stop them without the FBI’s involvement?” The vein in his forehead is sticking out, his jaw tensing and face flushing. “There’s bravery, then there’s stupidity. The more of us working on this, the better.”

Is this why he had to talk to me alone? He’s mistaken if he thinks I’ll comply; I don’t answer to him. Not as a husband to Eden, not as a father to Wes, and definitely not because he is a high-ranking FBI agent.

I’m accountable to Eden and the kids, but I know my wife would approve of any means necessary to return Weston. We have the unique displeasure of learning the hard way - it’s us or them. They believe we’re a danger to society? Then they must be eradicated. Our blood and genes aren’t the problem, it’s us knowing the truth. They aren’t able to profit from our blood or genes. We took down their leader, but there was more to Camp Carroll than Number One.

I have no problem taking the lives of anyone involved in this. The last of the true Realists have no idea the monster they’re unleashing.

Matt is still mulling over my refusal to comply with him when I leave my office, only to find more random people milling around. “Harrison,” I bark. “Get these people out of our home. Now.”

Thoughts appear to be processing, but he’s not moving fast enough for me.

I’m tired of playing nice with agents who have been pointlessly roaming around the property lately. “Listen up, if you aren’t a member of this family or have a badge...get the fuck out.”

Matt mumbles, “There was a better way to do that. So much for the goodwill of our neighbors.”



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My words do the trick regardless. Several people scatter toward the front door. I take mental note of each, a possible culprit among them. It was lazy of the agents and officers to allow people inside our home. They were all briefed on the threats. But by all means...come on in. Matt and Keir would know better, but it all happened before they returned from finding Eden.

We need to make our circle smaller.

Much smaller.

Trust. No. One.

Camera footage from overnight into the morning hours only showed Harrison, Bristow, our neighbor cutting down trees at the northeast corner of the property, four passing cars, and various wildlife. No suspect to hunt for. I've managed to get plate numbers from the vehicles in case they stopped off camera range and someone returned on foot. "These need to be followed up on." I hand the list to Matt.

He pockets the paper with a nod. "Does the property west of the vet clinic have any security cameras? The ...What's their name again? The Paulsons?"

"Harrison was checking on it."

I hear Blaine bitching at Bristow, and I fully support his efforts. We don't always agree, but I understand the frustration right now.

When I see Eden coming out of the bathroom, we make eye contact from across the

room. Moving towards each other with haste, I pick her up in a hug. “I’m going to find every person responsible and make them pay...every one of them.”

They have the worst enemy imaginable.

One who has blood on his hands already.

“Find Weston. Find him first,” she says in a scratchy voice through her tears.

“I will.” In the meantime, I need to ensure they can’t get to her or the other kids. “You need to go into hiding. I know you’re g-”

She cuts me off. “No. We stick together. We stay together here. If they know where we are, they can bring Wes back,” she continues her eyes wide. In a plaintive appeal, she says, “They found us before, they will again. We stay. All of us together.”

She thinks they’ll return Weston?

I don’t. I expect they will use him to torment us, make demands...but if we don’t get to Weston soon, we’ll lose him.

## Chapter Twenty-Three

Oh, I don’t like that verbiage

Blaine

“Wewerejustgivingout some information to the volunteers. Don’t hate the people trying to help,” Bristow says with his hands on his hips.

“Huh, well I don’t give a fuck.” He flinches away from me while I circle the

room. That's right, you bureaucratic piece of shit. "Take a seat. You're not important enough to hate. I said, sit your motherfucking ass down." In fact, besides our family, nothing else matters.

A rising panic is making me act out. Old habits are starting to itch at the back of my mind. I realize this, but right now I don't give a damn about my lapse in manners.

"Now, get on your fucking phone and find out who you've let inside our home. While you're at it, find out where those agents you've sent to the elementary school are. They better take their jobs more seriously than you and Inspector Gadget over there." I nod my head toward Harrison.

I hadn't expected my arrival back home to grab my forgotten wallet to turn into the worst day of my damn life. But it has. Initially, I thought we'd come across Weston coming back from the vet clinic. Since he hadn't been anywhere Caleb or Eden had checked.

Hutton's fury over the camera footage missing during the chunk of time he must've been grabbed would've freaked me out more if I weren't already spiraling. Our son would never willingly get in a stranger's vehicle, and he'd never wander far from home. He was kidnapped.

My beautiful ball of energy, my Weston.

The same kid who stuns me daily with his observations and antics. The same kid I predicted would be a leader of men, a changer of lives one day. The same kid that never misses an opportunity to give me a hug and say, "I love you, Daddy."

With each passing minute, my anguish pounds away at my hope. It hits me... We've lost our Weston. Once the crying starts, silent at first, angry growls working out of me as the waterworks won't stop. I can't rein it in.

Someone is going to pay.

If Hutton wants to rip them apart, I'll be standing at his side to help.

*Source Creation Date: May 20, 2025, 4:52 am*

“B.” Eden grabs my hand. “He’s just doing his job.”

I want to say he’s doing it poorly, but my mouth snaps shut with one look at her face. The past resurfaces in my mind. The absolute chaos she went through. Her brother. Oh, my fucking...

“Ed, fuck.” I crush her to my chest as she starts weeping, her body shaking.

Life isn’t fair. Not that I ever dreamed it was, but she’s overcome things no one should ever have to. Now we’re parents of a missing child—a child who was taken from us.

Apeshit, batshit, chickenshit, ratshit...shiiiiiiit.

If the drugs I picked up at school weren’t still locked in the compartment in my car, I’d be popping a few. How the ever-fucking fuck am I supposed to do this sober? Weather this loss...Jesus fuck...we’re not losing him. I can’t think that way. I can’t do it. I can’t do this without pills.

I can’t do life without my son.

Picturing him at breakfast sends a pang of pain through my heart. Squirming in the chair next to me, humming, he looks up at me with a mouthful of Cheerios. “Wanna hear a joke?”

I chuckle at him, since he’ll tell it either way. “Sure, buddy.” His giggles when he tells it are funnier than what he’s saying

“How do you get a squirrel to like you?” Zach starts to laugh too, knocking into his bowl of cereal. “Act like a nut.”

I can’t do this.

Matt herds us all into the kitchen, away from everyone else. Clearly none of us are handling this well. Caleb blows his nose amid a cry of distress, Keir looks like he’s in shock, Matt is getting angrier by the second, and Hutton looks like he’ll commit murder without much provocation. Then Eden...my queen, my Ed. Her face and neck are red and splotchy, and the tears track through her makeup, smearing her mascara. She’s trying to get words out. “I, I.-just we...we have to.” I keep rubbing her back, but it’s not helping.

Right now, we’re doing nothing to help this situation. Not one of us.

“Does anyone remember anything strange about this morning? Do you remember seeing anything?” Matt asks his voice stern. What the fuck? Does he think he can talk to us like he’s a king-shit FBI agent? It’s not like our family-his fucking family isn’t being fucked with.

Caleb answers, “What do you mean?”

“We’ve all answered these questions already,” I say with irritation. “Agent Scholl,” I add sharply.

Hutton glares at him. “There seems to be little doubt about what happened. Let’s cut the bullshit and figure out how to proceed.”

I look down the hallway and out the front window seeing someone from the police department speaking to a man wearing a windbreaker with a news station logo on it. The fucking media. On our property. “Can we get them out of here?”

No one answers me; they're busy arguing about what we need to do.

"...waiting to get more information on the registered owners of those four cars."

"We can't wait. We don't have time to sit and wait," Keir responds to Matt.

"How do we make contact? With them...with the Realists?" Eden asks, wiping the tears away. "We need to establish contact, right?"

My mind shuts it all out. I'm trying to pick through the mess of my thoughts. I promised Wes when he was a baby, I'd always put him first. That, as his dad, I'd fight for him against everything and everyone. It was no accident we found him. I'm keeping my promise, buddy. I'll keep it.

Right now, that means keeping those pills I want locked up. Right now, that means fighting for him.

Matt's voice shakes me from my thoughts. "...now. Hey, Blaine. Blaine, are you ignoring me?"

I answer angrily, "If I want to, I will. I will ignore you so fucking hard, you'll doubt your own existence. The two dumbasses you assigned here managed to fumble this one. Our son is the casualty of their ineptitude. So, don't talk down to me. Don't pick fights with me. And don't fucking act like you're suddenly in charge here."

Matt's phone starts ringing. After glancing at it, he pauses before closing his eyes. He answers, "This better be important." I keep watching him as he turns away from us, his voice lowering.

Then I look over at Keir, who is busy discussing a press conference with Caleb and Eden. He meets my eye, his pain clear to see. The past he's suffered is playing in his

head, I'm sure. I want to give him comfort, but I'm held back. We're on uneven footing.

“That’s...I understand. I’ll bring the family.” What in God’s name is he fucking discussing, and with whom? We’re in the middle of the biggest emergency imaginable and he’s shooting the breeze with some jackass on the phone?

He ends the call, placing his phone in his pocket. He looks at Keir, holding his wrist up and tapping it twice.



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I have no idea what that could mean, but Keir's hands drop to his sides, eyes widening. It means something to him. Is it some secret FBI thing? Possibly. All I know is secrets in this family, especially right now, are not cool. "What are you doing?" I mimic his movement.

Matt looks at me blankly. "Nothing."

Oh, I fucking think not.

I step close to him, gripping his arm as I lean in to whisper, "If you know something about Weston's disappearance and you don't tell the rest of us..."

There's an implied threat but I should really just say it. "...you're going to be the cause of it all ending. This family, this relationship...I'm not fucking kidding."

"Blaine, the last thing we need is infighting. Get a grip, stop being an ass, and" he takes a deep breath, "cooperate with the authorities. Please."

I stiffen when he gives me a hug, whispering, "Weston is depending on us."

### Chapter Twenty-Four

Hold on. Hold on. Hold on.

Caleb

"Heavenly Father, please protect him." Closing the door, I lean my head against it.

Praying with everything in me, I continue, “Keep him safe from harm. Please, God.”  
My rough whisper cracks.

This is my fault. He was looking for me.

I found him outside talking to Petunia through the fence, reminding him he needed to get his backpack. Then he could check on the kennels with me later. He tried to negotiate, wanting to visit the kennels immediately. Instead, I conceded that if he got his school bag, he could come get me in the barn, where I would be getting feed for the animals, and give a couple sugar cubes to the horses.

Then, my phone rang. Becca called to ask if I might be able to stop at the church before work because she needed some help. I wandered away from the barn as we spoke, feeling embarrassed in part that I felt I needed to hide the conversation from Eden.

But it wasn't wrong that I gave her my number, was it?

Becca asked if I could look inside my truck to find a folder she'd accidentally set on my seat while we were talking after the study. She needed numbers from a receipt. I spent almost fifteen minutes running to get the keys from the barn office, then into the garage to my truck, where the folder was on the floor of my passenger side. I couldn't find the specific receipt. I told her she must not have it in there.

She insisted. After I'd spent minutes going through the pile, she suddenly remembered it was for a different store.

I wasted far too much time doing that.

The same period of time Wes disappeared in.

I'm too ashamed to I was on the phone with someone I don't know well. A woman.

Even if my intentions aren't impure, I'm starting to gather hers might be.

Or she's just someone looking for a friend, and I'm letting all the paranoia around us affect that.

The kids are here with their great grandparents. Kathy is full of theories about what is happening, while Roger is full of as much anger as Hutton.

Waverly clings to Blaine's side, and Zinne won't leave Zach or Zeb alone. Eden won't put Warner down. Denial. I'm in denial over Weston's disappearance. But his absence is loud, his energy gone like water thrown over a flame. Zachariah has been crying as he carries around Roscoe, Wes's teddy bear.

My heart is broken.

I return from the bathroom to sit with Eden. She's holding Warner to her chest, but he's wiggling to get free. "Angel..." Without another word, I take him from her, releasing him to waddle after the dog.

Eden stays silent, grabbing my hand. We watch all the activity around us. The blaring television airs the news, and Matt, wild-eyed, mutes it to keep the kids from hearing it. But Waverly already caught it. Her bawling makes the hurt in my heart amplify. "Is he dead? My brother isn't dead, is he?" she asks her great grandmother. Waves is curled into her side, her hand holding Blaine's.

Matt kneels in front of her. "Sweetheart, we'll find him. Okay? I don't want you to think like that. We've got a lot of very smart and determined people looking for him."

The only person fitting that description in my book is Hutton. Thank the good Lord,

he left quietly earlier, texting me, Eden, and Blaine, he was following up on a lead and not to tell Matt, Keir, or the other law enforcement. They'd only get in the way.

I can't sit still. Following Warner around while taking a sleeping Zeb from Kathy, I keep moving. The moment I take my attention from their needs, reality hits. We're missing a child. Weston isn't here. We have no idea where he is, with whom, or what's being done to him.

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So, I move. I make food no one wants (but Warner decorates the kitchen floor with). I put Lego bricks together with Zach. I ask Waverly to show me the video from her dance recital. I discuss baseball with Roger.

It's not until I find Keir crying in Wes's room that I sit back down. Hugging him one-armed against me, I say, "What if ...The boys keep talking about ninjas in the woods. Do you think we've had someone in the woods watching us? That they saw something?"

Keir's head jerks to me. "I need to talk to Zach." With purpose, he stands up, sliding his hand across the embroidered pillowcase cover and karate uniform hanging from his bed post. "I don't know why none of us ever questioned it before now, but their imaginations are so vivid. I just..." He inhales to clear his throat. "You might be onto something."

I keep hoping for direction from God, but I remind myself it's hard to hear God's voice when I've already decided what I want Him to say.

### Chapter Twenty-Five

By any means necessary...

Eden

Weswentmissinginless than twenty minutes.

Everything changed this morning in mere minutes...

If I wasn't distracted, if I didn't check on Zeb and just trusted Caleb's assessment, if I found Wes's backpack myself, if...

If I wasn't an abomination.

The revolting message left behind by his kidnapper only confirms all the signs I've ignored lately have resulted in this.

I tell myself to keep calm, because the kids are looking to us for direction. If we show how we're feeling, it'll add to the trauma.

That vicious voice in my head has gained momentum. Why did I think it was over, and we'd be allowed to live without more attacks?

Harrison asks if I need anything, but all I want to say is, Yes, my son back. Instead, I shake my head, biting my tongue. "Your next-door neighbor wanted me to pass along that he's sorry about Weston. I think the days of signs and craziness are over."

I can't count that as a victory right now.

Knowing Weston's not with us, and it's getting dark out...

I bend forward as I lose my composure. My baby is probably scared. It's dark, he's with a psycho...Please hold on, baby. Be alive. Be alive.

Keir kneels in front of me, handing me his phone. "It's Chris."

What little control I have left is gone with that. I take the phone, heading for the bathroom. "I don-" I can't get any more out.

"Mom and I are on our way. Sis...I can't believe this is happening. Your little guy is

going to make it. You hear me? Eden, listen to me. Sis, he's got your determination and his dad's ingenuity. We'll be there soon. My little nephew is coming home soon. Hear me?"

I'm not able to form the words I want to.

Will he come home?

I would give my life to have him home. Safe.

"Those Realist fucks have no idea the crew they're messing with," Chris says, sounding so much like his brother, Hutton. For a minute, I almost believe we'll win. Not only will we find my baby, but we'll wipe them off the face of the earth once and for all.

Then her voice rings through my mind, "You're nothing but an abomination. You were never meant to exist."

Minutes later, Keir finds me in the bathroom, my hairbrush stuck in my curly strands. I'm lying balled-up on the floor, overcome with grief, because I remember what I've been told before: A child not found in a stranger abduction within an hour or two...is likely dead.

"I love you, Mommy. I love you to the moon and back." His puckered lips blow me a kiss. "Forever and ever and ever." Weston crawls into bed when the door is unlocked to play with my hair. To tell me stories. To snuggle.

"Oh, sweetheart." The groan from Keir as he holds back tears only makes me cry harder. Together, we sit on the tiled bathroom floor, holding each other through it.

Blaine knocks at the door, opening it a crack. "Matt has news, can you c-" Seeing us,

he stops short. Quickly closing the door behind him, he comes to sit on the closed toilet lid near us. “Fuck this.” He hangs his head while wiping his cheek. “How the fuck is this happening?”



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By the time we join Matt, Harrison, Bristow, and Caleb, we're all cried out. Matt says, "They've followed up with the registered owners of the vehicles. A neighbor heading to work, an Amazon delivery driver, a teenager driving to the high school, and the last one...The one that could give us something is a blacked-out SUV. It's a Starlit rental vehicle out of New York City."

"Like an unmarked FBI squad?" Keir asks, fidgeting next to me. "My vehicle is part of the Starlit rental fleet and fits that description."

"It wasn't yours," Bristow says.

"Huh. Matt, do you think this is Camp Carroll all over again?" Harrison asks carefully. "If that vehicle is involved, and it's an FBI vehicle, they're not playing it safe. They want you to know..."

Hutton has never trusted the FBI. I only trust the two agents I love, and this doesn't help.

Matt is in a top-ranking position. How could the FBI play any part in this? He'd never put our kids in harm's way. Not willingly.

I try to keep up with the conversation, but I'm watching the muted television screen on the kitchen counter as an advertisement for a movie Weston wants to see comes on. My chest hurts as I'm flooded with the urge to scream at the top of my lungs. This is not okay! Stop this! He's a baby!

Bristow starts telling us how we should conduct ourselves in the coming hours,

days...however long this plays out for. He reminds us we have eyes on us, and the enemy is clocking our movements somehow. We don't want to incite more problems. We need to prioritize our safety. I take it he wants us to hide with our tails between our legs.

As a child, I became an expert in complacency, pleasing and invisible as a means of survival.

I left that part of me behind long ago. Each of them should know that by now.

"I appreciate your advice, but when it comes to my children, there is no limit to what I will do to keep them safe."

I will not shrivel up and stay quiet.

I will go kicking and screaming to find Wes.

To hunt down the people responsible for this nightmare.

"Anyone know where Hutton went?" Matt asks.

To Blaine's credit, he's kept his mouth closed to this point, only now talking back to Matt, Harrison and Bristow. "Thanks for the moving lecture." He gets up while squeezing my shoulder. "You'll have to forgive me for not giving one fuck what any of you have to say right now. Do your fucking jobs and bring Weston home to us. As for Hutton...He doesn't need your permission to look for our son." He flips them off with both middle fingers as he walks out of the room to join my grandparents and the kids.

I don't want us to fight with each other.

Knowing Blaine, he's lashing out because he's feeling helpless, but he's going to push Matt away. We have to stick together.

## Chapter Twenty-Six

A lot to unpack here

Keir

Matt's signal in the kitchen hasn't helped my frame of mind.

Two taps to the wrist-code sixty-seven.

When I was training for the FBI, Matt and I would have long conversations about trusting our guts and relying on one another to have each other's backs. We developed an inside code known only to us. In the event we're working a case, and it's determined it's been compromised-whether it's law enforcement agents, or other government officials who have proven dirty or untrustworthy- we'd give the signal.

Until now it's never been needed.

The number dialing him had been his ex-wife, who still works at the bureau with Internal Affairs. She called on one of the cell phones Hutton made untraceable, telling him the Jets are projected to win, and it should be a nice game with a temp of sixty-seven. His response indicated he'd let family know-family being me. She delivered the message in code in case one of them is being monitored to let us know the New York field office is compromised.

There is agency involvement with the Realists and what is happening to our family right now. The added insult is I can't let on we know a thing.

Matt and I are unable to tell our family.

I'm surprised when Matt lets on that a blacked-out SUV was seen on camera with a plate tracing back to Starlit Fleet. But Bristow and Harrison know that, too. If pointing out my unmarked squad matches that description also gives Eden, Blaine, or Caleb any clue about FBI involvement-then good. Keeping this from them is going to be miserable.

It gives me a margin of relief that Weston will not be harmed. If it's a choice between leverage for the FBI and a child sex trafficker or psychopath bent on spilling Lassiter or Bradford blood, I'll take the FBI.

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I don't understand why, though.

Why would they have anything to do with the Realists anymore? The unraveling years ago behind the government testing being done should've ended it all. Between prison sentences and mysterious deaths...it appeared done.

Could Matt's ex be wrong?

I'm navigating this with a strong layer of haze. The way I cope by shutting down isn't helping, it's not keeping away the paralyzing fear we won't be successful in getting our son back.

That we're already too late.

I also don't like how cagey Blaine is being about Hutton's whereabouts. When he left, doing his shady-ass dip out, we didn't realize. It's not the first time he's gone dark when he leaves with no phone, and we have no clue where he went. I won't press though...I know he's searching for Weston.

Unlike Matt, I don't care one bit if he uses force or causes harm to people in his way. Not this time. I'm a father first, agent second.

Harrison made a good point...If the FBI is involved, wouldn't they cover it up better? It's an amateur move to have the SUV on the camera and then cut out thirty-nine minutes of footage.

I pull Eden into my lap. She hasn't drifted to sleep despite her body being limp from

exhaustion. We're still holding vigil in the living room. Kathy put the kids to bed, who all opted to sleep in Wes's room. Even Zinnea, who at one point covered Waverly with a blanket.

Matt's pacing is getting on my nerves. Every few minutes, he's on the phone or texting various people. The tension between him and Blaine is just getting worse as the minutes tick by. He's glowering in a corner at Matt, occasionally making snide remarks.

But Caleb has me worried. He won't sit with us.

Cleaning, cooking, watching the kids, comforting us...He's not letting it sink in. That Weston isn't here.

And why he's not here.

His remark about the ninjas was insightful. Sadly, Zach told me when I asked him it was just pretending.

Eden pulls away, standing to walk up to the stair railing. Blaine is getting up to follow her but she's back after snagging Weston's favorite blanket, which is covered in lassoing cowboys, from the rail where it's draped, wrapping it around herself. He pulls her to him, whispering in her ear. She leans into him, tears falling again.

I want to fix it all, to take away the events of the day and watch her light up as the kids run her way. I want to make it better.

Matt has just left the room on the phone when Harrison sits next to me with a sigh. "This isn't looking good. It's been fourteen hours with no real direction." My stomach takes a dive. He's not wrong. The possibility that Weston comes home alive has reduced dramatically. "Got to ask...Did you ever ask Matt about Halcyon?"

Weird timing, but, okay, what's this about? "No. Can you just tell me what you know? I could Google it, but you'll understand if I tell you I'm not in the mood."

Putting his elbows on his knees, hands steeped, he says, "You won't find a thing on Google, kid. Three years ago, the government floated a project, approval hidden in hundreds of pages of a bill they were looking to pass on fiscal reform in the military. It was an FBI testing proposal. The terms of it were fairly vague. In the bill, I mean. But that project outline landed on Matt's desk. He called me in to have a look. Eerily familiar to what happened at Camp Carroll."

"Okay...that's terrifying. What happened?" "Don't beat around the bush please. I'm already not thinking clearly."

"Well, wish I could tell you." He looks at me through narrowed eyes. "I asked him about it a week later and he denied the whole exchange. Told me he never talked with me about anything like that. It was...To this day, I don't understand what happened. Figured if you asked, he'd tell you."

"Why are you telling me this right now?" I lean in and ask him quietly.

"I'm not accusing Matt of anything." He looks over at Eden, who's now balled up under Weston's blanket on Blaine's lap. "But if Halcyon was set up three years ago under his supervision-"

I open my mouth to stop his outrageous assertion, but he puts a hand up. "Just hear me out. If he got wrapped up in that, just like the agents with Camp Carroll did, everyone involved would be at risk if an oversight committee caught wind of it. They'd find a way to pull those agents back in line...or worse case, eliminate them. It may be an angle we have to look at. It wouldn't be the first time"

Holy fuck. Unease trickles through me. The code...Am I being fucked with?

Or do I not trust my husband like I should?

“You could be telling me this just to get me to distrust Matt. How do I know that’s not what’s happening?”

“Why show my hand? I’m only telling you because you’re a good agent. You’re still new enough not to be jaded or have compassion burnout. I want you to keep your eyes and ears open. Be smart, kid.”

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Decorum gone



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Blaine

Running on two hours of sleep, I shut down my body, allowing me to drift off to dream that this situation is all a horrible, horrible misunderstanding. Weston was with Hilde, the receptionist at the clinic the whole time. She was all “gee willikers” and other embarrassingly clueless statements as per usual. Weston came home stuffed full of sugar and smiles. He was never snatched up by someone.

Waking up to Zeb crying and realizing that isn't the case makes me crave sleep again...the dreams of Wes being alright.

I would give anything to see him run through the room in his cowboy boots and karate uniform being loud in his morning greetings. Fucking anything. Letting the animals loose, throwing things in a full tub, or yelling out jokes.

Caleb walks past with Zeb on the way to the kitchen for a bottle. I move Eden onto the chair kissing her forehead to follow him. “I'll take him.”

Passing him over, he continues to get the bottle ready. “Kim and Chris are here. They're in Hutton's addition right now getting settled in.” I'm not surprised Chris would want to be here. His experience with the Realists could be beneficial.

It can't hurt.

Waverly walks in wearing the clothes she had on yesterday. “Daddy B?” A slight hiccup of a cry escapes. “Did they find Wes?”

It's too much. Waverly standing here at nine years old, so close to the age Eden's brother had been when he disappeared. Her little mini. The curly blonde mop of disheveled hair. Eden's blue eyes filled with tears looking up from Waverly's face. I sag heavily onto a stool, biting back tears. "Not yet, honey."

History repeating itself.

She says no to breakfast, sitting next to me and resting her head on the counter. "I wish I hadn't yelled at him to leave me alone when he wanted to show me the note he wrote his teacher yesterday morning." Her lip trembles as she speaks.

We all watch Zinnea stagger into the kitchen, her hair also messy and wearing the clothes she put on yesterday. "Mornin'," she says quietly, sitting across from Waverly.

Caleb offers Zinnea food but after looking us over and seeing we're not eating, she shakes her head no. "Did you get any sleep?" I ask her as she continues staring at Waverly. She's still giving me the creeps. I'm trying...I'm hoping any acts of goodwill may work in our favor.

She shakes her head again. I'm expecting more silence when she says to Waverly, "Weston told me when I moved in that his older sister is magic."

I freeze, not knowing if Zinnea is going to be mean or comforting. Honestly, with her it could go either way. Waverly isn't sure either as she sits up, regarding her cautiously. Zin continues, "He said whenever he didn't feel good or got hurt, you made him feel better. I told him that's not possible, but he said all I had to do was tell you...tell you and," her face reddens as she tries to go on, "you'd say or do whatever you could to make me better. Like magic."

Tears stream down my face. I look over to Caleb and mouth, "Oh my god." He nods

before looking at the floor, his eyes red.

The previous trembling of Waverly's lips is accompanied by a squeak before she drops her head on her arms wailing. Zinnea carefully gets down from her stool, walking to Waverly's side. She pats her back lightly without saying anything more.

She doesn't have to.

Just another example of Weston trying to help make others feel better. If anyone is magic, it's him.

Chris finds me sitting in my car staring at the compartment holding the pills I desperately want to swallow. To blot it all out. To forget the current state of things.

"What's up, boss?" He opens the passenger door, sliding in. His tall frame, like his brother's, causes him to hunch. "Sorry if you were looking for some alone time."

No, he's not, but I don't care right now.

I should tell him about the pills. I've helped him through the same thing...we lean on each other for support for our addictions. But I don't tell him. The pull of escape overwhelms my desire to stay clean. Right now, I need the pain to stop.

"Hear from Hutton?"

When he says he hasn't, we spend several minutes bullshitting, pointless talk when our world has imploded. I lean back, closing my eyes. "Ready to really talk now?" he asks as he lights a cigarette up.

I open my windows. "Oh, sure, feel free to smoke in my car, jackass."

He gives me half a smile. “Thanks man.”

“With some self-reflection, I think my ability to cope as an adult is a figment of my imagination.” I wave away a plume of smoke as he turns to look at me. “At least exhale out the damn open window you shit.”

“What’s in your car?”

“Huh?”

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“Got some pills or something in here?”

Well, I didn’t expect that. He’s better at reading me than most people, though. “Damn.” I let out a breath, my hands gripping my steering wheel so hard my knuckles are whitening. “I’m that transparent, huh?”

“Nah, man. But you’ve been out here a couple times, and when you’re not, you’re looking out here. I’ve been there...I came so close to getting trashed when I heard about Weston. Luckily, Ma was there.”

“I’m barely holding on here...” My voice is soft, tears pressing in. “I won’t be able to if he’s not home soon.”

He passes his cigarette to me. I hold it for a few seconds before taking a drag off it. It’s been years since I’ve smoked; Matt and Eden didn’t like the habit.

It’s still better than a few pills washed down with alcohol, which is what I’m craving.

Keir peers out the window at us. For a few hopeful seconds I think he’ll come out to investigate. But instead, he turns around to speak to Matt. Does he give one single fucking shit about me?

Some days it feels like the answer is a strong no.

I’m good for a rough fuck...

I’m funny occasionally...

I'm just not someone he cares about.

Chris has known Keir much longer than me, and he sees the look on my face as Super-Agent moves away from the window. "Damn, dude." He chuckles, shaking his head as he ashes out the window, missing it by inches and causing white ash to rain down on the black leather door.

"Christ, Chris, come on." I roll my eyes before leaning onto my elbow. "I'd like to keep my car burn-free."

"Uh-huh, so this thing with Keir. Thought it was all good. Like goooood." He raises his eyebrows as I smack his chest with the back of my hand.

"I don't give two fucks about that right now. Our son is missing." My tone is outraged at him for even trying to discuss this. On top of my struggle with sobriety.

"Mmmm...it's like that? Sorry. If this helps you at all, Keir came from a place where emotions were a weakness. He couldn't show them. He watches you, all the time, man. It's not what you think."

Yeah, fuck that. I'm not getting sucked into a conversation about my fuck buddy, brother-husband...whatever he would want me to call him. I'm going to tackle one problem at a time. Right now, that is keeping a clear head...a sober one.

"If you get any more ashes all over my car, I'm kicking your ass out."

"Nah, I'll behave. I forgot you're a guidance counselor now and shit. You should've seen me when I was younger...woo wee. Not like you, I'm sure."

"Oh, I bet someone's parents were using me as a bad example when I was younger. Hey." I look over at him. "Thanks for coming out here to check on me. Appreciate

it.”

## Chapter Twenty-Eight

From a whisper to a scream

Eden

We’re on day two without Weston.

I move in a functional freeze, trying desperately to appear confident he’s coming home. That the Realists will leave a message giving their demands or Hutton will walk through the door with him. When I slow down or I’m alone, I drop my act, sobbing and pledging to find out who is responsible. Because I will get revenge.

Parking in the lot of Dr. Almari’s office, I look over at Zinnea, who asked to come today. I was going to skip it because I don’t want to look at the horrid woman in my current state. All it will take is one remark about Weston and I’ll slug her. “Let’s do this,” I say under my breath.

Zinnea places a hand on my arm. “Thank you.”

On our walk into the opulent office, I hear a loud laugh. Turning, I see a little dark-haired boy dart away from another child. A peal of laughter goes up again. It’s not Weston, but the jolt of realization that he’s gone, that I’m carrying on with life and he’s gone...it’s all too much.

My face crumples as the quiet tears start to fall. I’m stuck in place. Zinnea takes my hand, tugging me on. Harrison nods at me from the vehicle he followed in. I have to do this...I’m not helping anyone else by giving into my hysterical feelings.

I can't give Dr. Almari any more cause to meddle in our family.



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Ushered right into the office by the same harried assistant as before, I lag behind Zin, trying to focus on anything other than the doctor. “Ms. Bradford.” Her demanding voice makes me cut my eyes to her. “I didn’t think you’d keep the appointment.” She pulls her glasses down from on top of her head. “Why don’t you join us.” It’s not a question, more of command. It rankles me to the very core.

An hour of being subjected to this mean woman and her unprofessional demeanor is the last thing I need today. “No, thank you. I’ll be waiting in the lobby.”

“Sit.” Oh? Now I’m being ordered.

I roll my eyes turning to head back into the cavernous lobby with its espresso machine. “I insist. You should sit because today’s session is going to include you.”

If I keep pushing back, will she give up?

Zinnea stands looking uncomfortable near her seat. I’m not being a good example to her. “Uh, okay?”

Whatever happens in the next hour will not make me break down. I will not give this woman any of the satisfaction she seems to get from me being upset.

For the next twenty minutes she and Zinnea talk about how it feels in her body when she is scared or anxious. There is not a word said about the Revivalists, the house fire, losing her parents...nothing about the trauma itself. I want to interject about her methods. Instead, I try to stay present because when my mind latches onto Weston being gone, it pulls me down a dark path.

I start to pay attention to how my body is behaving. My stomach is tied in knots, all the muscles through my shoulders and down my back are tightened, there is a pulsing ache behind my ears, my eyes are dry and irritated from crying. Once I start identifying the physical feelings, I can breathe easier.

“Now. Ms. Bradford.” I snap my head up to look at Dr. Almari. “My sympathies for what is happening with your family right now. Dr. Wallen and I spoke earlier today. I feel it’s important to acknowledge you will have complicated reactions to this.” Her observation is direct, maybe more than I’m comfortable with, but she’s schooled her tone. No longer exactly condescending, but there is a clinically cold feel to the words.

She is not soft and fuzzy.

I simply nod; afraid I’ll cry if I try to speak.

“Yes, I’m sure.” She pulls open a desk drawer, taking out a key attached to a Fort Lauderdale seashell keychain. Shoving it to the front of her desk she says, “This is for the room across the hall. I’d like you to use it. It’s soundproof. You can utilize it any way you wish; cry, scream, call me bad names. It’s a release room. A bell will sound when Zinne’s appointment is done.”

My mouth drops open in response. I don’t want to. Once I let go...once I release the growing trepidation, anger...once it’s all bubbling out, I won’t be able to stop. Will I? I can’t do that. I stay seated, now shaking my head.

“Ms. Bradford, you are free to do whatever you’d like. You can do your taxes...I don’t care. What I want you to do now is leave. Go on.” She pushes the keys closer to me.

Zinne takes the key off the desk, bringing it to me. “Here,” she says forcefully.

On legs that feel like lead weights, I drag myself across the stone-floored, cavernous lobby to a door pointed out by the scrub-wearing presence flitting around the room. I let myself in, and a light comes on at the motion, illuminating a ten-by-ten room in deep shades of blue. There is a single high-back gray chair next to an ornate stand table with a box of tissues on top. There are two paintings of seascapes on the walls. I flop into the chair.

After a few seconds, I hear what sounds like rushing water being pumped through speakers into the room. To no one in particular, I say, "I'm not doing this." But I'm alone, and the only person listening is me.

Louder I say, "I'm not doing this."

Floodgates break open, and I shout with everything in me, "I'm not doing this!" Between ugly sobs, I scream, "Nooooo!!! Nooooo!"

When I feel like I've rid my body of all the anger I stand to yell, "I want my baby back!"

Then I lay on the floor, a miserable wreck.

A crying lunatic.

She said the room was soundproof. If she lied, I'm sure the whole building and parking lot heard me.

A bell dings loudly, and the light blinks on and off three times. Returning to the office, I'm wrung out. Every cell in my body is exhausted to the point of breakdown. Dr. Almari stands from her desk to take the key, then hands it to Zin. "You wanted to see the release room, Zinneah? Take ten minutes while Ms. Bradford and I have an adult talk."

She starts in when the door clicks closed. “I have a deep and abiding respect for Greg Wallen. He and I don’t see eye to eye on some techniques, but I’ve seen his studies on hypnosis, and he’s improved its clinical use. Now, he has some interesting choices for friends, Joan Lassiter in particular, but she bankrolled a lot of his projects. Like the wellness center.”

“That’s true.” I nod in agreement.

Where is she going with this? If she wants to belittle the center to me, she could’ve picked a better time. Like after Wes is home.

“He tells me I have you all wrong.” She frowns, tapping her nail on the desk. “That I’m harshly judging your actions when I don’t understand. That may well be the case,” she purses her lips as she pauses, “but I won’t apologize. The circumstances that caused you to enter into a relationship with three of the men involved in the graduate study you were a part of...they don’t matter. What does matter is the end result. You have a polyamorous family, three biological children, and three more you are in the process of adopting.”

Not crying. I won’t do that while standing here. She isn’t saying she’s sorry. Instead, she is doubling down. I should’ve just walked away after returning her key.

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She continues, “By all accounts, you appear responsible. Your current patients have nothing but positive things to say about you, and Zinnea has relayed how much you do for everyone in your family. So, I won’t apologize for my feelings about you when we met, but I look forward to learning how wrong I may be. The picture unfolding of your life is one of a woman surrounding herself with people needing healing.”

If she expected me to be appreciative, she doesn’t seem the least bit irritated when I’m silent watching Zin deliver the key back to her. There’s a slight tug to my arm as Zinnea takes my hand and propels me forward.

“I’ll see you soon, Zinnea. Good work today,” Dr. Almari says with a quirk of a smile.

Wiping away the scatter of tears that fell listening to Dr. Almari, Zin and I find Harrison waiting by the door for us. “Too many people around not to escort you to your vehicle,” he says to me.

“Seems a little overboard,” I mutter. Looking down at Zin, she appears lighter after coming out of the release room. She certainly has plenty to scream about, too. “Do you have any news?”

I know I don’t need to ask, because clearly if Harrison, Bristow, Matt, Keir, or any of the law enforcement officers hear or find anything, I’ll be told. I just feel all too idle when I want to be actively looking for my son.

“No unfortunately. Not about Wes, but Matt made some progress on the copycat killings.” Harrison holds open Zinnea’s door before walking around the front of the

car to grab mine.

Aren't they related?

"I thought they were both...I thought they were connected?" Harrison lets go of the door, assuming I can manage climbing into my own car and shutting the door behind me unassisted. I close it before getting in, though, wanting to speak out of Zin's earshot. "What happened?" The squeezing sensation in my chest is making me feel choked. I don't want to hear there's been another death.

"One of Matt's agents developed a timeline and created a short list of suspects based on vital information the perpetrator would have." He's leaving something out; I've known Steve long enough to discern he's going to have me draw the conclusion.

"And?"

"I'll let Matt tell you."

## Chapter Twenty-Nine

No right answer

Matt

"WheredidHuttongo?" I've asked everyone else, but Eden may be the only person he confided in.

She hangs her head, voice strained. "He didn't tell me where he was going. He's looking for Wes."

I guessed as much.

The fear I had yesterday is either he or Eden is the ultimate goal for the Realists. They're using Weston to lure them in. It has to be a trap. Why else would they take him?

An hour ago, it all turned upside down.

Now, I'm looking at it all differently.

One of the special agents working on the copycat killings had a short list of suspects...people who are alive, aware of certain details the public wouldn't know, and are currently not serving time in prison. There are only three people that fit. If we aren't missing another element of these crimes, then our suspects are: me, Agent Donna Schieve...and Hutton.

It's not me, obviously, Donna is retired and living in Iceland last I knew, and Hutton...

Could he, or would he, ever do this?

I vehemently denied it being possible, until I remember he was groomed to be a super soldier his whole life; he is arguably the most intelligent person I've ever met, and the most secretive. The agent calling had explained each murder coincides with Hutton being out of town on business. He was also here the morning Wes went missing, and he trusts his dad...Would Hutton hide him somewhere as a "game" and return to him later?

Staging all this...

Could the mind-fucking he had cause him to act out this way? He was built for destruction; he says it all the time. What if it's caused him to become a cold-blooded killer?

It just doesn't sound right. I've lived with him for years and, even if he keeps to himself, I don't see him being capable.

I'm missing something.

Eden is distraught. We're all losing any shred of hope, because too much time has passed. I needed to walk away earlier when Harrison and Bristow went through the timeline again, dry heaving behind the barn until I thought I would collapse. My heart clenched in my chest. It didn't help noticing the picture Weston drew of Petunia that he stuck to tack nail on the side of the barn.



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Leaning back against the barn while trying to get my breath, I hear Blaine walking closer. “Big Gulp, you’ve just got to walk into the room like God sent you.” Blaine’s and Caleb’s footsteps move farther away, not knowing I’m only steps away at the back of the barn. Blaine is giving me the cold shoulder, deciding to blame me for Weston not being found immediately. It’s not fair, but we’ll deal with that later. I don’t have time to convince him I’m trying to do everything I can.

My son, our son, needs us, but we’re at a standstill. Starlit Fleet confirmed the blacked-out SUV was assigned to the bureau’s New York office. However, there is no video of the driver picking up the vehicle, and I can’t find records of any agent using anything other than their assigned squad.

None of the volunteers noticed the note stuck in the gate.

Then there’s the blackout of the security recordings. He’s meticulous when it comes to the security of our property.

With each piece of information we have, Hutton’s involvement becomes a more real possibility in my mind. I don’t want to think that way. And I know he’d never hurt Weston, not in a million years. In my mind, him having Wes would be the best scenario, because he’d be somewhere happy and safe.

It’s the last hope I have.

The Realists don’t value life, especially the lives of children. Memories of statements taken about experiments turn my stomach.

I find Eden sitting at the kitchen counter, with a dazed look on her face. Wrapping my arms around her tightly, I say, “If you hear from Hutton, I need to know. I really need to talk to him, sweetheart.” Keir walks past us to rinse out one of Zeb’s bottles. He pauses briefly before he shakes his head, moving out of the room again.

I didn’t want to call a code sixty-seven, effectively forcing him to keep a secret from the rest of our family. The call from my ex knocked me sideways. What I’m forced to do next isn’t going to be understood by Eden, but it’s a risk I have to take.

For Weston.

A call earlier today with the state patrol discussing what we currently know passed the torch to them. My superior had already ordered me to step aside since it’s my son missing. It’s standard procedure, because our family will be investigated. The state police detective wasn’t told anything from me they didn’t already know.

Except that there is an FBI tie.

Three of my special agents are going over the volunteer list again in the living room with local police, a state officer, and Harrison when I come to stand in the doorway.

It’s another rehashing of dead ends.

Clearing my throat I say, “State’s taking the case over.”

Everyone looks at me, and I hear Eden’s gasp behind me.

Keir steps back into the room. “What did you say? I don’t think I heard you right.”

My patience is dwindling as a drumbeat of dread pulses up my throat.

Everyone I love is at stake.

One wrong move will end it all. Lines are being drawn right now, but I can't stop the inevitable fracture forming between us. All my training dictates the next decision I have to make. "You heard me correctly." My chest tightens with anxiety as I say, louder and with authority, "The FBI is standing down."

## Chapter Thirty

Revelations...He will wipe away every tear

Caleb

Warnerlayshissleepyhead against my chest, exhausted after running around trying to grab Dodger's tail while squealing excitedly. Both Blaine and I have Zach and Zinnea outside too, attempting to distract them from all the officers milling around in the house. All we've succeeded in doing, however, is highlight how much we're all missing Weston, making me question if God is hearing me...Does he hear my anguished cry? Earlier Blaine tried to talk me into demanding information from Harrison or Bristow about the case. Not Matt. Not Keir. He's decided they're leaving us out of the investigation, withholding what's really happening.

But I'm afraid to ask. I don't want to hear they have no idea where our son is, that Weston is lost to us.

I've always looked to Matt for an example. It's not just because he's thirty-six, holds a high-ranking position with the FBI, and can bring calm to a situation; it's the way others look to him. Blaine is angry right now, but he'll get over it. When it comes to Matt, he always does.

Zinnea hovers close to Zach. "Stay near us," she hisses at him, taking her role as big

sister to the next level because we've proven unreliable at keeping them safe.

For the last two days, our home has been a hive of activity. There are currently all kinds of police, FBI, and sheriff's office vehicles parked on the road, in our driveway, and even at the vet clinic across the street. I almost miss it when Becca's vehicle rolls to a stop behind a squad on the road. She walks our way with a covered casserole dish. Her head is down until she's a few feet from where we stand discussing, yet again, who should talk to Harrison about the status of things. I'm not doing it, but Blaine is being stubborn and insisting I be the one. When she lifts her head to call out a greeting, I'm shocked to see her left eye blackened and scratches on the side of her nose.

"What happened?"

She begins to cry, telling us her ex-boyfriend found out where she has been staying. I ask if she's called the police, although there are plenty here she could speak to. She starts to cry harder. "I don't want to tell anyone. I'll be fine."

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Blaine looks on with his arms crossed and eyebrows raised. I'm waiting for him to chime in. Even though Blaine is capable of watching the kids, I keep an eye on them as they move closer to the animal pen. Looking back at Becca, I say, "Is that a good idea? I mean, aren't you scared he'll come back?"

I'm not a pushy person. In most matters I'd prefer everyone gets along. It feels presumptuous to tell a new friend how they should handle a situation, but she's been hurt. "When did this happen?" I take the offered meal from her saying thanks. It's hard to give my full attention to her as I look around to make sure the kids are close by.

Blaine mouths, "What the fuck, dude" before catching sight of Warner trying to climb onto a bucket. He moves in swiftly to stop him as I turn back to her. "Becca, as a friend, I'm telling you anyone capable of doing that to you will do it again. Or worse."

For several minutes, she gives me the history of her and the man who won't let her move on. I'd be lying if I said I'm listening closely. My eyes are still tracking the kids while I try to keep my emotions in check. The pain of Weston not being here is overshadowing every thought, every action.

I nod as she goes on, but I'm being a terrible friend not staying engaged. She gets my attention, stepping closer and putting her hand on my arm. "I'm sorry. I came over to bring your family something to eat and tell you I'm always available if you need to talk. But instead, you're the one listening to me." She gives me a shaky smile. "Everyone at church has been praying for your little boy."

She envelops my hand between her own. “Can I offer a prayer right now?” A part of me is resigned to it, and another part of me is taken aback she is thinking of me when she has other obvious problems.

“Thank you.” I try to clear the lump from my throat. “I’ve never needed God’s guidance more.

With lowered heads, she says softly, “In Your holy word, You have promised to hear those who cry unto You in their day of trouble. Listen to our cries for mercy and send us help from the sanctuary of Your grace...”

Blaine moves closer to us, Warner on his hip. I hear him mumble, “Not disrespectful at all...”

I don’t know what he’s referring to, but his snarkiness is at an all-time high. Becca says she’ll stop by tomorrow with more food. I miss the comment Blaine says after a huff of a laugh. She doesn’t pay any attention to it. Making sure Blaine sees I’m walking her back to her vehicle, I say, “It was really thoughtful of you to stop by, especially after what you’ve been through.”

“That’s what friends do. You’d do the same for me if you knew I needed you, right?”

It makes me feel even worse I didn’t press harder for her to report what happened between her and her ex. I would’ve a few days ago, but right now I’m on survival mode, praying God hears me.

Blaine gives me a stern look when I return from escorting Becca to her car. “Who and what was that?”

I explain, once again, she is my friend from church. It feels like he willfully ignores me when I tell him things sometimes. “She was part of the search party.”

“Big Gulp.” He sighs, shaking his head at me. “You don’t see it, do you?”

“See what?” Eden peeks out the window. Both Blaine and I turn to see her better. Wearing an old Belmont sweatshirt, a pair of yoga pants, and her hair tied up on top of her head, she looks far younger than her thirty years. Pain is evident in her eyes. When she sees us, she puts her hand on the window, leaning against it and shutting her eyes, her breath fogging the glass.

“If you’re a committed man, you aren’t giving attention to another woman, making another woman feel like she has a chance with you, giving emotional energy to them, or disregarding boundaries. You’re a married man.”

“That’s not fair, I’m committed.” Since when is being a friend to someone of the opposite sex such a problem? I almost remind him; Eden knows I’m committed, but he’s already halfway to the house. I follow, waving for Zach and Zinneah to join us.

I committed to Eden with all my heart and soul, but in return I only have a piece of her. The thought hits me hard. I’ve never doubted she loves me, but maybe, just maybe, her divided attention is starting to bother me.

## Chapter Thirty-One

When the problem asks what the problem is

Keir

The look of sheer devastation on Eden’s face when Matt announces the FBI will no longer be investigating Weston’s disappearance kills me.

It drives a stake directly through my heart.

With one look I know she's thinking about what happened to her brother. So am I.

I'm feeling caught in the middle-pulled in two directions by the two people I'm in love with: Matt's need to keep a bad element from the FBI away from the investigation and Eden's need to have as many boots on the ground looking for our son as possible.

"Matt?" Eden's fist is balled up in his shirt. "Why? Why would you do that?"

He leans toward her, but when he tries to wrap his arms around her, she pulls away. "No! That's not going to help!"

My brain feels like it's wrapped in cotton, as if I have to concentrate hard to stay tuned in.

Eden turns to me, stepping close. "Make him understand. Please, please...he doesn't understand," she pleads, begging me to intervene. But she doesn't realize I have no real power to change his decision.



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What I'm privy to can't be shared. I don't want to lie or withhold anything from Eden, but I don't have a choice right now. One wrong move could be fatal.

Matt's face may look calm, but his eyes tell a different story when he drops his arms. In a saddened voice, he says, "Sweetheart, state police have been fully briefed-"

She cuts him off. "I swear on my life, if we don't...if Weston doesn't come home;" her voice is strangled with tears. "I'll blame you for it, because you did this. You decided to remove resources that could've helped find him." She swipes his hand away while running for the stairs.

Bristow and Harrison witness the whole exchange, waiting to speak to Matt. Harrison lets out a big breath. "Do you want us to hang around for a while longer?"

"We've got this. Both Keir and I are on leave for now. You can take off." His voice struggles to remain even. "Could you forward the search party list to me?"

Harrison claps a hand on Matt's back. "You've got it. If you need anything you know where to find me."

I watch as Harrison, Bristow, and a handful of agents grab their gear and leave. With them goes a sense of forward momentum. The three state officers pull Matt aside to talk while I remain rooted in place.

Do I go to Eden? Try to smooth things over and reassure her this isn't a detrimental turn? I don't have the words right now...

My feet carry me into the kitchen, where Chris's adoptive mom, Kim, is banging on our coffeemaker swearing to herself.

"Ayyyyy yooo, Ma, don't beat their fancy shit," Chris says from behind me. He pulls her coffee cup away. Kim, with her Guns N' Roses T-shirt and ripped skinny jeans, isn't your typical parental figure. This mental health nurse smokes like a chimney; and uses both foul language and blunt observations like a badge of honor. She and Chris are kind of perfect together.

She snags a cookie from a tray left by a neighbor. With a full mouth, she says, "Eden needs to be doing something more than waiting around. Spinning your wheels at a time like this is going to drive her crazy."

Before I can formulate a response, Blaine carrying Warner; and Caleb with the Abbott kids come trooping through. Zach stops in front of me. "When is Wes coming home? I miss him."

Me, too. Christ, me, too.

He's been carrying Roscoe, Wes's teddy bear around. The same one Weston never left home without until a couple years ago. Now, Zach hands him over to anyone he sees who needs cheering up. Standing there while clutching it, looking to me for an answer, I can't find my voice. Blaine covers his face as silent tears fall, trying to keep Warner from catapulting at me.

Lifting Warner from his arms, I bury my face in his dark hair. He resembles Weston. At three, Wes was a chatterbox, always on the go, saying "look, look, look," about everything. In contrast, Warner is reserved. Will he ever know his brother? Goddamnit, I feel fucking ill and turned inside out, my brain matted with horrific what-ifs.

“We need to keep her safe,” Caleb says to Kim.

“All of you forget what you’re dealing with here. I remember all too well those Realists, and they will get to her wherever they want to. At least if she’s busy;” she pops another cookie in her mouth, smacking away, “she isn’t blaming herself for not fighting in a meaningful way.” She hands a couple cookies to Zinne and Zach. “Tell me I’m wrong.”

Matt’s been listening from the doorway, and we all startle when he says, “Keir, I need to talk to you.”

Following him into the hallway of Hutton’s addition, my stomach cramps as I struggle to come up with a way to convince Matt to undo his earlier decision. He leans against the wall before bending forward. Agony bleeding through his words he says, “We need to find Hutton. If we don’t, he...” He peers up at me, his face contorted in pain. “It’s a trap. Every last bit of this feels like a trap to lure him in. They have his code, they’re leaving threats for Eden, they’ve claimed responsibility for Wes missing...”

I’ve never seen Matt like this. Broken. Fighting to keep his composure when it’s clear the weight of all that’s happened is too much.

He knows he’ll lose Eden if his decision backfires.

I squat next to him, pulling him close by the back of his neck. Through a thickened voice, I tell him, “I trust you. Nothing has changed in that respect. But I don’t understand, and Eden doesn’t either right now.”

Make me understand, just give me more here...

He meets my eyes, saying, “I need you to make sure if Eden leaves someone is with

her, and the kids have at least two, if not more adults watching them. Can you do that?"

What's he going to be doing?

Confused, I move back slightly. "You don't need to tell me that. Where exactly are you going to be?"

He pulls me back to him, giving me a tender kiss on my mouth, barely any pressure. Holding me tightly to him he says, "I need to find Hutton. No one else needs to know right now, though, okay? I have a good idea where he may go, but he's going to need help...which he'd never ask for."

In silence, we hold each other for a few more seconds; before he stands. Determination sets in regarding what he plans to do. "If anyone asks, you don't know where I am. I don't care if I'm the bad guy in their eyes if I can stop what's happening. If I can find Wes. I'll make everyone understand later."

I disagree completely with what he's doing, but love makes you accept circumstances you'd rail against otherwise. I'll protect him, as I will Eden because I love him. "Be fucking careful. If you don't check in with me twice a day, I'm not keeping this to myself. I'll send Harrison and Bristow to find you."

Moving in a state of turmoil to look for Eden, I can't help doubt creeping in about Matt's reasoning. Is he going to find Hutton to help, or does his motive have to do with covering up something larger he's become a part of? I still haven't found time to ask him about Halcyon. Wes missing overshadows everything.

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Steps from the bedroom, I stop. My unease grows exponentially when I consider all the secrets, the lies...points he barely explains before giving orders. Am I being played? Are we becoming pawns in a cover-up? It wouldn't be the first time I was used by someone exerting their control over me. Being a survivor of XIX honed one aspect of my personality through time: my gut instincts.

A cautious feeling crawls over me.

Something doesn't sit right with me about this.

Eden's lying in bed, holding Wes's blanket. She's been crying, her body jerking as she whimpers. Blaine hugs her tightly from behind. They don't see me in the doorway, hesitant to enter because I'm worried I'll be taken to task for a decision I had no part in. That I don't agree with at all.

Their eyes track me as I move to the dresser to put my phone, the change in my pocket, and watch on it. I fully intend to hold Eden and give her any kind of comfort I can. I need it, too.

Wes's blanket tucked between us; I lie facing Eden. I give her a kiss on the forehead before leaning my cheek against the top of her head.

"Do either one of you know where Hutton went? Did he tell you before he left or communicate with you after?"

Eden only shakes her head, but Blaine sits up slightly with an irritated look on his face. "Because Matt sent you to find out?"

“He’s in danger.”

Not that we aren’t all aware of that fact, but I can’t say who Hutton should be leery of.

“We were just talking about your late-night rendezvous with Matt. Were you discussing this move today? I shouldn’t be surprised.” Sneering at me, he continues, “I wouldn’t tell you where Hutton is even if I knew. He’s actually trying to find Wes.”

“That must be why I couldn’t find you.” Eden’s scratchy voice is quiet as her breathing evens out from crying.

God forbid anything be kept private.

“You mean-” I can’t look her in the face, dropping my gaze to the ground, “he told you? About last night?” Damnit. The secrets have been piling up. This doesn’t look good.

Knowing Blaine, he made it sound like we were going at it. Like anyone is in the mental space to be intimate like that with our son missing. I want to deck him, but that’s not unusual for us. He doesn’t bother to hide his jealousies. “That wasn’t...No, we weren’t plotting or doing anything more than discussing what’s going on.”

As time slips away, I try not to think about where Weston might be. Whether he’s being mistreated or if he’s even alive. But I can’t push all the cases I’ve worked on involving missing children to the back of my mind. Close to fifty-five found the deceased, only two recovered alive. The pain of knowing he could be gone is more than I can live with if I don’t pull away from it.

Blaine leaves the room to check on Caleb and the kids while I hold Eden. She drifts

off in my arms, her sleep troubled with twitching and restless movements. Brushing back her hair, I whisper words of a poem I once read to myself. “It well may be that in a difficult hour, Pinned down by pain and moaning for release...”

My life has been a series of tragedies.

The only thing that keeps me here is this love.

Resting her head against my chest, I say to her as she sleeps, “I won’t trade our love or Weston for anything...not anything.”

Especially not keeping secrets I don’t agree with.

## Chapter Thirty-Two

Aishitemasu (I love you)

Hutton

They aren’t trying to hide it. It’s all a ruse to draw me in, knowing I’ll come for my son. One down...

“Little bird, you need to run. Don’t let them catch you...run.”

Holing up in the parking ramp of the old Trinom Labs on the wellness center property, I pick apart the message Keir was handed on the thumb drive. It isn’t the words, which are vague and simple. It’s the code running beneath them. It mirrors the Nautilus code I used to hack into the government’s classified records and extract dark-web secrets.

When I developed it at sixteen, I’d glibly called it -the DTMY-Dying to Meet You

code. Hints were dropped in the message to Eden, but I didn't pick up on it right away. It's essentially a virus that infiltrates and strips away information before rendering whole systems destroyed. I was paid almost three million dollars by the FBI for that code...albeit an altered and tamer version. That code in the wrong hands will wipe out government infrastructures, power grids...that code can launch nuclear weapons.

But I'm not dumb enough to trust any government, especially not the same agency partially responsible for the tortures I suffered growing up. I alone have the full code in my mind. It's not printed anywhere or recorded in any way.

Is that what they want? Are members of the FBI posing as The Realist cult members? Why the copycat killings then? Why take Weston?



## Page 52

*Source Creation Date: May 20, 2025, 4:53 am*

Is this about our blood and the isolated gene found within it, the supercell cluster? Lassiter, Wells and Hutton discovered a component in both Eden and my blood which could cure a multitude of diseases, because it will stop mutations and unnatural cell degeneration. That discovery resulted in the sprawling research laboratory on the Camp Carroll property.

Whatever the purpose, I know I'm meant to figure out where Weston is. It's a puzzle to crack.

A thirty-nine-minute blackout of recording;

The Starlit Fleet rental matching FBI agents in the New York area seen minutes prior;

The ninja talk;

Dying to Meet You;

Mention of the true Realists;

The note to Eden mentioning "why you must die";

The killings of people associated with either the Bradford or Lassiter families;

Lawrence Hutton...

Contributor to my genetics, but certainly no father. He had strange proclivities like germophobia, physical fitness in preparation for doomsday, the ability to look at

people like material, and a fascination with riddles, hidden meanings...games.

Nature versus nurture...I will never again look at another human being as little more than a tool to use. Eden and the kids changed that. The other traits I come by naturally, it seems. It also means Number One's contribution has left me with the ability to be a monster.

Not one person standing between Weston and me is going to walk away; they were dead the moment Wes was taken.

There has been no movement in the parking ramp, or this abandoned area of the property. The wellness center rests on a hill beyond a grove of trees to the south, not visible from anywhere but the top floor of the research labs. I don't need to look at it to know at least one person was planted there by either The Realists or the FBI shadow group to track Eden and leave threats.

It always comes back to Camp Carroll.

I was always supposed to die here.

Avoiding it has caused a ripple effect that won't stop unless I put an end to it.

Before it gets dark outside, I slip from my hiding place in the parking ramp, dressed all in black with my hoodie up. Weston would say I'm a ninja moving in the shadows through the trees, lightly stepping to make as little noise as possible. My destination is the last place I want to return, but after showing Eden the spot, I need to leave her a way out.

So, in the event I can't help her she can still survive this. Bringing along the weapons from a safe I keep in my office, I shut out the memories plaguing my mind.

At the tree with the nailed-on skull, I place a fully loaded handgun, resting it against the bark behind the dirt-marred bone. Sticking out of the jaws is an envelope containing all the words I may never get to say to Eden again. Telling her I'd suffer every second of pain again to love her. That no matter what happens to me, it was worth it. The kids were worth it.

Then I do what everything in me screams against with every step I take. I go inside the shack. I order myself not to notice the devices used to "strengthen" me, the gruesome photos meant to mentally steel me but fueled my nightmares instead, or the stains of blood splatter on the walls. I place a handgun in one corner, then drop a pocketknife on the metal folding chair that's fashioned with both ankle and wrist straps and is bolted to the floorboards.

I take one last look at the decaying walls and the nature eating away at this space before I slink into the dusk, lightly stepping to return to my hideout.

As I approach the parking ramp, I catch sight of an object in one of the glass windows from the labs in the building. The light catches it, making it glint. It moves away and back. There's someone inside the labs.

Game on. I'm getting closer Wes...I'm coming.

The state police had searched the abandoned labs. It was one of many locations we floated by the investigators as a place the Realists might choose to use. But deep down, I thought Weston would be at a member's home. If he's here, it's even clearer they are using him as bait.

I didn't come directly here when I left home. My first stop was to Starlit Fleet, where I managed to get further than a badge did. I was given a contact name. It was a made-up name, which we already knew, but they also managed to comb through payments pinpointing where it was made from. While officers waited for a search warrant to

learn the same information, I located the company using my hacking abilities: a shell company set up only days prior connected to a bank in Bermuda. The name on the account is Michael Wells. Another nod to the Realists since it can't be him.

Once I hit a wall, I came here to Camp Carroll...or, as it is now called, the Horizon Wellness Center property. Signs the abandoned lab had been searched remain from tire tracks and doors left open inside. I know all the hiding spaces and hidden rooms, and there are no signs of Weston. No signs anyone else has been here.

Each place is left unoccupied but still standing: the lab building, the house towards the lake, the guard shacks, and the housing block. I searched it all. But they had been searched already by the FBI and local law enforcement.

I continued to search every couple of hours, knowing they would arrive eventually.

Bolting through doors and up the stairs to the third floor, I don't slow until I'm steps from the lab I'd seen movement in. The entire corridor on this level is floor-to-ceiling glazed glass. Much of it is visible, except that southwest corner. My body stills outside the open doorway, sudden movement alerting me to a person lunging at me.

## Page 53

*Source Creation Date: May 20, 2025, 4:53 am*

We tackle one another, rolling back to strike the wall. I've got an arm around his neck before I realize who I'm fighting. I don't let go, adrenaline coursing through me. "Scholl?"

"Get off me." He pushes back on me. "Let go."

Very slowly, I release him.

We try speaking at the same time. "What are you-"

"Fuck, what's goi-"

He tells me he knew he'd find me here. That whatever I think I'm doing, all I'm going to accomplish is getting myself killed.

So be it. But I'll find Weston first and get him home safely.

We both stand. Before I can question if he's here working, I see a piece of paper sitting on the metal cart inside the lab room. "What's that?"

"I hadn't looked around the lab yet. I saw someone out of the corner of my eye and ducked in here." Matt joins me at the cart, looking down at the note.

In block print: Two down. In the lab across the hall, find the tablet. Weston wants to say hi.

I'm seeing red. Two? Does that mean Eden or one of the other kids has been

grabbed?

Blood drains from Matt's face, and my body feels like it's going to explode when we pick up the tablet and hit play. Weston's beautiful little face fills the screen. A noise of frustration comes from Matt.

Our son smiles and says, "Hi, Daddy H! Ai..." His face bunches up, finger scratching the side of his nose. "Aishi-Aishitemasu. That means I love you in Japanese."

"Oh my God." Matt groans next to me. "Wha-"

I cut him off, my voice rough with emotion, "Shut up."

We may miss a clue if he blabs while it's playing. The instant Weston appeared on the screen, my chest felt constricted.

A digitized voice can be heard off camera saying, "Weston, what do you want your daddy to know?"

His eyes widen looking at the person speaking. He clasps his hands together as he squirms in his seat. "Daddy? Can I come home now?" Matt slams his hand into the cabinet next to us swearing under his breath. I'm imagining making the kidnapper's death as horrifying as possible.

The voice's tone changes, getting sterner. "That's not what you were told to say, Weston, was it?"

He shakes his head slowly before saying, "Thirty-nine. Star black. Three down." The words are said carefully, like he had to commit them to memory.

Thirty-nine...minutes the security camera was down?

Star black...Starlit Fleet blacked-out SUV?

Three down...three of us taken?

I can feel my pulse raging, and Matt looks like he's ready to help me put the kidnappers in the grave.

The screen goes dark.

“That's it?!” His eyes look wild. “That's all?!”

The voice was digitized, making it unrecognizable...male or female? Was it masked because we know this person or simply to protect them until they reveal themselves? Weston was uncomfortable but not scared...even when they were more forceful.

He knows them. I touch the ninja action figure of Weston's I've been carrying in my pocket.

Matt is hitting the play button on a rant about the sadistic mind games being played. I'm running it all through my head...it's a puzzle. We know who this person is...

I grab Matt's arm. “I know where Weston is.”

### Chapter Thirty-Three

Until the day I die

Eden

My entire world is in upheaval.

Weston is missing.

Hutton has disappeared off the grid like countless times in the past, he's in danger this time.

Matt is gone, but we have no idea where.

Zinnea told me last night God is mad at her, so we're all going to burn.

Chris is worried Blaine is going to relapse.

And I simply feel like shutting down.

Now Keir told me he's worried about Matt's possible involvement in Weston's disappearance. Would Matt ever put us through hell like this?

The monsters in my head remind me how dangerous trusting even loved ones is.

Staring at the animal pen from the kitchen window, I mindlessly take a swig of my



tasteless, reheated coffee. My hand starts to shake when I notice I'd poured it in the mug Weston made me for my birthday.

"If you're going to work today, which sounds like a rotten idea, you can't go there alone," Blaine says, shifting Zeb to his other hip. "Take Keir with you."

Over the rim of his coffee cup, Keir says, "I was already going to, whether you liked it or not."

Going to work is a cover. There is no way I can sit in group or private sessions with any of my patients when I'm in this headspace. Kim suggested it, but the only reason I went along is because it puts me at the center where I fully intend to poke around. The Realists may no longer be there, but among the remaining original buildings and land, there may be a message or even another threat.

It's the ability to actively look for Weston without being told I'm interfering that has me out of bed, dressed, and ready to go. "I assumed I'd have a bodyguard." My smile at Keir is weak and falls off my face quickly. "Prepare to be bored stiff since you can't sit in on my appointments."

Leaving the kids is difficult. When Waverly starts to cry, I almost back down, but there's a feeling of certainty in the pit of my stomach that I'm making the right decision. Even if the police have searched, they don't know Wes like I do, and they don't understand the mindset of a cult member.

Blaine corners me in the kitchen as I put my coffee cup in the sink. "Ed, if Keir is starting to question Matt-" he pulls me in for a hug, his mouth near my ear, "we have to start considering he's gotten involved with-"

"Not in a million years, B. Not a chance." I know his heart, and I know the love he has for the kids. He'd kill himself before jeopardizing anyone in this family.

“Will you still feel this way if he shows up with Weston after he made it a point to pull the FBI away?”

Entering a side door of the building, I try to avoid being spotted by patients. Dr. Wallen didn't answer when I tried calling him, wanting to warn him that I'd be coming in. Maybe this way, though, I can avoid him trying to talk me out of it. Keir keeps touching me-reaching out to lightly stroke my lower back, running his hand down my arm, and taking my hand. It's like he's trying to remind himself I'm close and I haven't gone anywhere. He just knows what hand placement is...reassurance for both of us.

Once we're in my office, I check my messages. There isn't any from the only person I'm interested in hearing from, other than my husbands or Weston, and that is whoever is responsible for this living hell. I don't think Keir will agree to my idea of roaming around the property, but the thought of worrying him by giving him the slip makes me feel terrible.

“Here's the thing...” I level with him while looking at the picture on my desk of the kids. “I'm not here to work.”

## Chapter Thirty-Four

I'll let you sit with that

Blaine

The pills are on the counter in front of me. I've rearranged them six times. Looking in the bathroom mirror at myself; five o'clock shadow, dark smudges under my eyes from lack of sleep the last three days, and my wavy hair sticking up to the side of my head. I look like I fucking feel.

Like a trainwreck, like a dumpster on fire...like an addict wanting to fall into a hole.

I couldn't take another second of listening to Kim go on about her dull-as-fucking-ditch-water trip to Las Vegas. With the kids visiting their great grandparents in Hutton's addition, Caleb praying for all of us with his church buddies, and...fuck. I hate this.

*Source Creation Date: May 20, 2025, 4:53 am*

We're falling apart.

I'm coming completely unglued.

If Matt betrayed us to cover for his precious fucking FBI, there's no coming back from that...

I want to know Weston is safe, which if Matt did this to make it look a certain way, I know Wes would be. But the alternative fucking destroys me.

I would give anything to rewind time...go back four days and insist Eden and the kids go to a safe house like Hutton wanted. Now, we're forced to pretend life could go on in any healthy way if Weston is gone forever.

I pick up a yellow pill, rolling it between my fingers before putting it back to smash along with the rest of the pills using the side of my fist. A roar of anguish comes from me as I look down at the dust on the counter.

All the pain, hurt, and fear stab at me until I squat down and snort up some of the dust, running a finger through it to put it in my mouth. The bitter tang gags me.

What the fuck have I done? My regret is instant. What the fuck?! Angrily, I wipe the rest into the sink and rinse it. Then sink to the floor, sobbing.

I have no idea how much I've ingested as the effects start to soften the edges of reality. God only knows how long I lay crying on the floor until my vision swims, my limbs feeling numb.

Until I'm nothing and nowhere.

"Blaine? Blaine!" I feel a pat to my cheek, and I fight to open my heavy eyelids. Leave me the fuck alone. Let me drift away. Just vaporize.

Voices fade in and out. "Turn him to his side...Blaine?!...Damn dude, what'd you take...Blaine?!...Open your eyes, dude...turn him...hey...."

"Daddy B, I 'member that poem. Wanna hear it? There was an Old Man with a beard, who said, 'It is just as I feared...'" Weston's chipper little voice...I want my son back. I need my son back.

"Do we call 911? Wake up, man..." More pats, and I feel like my tongue is adhered to the roof of my mouth. "Hold on...just hold on..."

A sudden sharp pain penetrates my entire chest, my eyes opening to Kim on top of me giving me a sternum rub. My mouth flies open. "Gaaaaaa...fuuuucck. Stop...stop." Chris is on his knees next to me, disappointment all over his face.

"What did you do, Blaine? What did you do?" Chris asks, wiping a hand across his forehead. "You were barely breathing."

They should've let me go...

I've fucked up miserably this time.

Caleb runs into the crowded bathroom, his face red. He drops to his knees gathering me up in his arms. "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry."

What the fuck is he apologizing for? My arms don't cooperate when I try to push him off me, and my tongue feels immobilized. Chris's mouth is moving, his words

swimming in and out of my ears. "...struggling...pills...on the floor...with Wes...pills"

Caleb is nodding at him while talking, still holding me like I'm too fragile to let go of. I fucking hate myself right now.

Wes...Weston. I just need my baby boy.

"I stopped paying attention. I didn't...I didn't see this coming," Caleb says gripping me tighter. "I've been an awful friend."

## Chapter Thirty-Five

Breathe in, bleed out

Keir

Stepping over a tree root, I look at Eden a couple steps in front of me. "Honey, do you know where you're going?" So far, we've traveled a tunnel, opening any door or hatch we came across; walked through the parking ramp; tried to get into the lab building, but the door felt barred; the guard shack; an abandoned house; and looked in windows of the housing block. "The police and FBI were here three days ago and didn't find anything."

She ignores me as she keeps a steady pace, stopping to look around every few steps. "It was this way I think. Wait, he said look for the roof..." Her mumbling doesn't make any sense to me.

"Who?" My cellphone rings, tearing my attention away. "Harrison, what's going on?"

Even though Bristow and Harrison were dismissed from the official investigation, they've been checking in. "Where are you? Is Eden with you?"

## Page 56

*Source Creation Date: May 20, 2025, 4:53 am*

“We’re at the wellness center. Steve, everything okay?” I don’t remember ever hearing him out of breath or worked up before. Dread blooms in my stomach. “Steve?”

Eden hears my side of the conversation, a hand flying to her mouth. “No.” A soft, plaintive plea.

“I’m with Matt...W-we’ve got Weston.”

Not “he’s safe”. Not “hey, good news”. My heart sinks so quickly, my head spins as I balance myself against the oak next to me. “Steve?”

“Listen, I’m heading to you. I’m close. Where are you exactly?”

Stop. Back up. Weston...How is our son?All words I want to say but can’t get out.

“Keir?” Eden is tugging at the arm of my shirt, her face reddening and eyes filling with tears. “Nooo...noooo, not my baby.”

I don’t know how far from the main building we’ve ventured into the woods. I grab Eden’s hand, pulling her as I run back the way we’ve come. “We’re going to Eden’s office...okay? Steve, do you hear me?”

“Yeah, yeah. We’ll be there soon.”

I look over at Eden, whose cheeks are wet with silent tears. I swallow down a bellow that quakes inside my chest. Why was Matt with Weston? Did officers find them?



What is going on?

All the times I pushed away the questions...about Halcyon, about Matt's role in Camp Carroll, about the code sixty-seven.

Now I wonder if this is on me.

If my judgement was clouded by my love.

All my training feels ineffective right now; the stakes are too immeasurable.

Our lives are about to go up in flames

Chapter Thirty-Six

X

Hutton

Relaying what I think the words in the video mean, Matt nods along. I tell him to go as I'm taking a few steps back into the lab to get the tablet and note. "Are you sure?" he asks.

"That has to be what he meant. Go, I'm right behind you. Go get Weston."

I run through the door with an arm out to grab the tablet and leave, but the door slams shut behind me.

The trap was set, if I had to guess, long before I came back here.

This is what was always going to happen.

Camp Carroll...the beginning and end. They knew I would never leave the building without finding out who is behind it all. That my unquenched rage over taking my son would cloud my judgement.

The tablet is no longer there...Someone was in the room with us. Watching us.

Did Matt make it out, or was it all a tease?

Not giving up, I push and kick at the door. Grabbing one of the metal carts, I smash it against the door. A digitized voice comes over the speaker system in the room. "It's no use, X."

I haven't been called that since I met Eden six years ago when she saw me as a person instead of a product to be used.

"Who are you? A coward? Show your face, at least." I try to keep my voice emotionless, but it's pointless. Whether I draw on years of programming or let emotion take over, they have a plan that nothing I say will change.

"You'll know soon enough." The speaker crackles as it cuts off.

### Chapter Thirty-Seven

Hope dies a bloody death

Eden

KeirrelayswhatStevesaid as we race back to my office. I tell myself it doesn't mean Weston isn't okay. That's not what it means.

My sweet little baby boy.

"Mommy, guess what?...Chicken butt." His little giggles erupt as he spins around.

A shaky sense of disbelief floods me.

I won't hear that voice, see that face, get that hug or little peck of a kiss anymore. No, no...that's not what Steve said. He didn't say that.

The closest door back into the building sticks from warping. I kick at it in frustration, tears threatening to spill as I give another hard yank. Keir quietly moves me aside, able to effortlessly pull it open. Then we're running again, past confused patients, and we don't slow until I'm at the closed door of my office.

If they're inside...If the news isn't...

"I can't...I just, I can't..." I gasp, bending over to catch my breath. Once I hear it, I can't pretend everything will be okay anymore. Once I hear it, it'll be real.

Weston will really be gone.

Keir leans back against my office door, taking my hand as I straighten back up. “I love you.” It’s a soft reminder from him, but it’s said through a voice fraught with pain.

I expect to see Steve, Matt, and Weston when I open the door to the office, but it’s empty, just as we’d left it this morning when we went to search the grounds. Keir looks back into the hallway. “We must’ve beat them here.”

Slumping into my office chair, my eyes are drawn to the children’s picture again, the vivacious nature of Wes featured perfectly. He’s leaning against Waverly, who is seated, with an arm around her shoulders, his head leaning against hers. Warner is on her lap. Taken a year ago, it was before the Abbott children came to live with us. Tucked in the corner of that picture is a candid shot of all the kids playing in our yard. I pull the pictures toward me, pressing them against my chest. I don’t bother trying to stop the squall of tears from coming.

Keir pulls his phone out, dialing Steve back.

It rings a few times before going to voicemail.

“Try Matt. He said Matt is with him.” I’m not allowing myself to think about the implications of that right now. Later...later...

But he doesn’t answer his phone either.

Even if it’s the dead of night and he’s sound asleep, his cellphone is on and charged with the ringer up. We all give him a hard time about being attached to his phone, but he’s said over and over: “I’m in charge of eighty-three people and I’m a dad. That’s just the way it is.”

“I don’t like this,” Keir says. I agree. Between what he said about Steve being uncharacteristically bothered and us not being able to reach them, I’m worried about their safety, too.

I check my phone but it is dead, so I put it on the charger. “D-do you think we should go looking for them?” It makes no sense to do that, I know, but worry is starting to gnaw at my insides.

“No.” He checks his phone again. “My work cell is in the car. It’ll have Matt’s location on it. I’ll be right back. Just stay right here in case...” He nods at me. In case they arrive with their bad news before he gets back from the parking lot.

All I can do is give him a jerk of a nod. Employee parking is in the lower lot and the walk is only a few minutes, so I’m not concerned he’ll be gone long. But I won’t be able to see him from my window and he will miss Steve and Matt if they come in the front side of the building.

Not that anything matters more than getting confirmation they have Weston and he’s okay.

## Chapter Thirty-Eight

### The word of God

#### Caleb

Placingacupofcoffee Kim made in front of Blaine, I sit across from him. I missed the signs. It’s been a couple years since I thought his sobriety was at risk. With Weston missing, though, I should’ve been keeping a closer eye on him.

It seems there is a pattern of me not being watchful enough...Wes was taken, Hutton

took off, and now Blaine almost overdosed.

*Source Creation Date: May 20, 2025, 4:53 am*

“This reminds me of that venti double-blasted-dingleberry-brown-star latte shit we were given at that diner outside Pittsburgh.” He’s back to his old form, being sarcastic and cracking jokes, but I’m not in the mood. We could’ve lost him.

“This is serious, Blaine. We have to talk about it.”

He puffs out a breath before rubbing his eyes. “Do we, though?”

Chris sits down at the end of the table. “Yeah, buddy. Yeah, we do. I don’t ever want to find you that way again.”

He hangs his head, and in a saddened voice, says, “I get it...I fucked up. I gave in, because I just can’t take this feeling...this pain.” He looks up at me, eyes glistening with tears. “What if he never comes home again?”

What if. It’s the thought I won’t let myself have. God help me, that’s not a reality I want to ponder.

Chris speaks up. “You need some self-reflection, man. Be honest with yourself. Checking out when there is a crisis is just an excuse.”

As Kim watches over the kids in the family room, we discuss the next meeting he can make and reconnecting with his therapist. There is talk about his sobriety while carefully skirting the subject of loss. Blaine gets agitated after twenty minutes of reiterating his need to talk to someone. “For the fuckteenth time...” he starts.

I hear the doorbell, excusing myself to find Becca standing on our wraparound porch

with a pan of food. The bruise around her eye is a mottled purple, reminding me she needs a friend to lean on, too. “You haven’t called, so I thought I’d-” she holds up the aluminum pan “bring something by and check in.”

Letting her in, I nod at the county deputy sitting on the road by our house. “Come on in.” She follows me through the family room greeting Kim and the kids then into the kitchen where Blaine is telling Chris he’s not about to do something so stupid again.

“...it’s probably located in the ‘fuck this’ cluster of neurons.” Not bothering to hide his irritation at seeing Becca here, he rolls his eyes.

“How are you?” I ask, but I’m not invested in her answer. I’m ashamed of myself for feeling like it’s an obligation to ask, but the timing is not the best. “Has your ex stayed away?” Instead of listening to her response I try to catch the conversation between Chris and Blaine while listening to Waverly ask if she can go check on the animals.

I ask Waverly to wait, turning back to Becca. “It’s a little hectic right now. Sorry. Give me a minute?”

Zinneah has wandered to the doorway next to Waverly. Since Wes went missing, the girls seem to have shelved their problems, but there is still hesitation and awkwardness between them.

“Can I go with her?” Zinneah asks.

Blaine replies, “Wait until one of us goes with you, please.”

It doesn’t matter if there is a deputy posted on the road, or cameras in the yard; Wes was snatched away in broad daylight, security cameras all over, and FBI agents patrolling the property. We can’t trust they’ll be safe alone outside. They both look



crestfallen as they mumble, “Okay.”

“I could go with them? I’d love to see your animals,” Becca offers. “Really. I was even going to ask if I could see the horses.”

Looking into the family room, Kim has her hands full with Warner throwing blocks that Zach hands him at the cat and Zeb having a bottle. I want to finish my conversation with Blaine, and Chris has a fear of all big four-legged animals. I relent, because it’s easy at the moment. Waverly grabs her sketchbook off the table to take with her as she leads Zinne and Becca out the back door.

“Don’t go in the pen or the woods,” Blaine calls from the table.

I check my cell phone, waiting for Keir to text. Eden insisted on searching for Wes at the wellness center, so he sent a group chat to Blaine and me that he would check in every couple of hours. It’s getting close to the third check-in time.

Chris reclines back in the chair. “No word?”

Making sure I’m paying attention to the time, I set an alarm on my phone for fifteen minutes while Blaine tells us where the pills came from and about his battle to throw them away.

When the alarm goes off, I check, seeing no text. I try calling his phone, but it goes to voicemail. I’ll try again in a few minutes. I reset the alarm for another five. “I need some fresh air, so I’m gonna find the girls.” Besides, I should make an effort to see if Becca is doing alright.

No voices carry from the animal enclosure, and I don’t see the girls or Becca when I walk down the porch steps. Alarm doesn’t hit me until I see Waverly’s sketchbook open on the ground, like it was dropped. Calling their names, I pick up the pace.

Besides a disinterested-looking donkey and our recovering goat, there are no animals in the pen close to the house. The horses can be seen near the tree line, munching on grass.

I circle the house to see the deputy from earlier still seated inside his squad. When I look back towards the house I don't see Becca's vehicle.

Maybe she parked farther down our driveway, and I didn't see it when I initially exited the house. The panic that sets in when I don't find it overwhelms me.

I can't make sense of what I'm seeing...

The deputy steps from his squad when he catches me waving an arm at him while running his way. "Did...did you see anyone leave with the girls and the lady that was visiting?"

Did the person take Becca's vehicle? Oh no, was it her ex? My thoughts are scrambling a million miles an hour.

*Source Creation Date: May 20, 2025, 4:53 am*

“Leave with them? No.” His brows lower as he looks down the road to the west. He turns back to me. “Gal that came a while ago left with them. Is there a problem?”

I try Becca’s number, but it won’t go through. “Yes, there’s a problem.”

The deputy gets on his radio, giving out information about the vehicle, while I lose it. Every call to her gives me a disconnected message, and Keir isn’t answering. I try Matt, then Eden, with no luck. Blaine and Chris come running from the house when they see us at the roadside from the family-room window.

“Where are the girls?” Blaine asks. “Don’t you dare fucking tell me...”

Closing my eyes, I beg God to hear me. I start to recite, “Fear not, for I am with you; be not dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you, I will help you, I will uphold you with my righteous right hand.”

We need help...we’re in trouble, God. So much trouble.

### Chapter Thirty-Nine

#### Deeply Lost

#### Matt

Myfeetcan’tcarryme quickly enough. Off to the side of the main building at the wellness center is an event space. When Caleb brings the therapy dogs to meet with residents, that’s where they gather. I have no idea what’s waiting for me there, but if

it's not Weston...

Hutton said go to the event space. There is a large, black star made of stone inset into the floor, and there are numbered rooms on the perimeter of the space. The utility room is room number thirty-nine, and it's the third door from the entrance to the main building.

I'm running down the stairwell when I realize Hutton isn't right behind me, but I can't wait; I need to get to our son. Pulling my phone out, I text as I'm running. I may need reinforcements. I don't know what I'll find.

I don't want to entertain the thought this could be a diversion and not about getting Weston. Or the video was filmed three days ago, not recently.

The backside of the event building has a set of double doors that are held open by doorstops. It's empty as I barrel inside, and all the tables and chairs are stacked on a platform in one corner. Looking for the small, green, plastic numbered plates over the doors, number thirty-nine is the third one. There is another plastic placard screwed into the door that says, "See Dr. Wallen for keys".

I rattle the doorknob just in case it's unlocked, but it doesn't budge. "Weston, Weston do you hear me?" I whisper loudly against the door. Louder, I repeat myself, but there's no response.

Hutton could be wrong...maybe it was a coincidence.

Regardless, I head to Dr. Wallen's office for those keys. I don't know how thoroughly the police and agents were in checking each room, closets included, but I'm not leaving here without picking through every inch of the building.

The doctor's door is closed, but I hear him talking. I don't care if I'm interrupting a

session. I open the door and see Dr. Wallen at his desk, hanging up his phone before turning to look at me. “Matt, what ca-”

A loud bang sounds from the direction of his window.

Every last thought grinds to a halt.

The splatter of blood is warm on my face as my stomach flips. No. This isn’t real. This can’t be real. With shaking hands speckled dark red, I wipe frantically at my pants, blinking repeatedly at the scene in front of me. What the fuck just happened?

Dr. Gregory Wallen’s body lays half out of his chair, most of his head missing.

I can’t believe what I’m seeing, taking seconds to kickstart my brain. The window has a large hole in it. When I move around the edge of the desk to look outside, I catch no movement, and there doesn’t appear to be anyone there. My hand shakes as I dial 911, giving the details to the operator. Then I text Harrison and Bristow. The local police may have a homicide on their hands, but I’m not going to quit trying to find my son.

Where in the ever-loving fuck is Hutton?

A surreal feeling moves in as I skirt the body to leave the office. I was trained to push past fear and revulsion. To keep a clear head when adrenaline threatens to take over. When you watch your wife’s colleague get his head blown off, though, there is no amount of training or preparation to handle that. Nauseated, I gulp down air as another staff member and the police rush into the building minutes later.

Eden...Christ Almighty. I don’t want her to see this if she happens to be here. I upend the dish with keys in it while others are concentrating on covering up the body, shielding the patients from what happened. How did no one else hear the gunshot

blast?

I pocket every key before slipping back into the hall toward the event center. I look up to see Steve heading my way. His eyes scan the blood splattered over me. “Doc? Is Eden-”

“Oh, oh...no. Fuck...no.” I interrupt. Steering him by the arm into a restroom, I continue, “I have to fill you in...”

## Chapter Forty

Saved...or sabotaged?

Keir

The screen shows Matt's mapping right here. What the hell?

My anxiety skyrockets hearing sirens in the distance. But if they called for an ambulance, Weston is alive. I'm almost to the side door closest to Eden's office when three squad cars and an ambulance pull up to the main entrance.

Eden looks up from her desk when I open her door. "Did I hear sirens?"

We follow the hallway across a common area and toward the main door, where we see people clustered around Dr. Wallen's office door. The shocking thing that makes Eden shriek is Matt, with blood on him, standing in handcuffs. Harrison is talking to a police officer.

I close the distance. "What's going on here?" Eden runs to catch up.

An officer shifts away from the door, giving us a look at the gruesome mess. Blood is sprayed across the wall of certificates, degrees, and pictures. On the floor, a body bag is being positioned while they remove a sheet. Eden starts to scream, making me jump. She turns toward Matt, her voice enraged. "Y-you killed him? You..." I stop her as she lunges at him, fists flying.

If he did, does that mean Wallen is involved with what happened to Weston? Or is Matt covering his tracks? I'm lost here. "Where's Weston?"

Using more force, I lift a screaming and crying Eden away from Matt. "Where's Wes,

Matt?”

Two detectives arrive on scene and divide us up. Harrison assures me he has FBI agents coming, but we don’t get to talk. Before I walk away, Matt steps backward toward me, saying quietly, “In my pocket are several keys. Grab them. Look at me. If you’ve ever trusted me, trust me now. I didn’t do this. Take the keys and get them to Hutton.” Reaching inside his pocket, I pull out keys on four different keyrings, none of them marked. That’s helpful.

Fuck me. Doesn’t he realize no one has a clue where Hutton is? “I would if I had any idea of his whereabouts. What do you mean you didn’t-” I don’t get to finish my question, though, because he’s being led away for transport to the local jail. He still hasn’t told me where our son is.

“Matt, what about Wes?”

“Hutton. Give the keys to him and tell him I tried. I fucking tried.” His voice cracks with desperation.

Then, he’s gone.

Eden is inconsolable, slouched against the wall several feet away from Dr. Wallen’s office.

Harrison crouches next to her, whispering.

I run my fingers through my hair, then pull. Screaming right now might help expel all the built-up emotion, but I’m starting to feel numb. Welcoming the dissociation, I look down at the keys. Where are these from?

There is absolutely nothing I can tell investigators that is helpful. We arrived after Dr.



Wallen was killed. I don't believe Matt is capable of doing that, but I don't understand the blood on him, why he's here at all, or how he'd know where Weston is when we still don't.

Halcyon.

Telling the FBI to stand down.

Dr. Wallen.

They have Weston, but where is he?

He asked me if I've ever trusted him, but I always have. Without a doubt. But now...Now, I'm questioning the blind faith and my ability to excuse all the times I just followed along, bending the truth or outright lying. All to protect our family. Or is it destroying it?

My phone sounds with a text message from Caleb:Call me. SOS

How many directions can we be hit from today? Let it be nothing...let it be an animal escape...

"What's up?" It's hard to keep calm and not unload everything happening here while investigators talk to Eden down the hall.

"The girls are gone. They're missing."

Chapter Forty-One

Dying light

Eden

*Source Creation Date: May 20, 2025, 4:53 am*

Staring at my trembling hands, I try to answer the questions the investigator has, but I'm grappling with what's occurred. Matt claimed he didn't do it. But why was he covered in blood as if he did?

We met when he was lying to me. He could be lying now...How the hell would I know? I've been fooled by people's manipulations so many times in the past.

"You work with Greg Wallen?" He offers me a cup of water, but it will come right back up if I try to drink it. "Has he been having issues with anyone lately?"

Our whole mission statement is a problem for some people. Lately, we've worked to vet any incoming patients to avoid danger. I can't think of a difficult patient he's had recently, other than Zinne. I shrug mumbling, "No."

"What is the nature of your relationship with Special Agent and Assistant Bureau Chief Matt Scholl?" He grimaces at me, and I can't pick one spot in this room to focus on, tapping my foot as I try to organize my scattered thoughts.

Tears spill over as I answer, "He's one of my husbands."

The investigator fumbles his pen before saying incredulously, "One of? Umm, do you mean he's an ex-husband or current husband? What does that mean?"

The wellness center is far enough away from where we live that not all law enforcement around here know our family. At home, no one batted an eye at that statement; we're well known to our neighbors and community. Here, it's still shocking. "We're polyamorous."

He raises an eyebrow. “Was Dr. Wallen part of that?” Why is that an assumption made so often- thinking anyone close to us is part of our relationship?

My emphatic “no” catches him off guard. “Not at all. He was my mentor, my friend. I didn’t have a father figure growing up, but he became like a father to me.”

He’s gone...the man who helped Keir regain his memories, helped Hutton find out about his family, and who could put me at ease with a well-timed word or two of wisdom.

Greg is gone. The person we chose to run the wellness center. This place is nothing without him.

“Do you know anything about my son?” The investigator already knew about Weston missing. He is surprised as I tell him about The Realists, the threats, and the hellish last couple days we’ve had waiting for another note or any word from the kidnapper.

“You think it’s all connected?”

“It has to be. Doesn’t it?”

Steve stops me after I finish speaking to the investigator. “I’m supposed to bring you to Keir and Weston. Come on.”

My heart thunders in my throat, and more tears press at my eyes. “He’s not hurt, is he?” We leave out the side door to avoid all the traffic near Dr. Wallen’s office. I’ll never forget that sight for the rest of my life. I’ll add it to all the other images that plague my nightmares. Worry about what’s happening with Matt nags at me, but first Weston. I need to have him in my arms before I can process anything else.

Harrison holds the passenger door open for me. “It’s close.”

My eyes blur from looking at the flashing lights of emergency vehicles. I try to take steady breaths, but my life has been torn up...the people I love targeted.

“Steve, you were with Matt, right? What happened?” I look back at the wellness center as we take a dirt access road leading to the abandoned area of Camp Carroll.

“Matt’s not who you think he is,” Steve says in a measured tone.

I’ve never known Steve to talk poorly about Matt. It feels like a sudden change, but I’m emotionally overwrought; I’ll dig more later. Following Steve from his unmarked FBI SUV parked in the lot outside the old lab, I notice there isn’t any other vehicle around.

“Keir came here?” He’s a couple steps in front of me walking into the stairwell on the first floor.

“Yes, he came on foot.”

I’m rounding the corner landing from the second floor when something dark is placed over my head, tightening around my neck. My hands scrape at the material around my neck, my screams muffled. I’m lifted off my feet. I can’t tell how many people there are or where Harrison is, but I don’t stop fighting, kicking, thrashing, and swinging my arms until I’m pinned against someone solid.

Disoriented, I’m dropped onto a tile floor. My hands feel around for anything I can use as a weapon. Strong hands grab one of my arms, then a handcuff is tightened around my wrist. I’m forced to stand as I continue to struggle, shrieking and screaming.

It was a trap...it was all just a trap.

Suddenly, a heavy object strikes the back of my head. My eyelids become heavy, my vision dims, my body falling...a second strike.

Before it all goes...

Black.

*Source Creation Date: May 20, 2025, 4:53 am*

“You’re nothing but an abomination.”

“You shouldn’t even exist.”

“They’ll never stay with you...” “You’ll lose it all...all...all.”

Limbs stiff; my head is met with a throbbing ache. I realize whatever was placed on my head is now gone. There is one light shining on me, a utility light on a cord, and I’m handcuffed to a cabinet. I’ve never been inside the laboratory portion of the building-tiled floors, stainless-steel cabinets, counters, two rolling carts, and fume hoods on each side of the room. A speaker crackles and I hear in a chilling voice. “This is a lockdown drill, I repeat, this is a lockdown drill.” Goosebumps pop up on my arms, and my heart seizes up. It’s a voice that haunts me.

But it can’t be her...not anymore.

“This is a lockdown drill. I repeat, this is a lockdown drill” Then a laugh...a male’s humorless chuckle. It’s a recording. Her voice is meant to inflict further torture.

“I’ve been dying to meet you.” That voice...

A loud pounding noise can be heard. I stand straighter, tugging at the handcuffs tethering me to the cabinet. There is another light coming from across the hall. Since the labs have floor-to-ceiling glass with a section where it’s half glass and half wood veneer, I can see fairly well inside the lab.

There’s a tall form of a person in the shadows of the lab across the hall. Is that the

person responsible for this? The noise is coming from that direction.

My voice is scratchy from screaming. I call out, “Hello? Can you hear me? Can you hear me?” I kick at the cabinet, but the only result is a shooting pain up my leg.

If I could just get closer to the glass wall...but I’m stuck.

“Eve.” The voice sounds taunting. “Eve, welcome back to the place of your inception. How does it feel?”

Terror floods my entire being.

Six years ago, I learned the hard way not to trust who people say they are. I didn’t hold onto the lesson like I should have, though.

Likeweshould have.

“Steve?!” How is this happening...again? “How could you? Why?”

What has he done? Matt’s been arrested, Wes is missing, Keir...Holy hell, where are Keir and Hutton? Who is across the hall? Did he murder Greg? What exactly is he capable of, and why?

I’m left with my agonizing thoughts because he doesn’t respond. The pounding subsides from the lab across from me. Sinking to my knees to keep from tearing the skin of my wrist, I weep. All the information Steve knows...He’s been a trusted friend of the family. He’s known Matt for well over a decade.

Wes would follow him anywhere; do anything he says. All the times he sat at our dinner table with us, engaged with the kids, had beers with Matt...All the times I thought of him as a close friend.



What's his end goal? What does he want?

I know what I want...Other than finding my son, I want to inflict pain on Steve Harrison. I want to see fear in his eyes like he's made me feel. I want to watch his light go out.

The sinister maneuvering he's done won't come close to matching what I want done to him. I never thought I'd advocate for blood shed, but this time...

## Chapter Forty-Two

Unwavering

Blaine

If I hadn't fucked up, all the attention wouldn't have been on me, allowing that fake-ass church secretary who looked like a wacked, whimsical art teacher, but in reality is a psychopathic cult member the opportunity to drive off with the girls. I can't even blame this reality on the after-effects of the drugs I did hours ago.

This is all causing irreversible damage to my heart.

Caleb sees all this as his fault, but this is bigger than the bitch who used him to do her damage. It's bigger than the Realists. We had a hard time getting hold of anyone until Keir answered.

Maybe I'm too sober now to hear Dr. Wallen is dead, Matt is being questioned in his murder, Hutton is still MIA, Harrison and Eden are now unaccounted for, and we still have no idea where Weston is. The motherfucking shots keep coming...

By the time Keir arrives, the house is full of badges again. He stalks our way.

Without thinking I dive at him, giving him a fierce hug. Instead of shoving me off discreetly, he returns it.

*Source Creation Date: May 20, 2025, 4:53 am*

Keir is breaking away to speak with the sheriff deputy when an alert is given on the radio that the suspect's rental is occupied, and the vehicle she had driven here isn't onsite. There is an ambulance staging in the area. They aren't sure who might be inside.

With haste Caleb, Keir, and I pile into his vehicle. We follow the deputy running lights and sirens to the rundown boxy-looking house tucked into a grouping of scrubby pines ten miles away. This is where the fruitcake has been staying? It looks abandoned.

God and I aren't on speaking terms like my magnificent bastard of a brother; Caleb and the big guy in the clouds are, but I fucking try. My heartfelt appeal goes out that we find our kids...alive, unhurt, and fucking hell, not traumatized.

Even when I know damn well that's not likely.

Keir has me message Eden and Steve to tell them where we're heading, hoping they'll meet us there, but we get no response.

"Are we worrying about that?" I ask Keir as he flies down the highway behind the deputy.

"Not yet. Harrison said the questioning could take a while. Maybe she's trying to help Matt. I'll get worried if an hour from now they still aren't responding."

Caleb says glumly, "Eden has been watching her phone constantly for an update on Wes. I think we should be worried."

We're not allowed any closer to the house than the main highway running past it. We listen to radio traffic as their SWAT team positions out of sight while surrounding the house. Commands are issued to the person in the house. When no movement is seen, and no one comes to the door an order is given to kick it in.

Excited shouts come over the radio to send in the ambulance crew for a found child. Without a word to each other we take off at a run for the house. It may not be any of our children, but that spark of hope...

It's a lifeline.

We're held back by a line of officers but it's easy to push through when one of the SWAT members walks out carrying a dark-haired little boy in a blue-lined sweatshirt. When we see our son.

He wants down when he catches sight of us. "Daddies!" His little voice rings out as he sprints toward us, having escaped the officer's grasp. We envelop him in a hug. The three of us hold him, reassuring him we're here.

As Keir speaks to the commander, I pick our son up, thanking God endlessly we have him back. He's right here...in my arms. "Are you okay?" My voice is choked up with tears. "Did anyone hurt you?"

He tilts his head at me. "I punched the lady in the eye and scratched her. Then she tied me up. But the good guys came to save me with my daddies."

I kiss him on the side of his head. That's right buddy, we're here.

"Honey, are Waverly or Zinne here with you?"

"Nuh-uh, just the mean lady."

Not since Eden was hurt have I wanted to rip someone's limbs off. How fucking dare she touch him?

Officers clear the rental house and find no sign of the girls or anything to identify the woman. Weston is eating up the attention he's getting asking if they want to see his karate kicks, until he loses steam and falls asleep in Caleb's arms. His face is smeared with chocolate from the candy bar one of the officers gave him from his squad car after paramedics looked him over.

On the way back to Keir's vehicle, Wes's eyes flicker open as he yawns. "I want to be a police officer instead of a ninja now."

Caleb's smile spreads wide, as he whispers, "Finally, a new phase."

I sit in the back of the SUV, next to Caleb who has Weston tucked against his chest with a blanket given to him by the ambulance crew. He is shoeless, at some point losing the one he had. Once his face was cleaned off, we could see some bruising and scrapes. It could've been worse...so much worse.

"Still no answer on Eden's phone," Caleb says in a worried tone. "Does she know about the girls yet? This is going to break her."

"You know what? I think what I appreciate most about Eden, beyond the surface stuff, is her resilience. It's that quiet, unwavering ability to push through life's challenges with grace, even when the weight of the world seems unbearable. She has this way of seeing the world differently, of nurturing something within it, making it better, even when she herself is going through storms. That ability to care, to hold things together when everything's falling apart-that's powerful. It's deeper than any moment, Big Gulp. It's a strength that keeps everything moving forward. It's fucking beautiful." I hold tight to our son, cherishing each breath. She'll show us how to get through this. The strongest damn woman I've ever known.

“I couldn’t have said it better, B,” Keir says, meeting my eyes in the rearview mirror.

My wife also has the capacity to withstand an unfair amount of tragedy. When I tell her about my lapse in judgement, my fucking relapse, she’s not going to cast me aside. We were made for each other, and I’m not built for anybody who’s soft- I talk back, I don’t listen, and sarcasm is ingrained in me.

“Caleb, keep trying Eden,” Keir says. “Wes needs his mom, and she needs him.”

## Chapter Forty-Three

Nothing to lose but everything

Keir

I can't stop looking in at Wes asleep on his bed, Zach curled up next to him. When we carried him into the house, the loud reception from Kim and Chris woke him up completely. He became teary-eyed when he realized Mommy isn't here.

"Guess what, little man?" Kim said with watery eyes. "I think we should make some honey toast." Since Wes could put solid foods in his mouth Kim has made him this concoction of regular toast slathered with butter and sprinkles. The creation has now been upgraded to honey and sprinkles. He grabbed Zach's hand, accepted his teddy bear being offered back to him, and followed Kim into the kitchen.

Glancing down at my phone, it has no new calls.

"She'd never take this long," Blaine warns, sidling up next to me and peeking into the room.

Nodding in agreement, I turn to look him in the face. "I know about what happened earlier." He should realize by now Chris would tell me; he's not able to keep secrets. "We need to talk about it."

"I'll pencil you in. There are more important things going on right now." His face screws up while he huffs, "I know what I need to do. My life isn't all live, laugh, and liver damage anymore."

Matt's call from the police department comes in as we head back downstairs. Once they examined the scene more closely, they were willing to listen to what he had to

say. The blood splatter matched his story; a patient saw an average-sized male in a pulled-up black hoodie run from the building around the same time. I'm relieved he's being released after their questioning.

"Did you find Hutton; did you give him the keys?" Matt asks me urgently. "Is Wes-"

Cutting him off, I tell him, "Weston is with us. He's home, he's okay...he's going to be okay."

"He's home? Really?" He breaks down crying.

Matt tells me he's heading straight here. I share with him that the girls are gone...good news then bad. He's distraught, which I knew would be the case.

"I'm getting worried about Eden, too. She's with Harrison, and neither of them are answering." Then I remember Steve's earlier phone call. How could I forget that? With Dr. Wallen's death, finding Weston. Fuck...

"Were you with Harrison earlier? And did you think you'd found Weston?" Oh my fucking God. If...

"Matt?"

His voice is pinched. "Explain that..."

"Eden and I were in the woods near the lake when Harrison called, wanting to meet up. He said he was with you, and you'd found Weston."

Which we clearly know now was a lie.

"Are you sure you understood him? That's what he said?"



The pieces start to fall into place in the most horrific way: the code sixty-seven; the seed Harrison planted about Halcyon, which Matt says he'd only heard of recently but suspected some of the agents he'd worked with in the Camp Carroll raid became involved in; the security cameras...one piece after another.

"Why, Matt...Fuck. Why?" Strapping on my holster and gun, I pull a couple more magazines from the office safe.

"I don't give a fucking shit why anymore. Why is immaterial. We need to find him. I'm going back to the wellness center."

"I'll meet you there. Did you find Hutton?"

"Fuck...I did, but I lost him." He makes a strangled noise. "He lured them in under my watch. He did the thing Number One never could. Meet me on foot near the parking garage under the abandoned laboratory building."

"Matt? Are we...Are we going to find them all alive?"

His answer is as scared as mine and defeated. "I fucking hope so."

Blaine finds me as I'm throwing on a bulletproof vest. "Where are you going? Did they find the girls?"

The rundown shocks him. "Steve? Who is the Bible-banging chick then?"

"B, I don't know, but I think you should come along." I grab a second vest and another loaded gun, throwing them in the duffle of gear I have.

Shifting from one foot to the other, he says, "So you can babysit me? Or because you want help and know Caleb isn't going to throw his holy hands, so you need me

because I have no qualms gutting someone right now?”

Exactly, B. “All of that. Are you coming?”

Sarcastically, he quips, “Why do I feel so seen, heard, and validated right now? Let’s go get our family.”

### Chapter Forty-Four

#### Choosing violence

Eden

Clattering can be heard from the lab next to mine, which makes me bang on the cabinet and yell again. There is a high-pitched screech back...and another. I realize I’m hearing them because there is a fume hood attached to an airflow system that must connect to the other lab. I lean closer to where the hood is, trying again. There is more than one person indistinctly yelling things. The pounding across the hall starts again. How many people are here?

Harrison’s voice comes over the speaker. “Would you like to see each other?”

This is a game to him. He’s playing with us because he can.

It’s been dark, with just one bulb lighting the vast lab, but suddenly it lights up completely. I have to blink to adjust to the glaring brightness. I turn to see Waverly and Zinneah huddled together, bound to a bar secured to the wall in the lab next door. I swivel to see where the continued banging is coming from. It’s Hutton. He has a gash on his cheek, a bruise covering the side of his head, and his knuckles are bloody.

Does he have all of us? Me, Hutton, and the kids? Or the whole family?

The thick glass doors and windows don't allow us to hear what we're yelling to one another, but it doesn't stop us. Tears of frustration fall.

Then Hutton and I are forced to watch Steve walk into the lab where the girls are, releasing them from the bar and binding them more tightly before leading them roughly out of the lab. I lose my mind, screaming and kicking the cabinet, when he's rough with them, half dragging them out of sight. The look on Hutton's face is downright murderous.

Good...we're on the same page. We're not going to lie down defeated. Harrison is likely to hear us, but I don't care. I scream at the top of my lungs, "Whatever he wants, don't give it to him! I mean it, Hutton. If he says he'll kill me, don't give in! Don't give in!"

He can't hear what I'm saying. We both continue to yell until Steve is back, standing between the two labs while loading a clip in a handgun. He's eerily calm and expressionless, reminiscent of when I met Hutton at the center. Devoid of human emotion.

We're going to die here. Maybe that's all he wanted from the beginning-not to use us but effectively end us.

He props the lab door open, then moves to do the same to the lab Hutton is in. He positions himself back between both of them. We stop trying to yell to one another, focusing on our captor.

"Are you wondering what you're doing here?" His tone is flat, his eyes dead. "We've never stopped watching you, tracking you. Did you think we'd invest millions of dollars in both of you, then let you walk off into the sunset? No. You belong to us."

I'm shaking with rage. We've been under surveillance...We've never been free. Hutton shouts, "Who is this 'us' you're talking about? The Realists disbanded into pockets of losers!"

Harrison looks at him, unbothered. "The Realists? No. The only purpose they ever served was to draw attention away from the work we were doing. If the public focused on their beliefs, we could remain a secret."

"You're demented!" I yell.

He shrugs. "It may look that way to you, but we've always seen the big picture. We were developing a human race capable of withstanding disease, the elements, psychological warfare...that we could control. But it never ended with Camp Carroll. Halcyon's scope has the potential to change all the things wrong with the world."

Hutton responds, "A crooked government gave you a limitless budget to torture children, but you can't see that because of your subpar intellect. Because you swallowed their rhetoric. Because you're a puppet."

I see a crack in the mask Steve is wearing, his jaw twitching. Hutton is going to get him so angry he lashes out.

If I can keep him talking, I hope an idea about how to escape will come to me. "What do you get out of these...these ideas?"

He steps closer to the lab I'm in. "I've dedicated my life to finding solutions. In fact, I joined the FBI in counterterrorism as an intelligence operative. I'm their original boy-wonder hacker...long before X was ever dreamed up."

He's jealous? Is this all about Hutton's abilities...they were grooming?

Hutton starts laughing. “You really are insane, aren’t you?” I watch Hutton’s face contort in distaste. “The FBI tapped me because I can run circles around anyone they already had. You’re angry I made you obsolete.”

Steve’s face reddens, the tendons in his neck protruding as he spits, “You were paid millions to take code I’d started and bastardize it. That was mine. The money should’ve been mine. But no, this is bigger than a science experiment stealing my money. This is about how valuable your blood is to our continued work. We can cage you and your offspring to farm your biological materials. It could be the end of disease as we know it.”

Chills run up my back. Farm? Cages? The worst part of this is he’s not speaking about just himself. There is a whole shadow division of a government entity dedicated to these Machiavellian schemes. My heart feels twisted inside me thinking about what Weston may be going through.

“Why now?” I manage to ask in a seething tone.

*Source Creation Date: May 20, 2025, 4:53 am*

He's been watching and actively pretending to be a friend for years. What's changed now?

My questions don't stop, even though I don't bother asking this maniac a single one. Why kill Dr. Wallen? Or any of the others in copycat killings? Why kidnap the children? Why play games or threaten? Why, why, why...

Harrison moves into the lab, keeping his distance. "You are a beautiful little thing, aren't you?"

I couldn't feel more repulsed. "If you try to touch me, I'll tear your dick off." Hutton is trying to free himself to get to me.

The laugh Harrison lets loose is nightmarish. He smiles at me. "I should sample the goods. See why you've been able to keep five men in your bed. Must be damn good, huh?"

"I'd rather slide down a razor blade into a pool of vinegar," I say before spitting at him.

Hutton yells, "I'll kill you slowly. I'll make your death so painfully slow if you lay a single finger on Eden!"

Standing tall, Harrison turns around to leave. Stopping to lean on the door frame, he says, "Why now? What better time? The seven-year anniversary of Camp Carroll, just in time to save Halcyon."

Harrison removes the gun he'd tucked into the waistband of his pants. "But I don't need both of you. One will suffice."

I'm not going to beg him to spare my life. I won't do it. If I start to plead for him to leave Hutton alone, he'll kill him just to get me in line. My experience with psychopaths makes me keep my mouth shut.

Hutton and I share a look. I mouth "I love you", and he mouths "forever". We're on the same page about not asking Harrison to spare us. He'll do what he wants, anyway.

In a bored-sounding voice, Hutton says, "It's sad you think DTMY had any input from you. You can't string a coherent code together if you tried. You bluffed your way into the FBI to begin with. It's sad tha-"

Harrison barrels toward Hutton in anger, cutting him off by shoving him back with one hand on his throat.

Getting him close like he'd wanted, Hutton goes for the gun. Still handcuffed to the cabinet, he fights Harrison. I have limited sight of their brawl. Then the gun goes off.

One shot, a groan...

"Hutton? Hutton!" I start to fight against the cuff and cabinet again.

As Harrison rises, wiping a trickle of blood from his mouth where Hutton hit him, he gives me a self-satisfied smirk. "I've wanted to do that for years."

"Noooo! Noooo, noooo! Hutton?!" Sobs wrack my body as I continue to pour every bit of strength, I have into freeing my arm from its shackle. In my flailing, I feel a shooting pain in my hand. I've pulled so much; I've broken a bone. I bite down on my tongue as I use my other hand to squeeze it. I manage to slide the cuff off, not



grabbing it before it hits the cabinet.

Harrison looks right at me. Freed from the handcuff, I scramble up. I lunge at him with unleashed rage, furious he's taken so many people from me. He's not fast enough in calculating my speed. I come at him full force, knocking him to the floor inside the lab Hutton is lying in. Harrison doesn't have the gun on him.

His reaction isn't immediate, but once I'm clobbering him, he grabs me by the back of my neck to get me off him. Remembering the self-defense classes with Matt, I go for his eyes. The loud grunt of pain makes me work harder. He's done. I'm ending him.

There's a screwdriver on the floor lying halfway under a rolling cart. I just need to grab it...

Harrison is twice my size; he just needs to unseat me from him, and I won't make it out of this. Risking the consequences if I can't do it fast enough, I rear my knee back and drive it into his groin. A huff of air leaves him. "You fucking cunt..."

I'm able to grab the screwdriver while reaching back. The trail of blood from where Hutton is lying, looking lifeless, spurs me on. I drive the tool with all my strength into Harrison's chest, hopefully right into this sorry excuse of a man's heart. "I want you to die. Die, you fucker, die..." My words are marred by tears. "Go back to Hell...die..."

He stops moving, his eyes wide open and blood spilling from his mouth. I clamber away from him to Hutton's side, still clutching the screwdriver. "H-Hutton?" Laying the screwdriver beside me to keep it close by, my hands scour his body, looking for the source of his bleeding. I can't find the bullet hole, so I roll him from his side onto his back. Hugging him, I bawl. "Baby?"

His eyes flutter. “Hutton?” My hoarse whisper is spoken against his cheek as I kiss him. “Baby?”

His beautiful, otherworldly green eyes open. “Get the girls and get out. Please, please...run, Eden.”

I shake my head. “I’m not leaving you. Harrison is dead. I killed him.” Oh, my fuck...I killed someone. I’m a murderer now. I-

Don’t crash out, keep it together. “I’ll help you up. We’re getting out of here. Together.”

I can’t help him get up, no matter how much I try. Hutton is solid muscle and almost seven feet tall; I’m not moving him alone. “Can you get up? I’m not leaving you behind.”

“We’re not alone. He has a whole group of people working with him. Get the girls...go.”

*Source Creation Date: May 20, 2025, 4:53 am*

Think. I have to think. We're not alone?

"I can't leave you," I whimper. "I can't leave you behind." From the stairwell, I hear noise drawing closer. The panic starts taking over, the pain from my hand excruciating. I can't think...let me think.

"Where...Where were you shot? Can you stand?"

Hutton grabs my hand, and I try not to wince from the pain. "I love you. Remember how to get to that place I showed you? You need to go before the rest of them come looking for him. Go. Please."

"Then you'll meet us there?" I nod to myself. "Then you'll come?" Grabbing the screwdriver once more, I work to undo where he's attached to the cabinet with my good hand, breaking the handle more than Hutton had and letting the cuff fall loose.

"Run. Go, Eden. Now."

I kiss his cheek while placing the screwdriver in his hand.

Gasping for breath, I run down the hall, looking in each lab room until I see our girls inside the last one. I pull the door open, sprinting to them.

Run.

A mantra pounds in my head as I clutch both the girls' hands, whispering, "We need to be fast, okay? Can you both run?" Looking over them quickly, registering their

tear-stained faces, scratches, and bruises, I fight off the urge I have to meltdown even further. My babies...They hurt my babies.

“M-Mommy, you’re bleeding.” Waverly’s voice is choked as her small hand touches my leg.

No. No. I’m not going backwards. Run, Eden run. Get them out of here. “Waves.” I kneel in front of her, kissing her cheek. “I’m okay. We’re getting out of here. As fast as we can.” Nodding to her, I try reassuring both of us. I pull Zinnea close, hugging her to me. “Do you both understand?”

It takes me minutes to orient myself in the building. We take the staircase close by. At the bottom, a rusty, unmarked leads to the tunnels. I’ve been in the tunnels on the property twice: once when Hutton wanted to show me an emergency hatch that releases close to the lake, and once when I came on my own looking for a missing patient. Neither one was at night, terrified of being located.

Run. Go. I need to get them out of here.

## Chapter Forty-Five

Tainted

Matt

I’ve counted six people surrounding the laboratory building. This is more organized than I’d given The Realists credit for. My heart sinks, admitting to myself the cleanup within the FBI wasn’t as effective as we’d been led to believe.

The grounds, the buildings, the tunnels...Harrison had all the maps. There is nowhere to go he wouldn’t know about.

Steven Harrison, one of the few people from the failed raid at Camp Carroll I'd trusted. He fooled me completely. It hurts to know I gave him all he needed to take us down. Hell, he set me up for Dr. Wallen's murder.

While we walked to the laboratory, Keir, Blaine, and I did a rundown, and it was enlightening. He's been working on destroying our family from several angles.

He preyed on all our weaknesses.

He made me feel paranoid about whom I could trust within the FBI. I stopped the flow of information, keeping things between Keir, Harrison, and myself, edging Bristow out of the loop in the process. Using examples from Camp Carroll ...keeping my failure fresh in my mind.

He made Keir question my motives and played on our perceived power imbalance, bringing up his past in XIX to torment him.

He dropped a baggy of pills outside Blaine's office after taking Wes from us, which Blaine discovered when the school asked him about a man seen hanging around the hallway outside his office. He knew the likelihood an addict would reach a breaking point was high.

One of his accomplices infiltrated Caleb's life through church, making him question his relationship with Eden and distracting him from watching over Wes so she could grab him.

Another accomplice moved in next door to stress us out with his hateful antics, drawing our attention.

He played games with Hutton's head over the security cameras and copycat code. Knowing he'd evoke the brainwashing Hutton endured by poking at him, he

suggested night vision goggles be mentioned by Bristow to him, walking in the woods at night, finding a security device planted...

Then there's our wife. By killing people connected to the Bradford and Lassiter families, leaving threatening notes, making her aware she was being followed, and taking Weston from us, he reopened a chapter from her past and made her relive the trauma she'd endured. Knowing he'd break her down, cause her to make unwise decisions...

He'd get her alone...

*Source Creation Date: May 20, 2025, 4:53 am*

“We need to move quickly,” I tell Keir and Blaine.

Having Blaine with us is unexpected, but he’s taken the self-defense classes and built his body up strong. He may not have the training Keir and I do, but he’s ready to fight back. I wasn’t for it, but with each revealed betrayal, all I want is to take Harrison and anyone working with him down.

But first we need our family made whole again.

A figure in all black carrying a plastic bag circles one of the parking ramp pillars to walk up the stairs. With a slight head nod to Keir, we run in the shadows pulling the person off the second step with a hand over their mouth. Once we have the cover of the trees and the person pinned up against a towering oak, I yank down the hood. A female.

Blaine snorts. “Oh look, it’s Bible-thumper Becky.”

Her lips thin. Glaring at us she says, “You won’t kill me. I know where your kids are.”

Keir presses his arm against her chest harder causing her to whimper. I give him a warning look; she could start screaming or calling for help. “I wouldn’t brag about kidnapping our kids...that’s a risky little move,” I say, moving in closer. “You’re going to tell us where they are, because I’ve been waiting for the chance to meet the person responsible.” Using the most menacing voice I can, while clamping a hand over her mouth, I add, “I’ve been dying to meet you...to take you apart and see what makes you tick.”

Blaine steps up to her. “We have Weston back. I guess you didn’t know how persistent we are about the people we love. Oh, but you don’t understand what it’s like to be loved, do you backshed Becky?” he taunts while handing Keir zip ties. “It’s funny you thought Caleb would ever leave his family for your ugly ass. They should’ve found a better-looking flunky to trick him. Not that it would’ve worked, anyway.” I move back slightly, dropping my hand to help Keir zip tie her wrists and ankles together.

She says angrily to Blaine, “There’s a special place in Hell for you, you deviant asshole.”

“A special place in Hell? For me? That’s actually really thoughtful,” he replies mockingly.

I tell Blaine to quiet down as we secure her with the zip ties. “One last chance. Where are they?” Keir bites off a section of duct tape to put over her mouth.

“Or what?” she challenges.

“If you think any of us will spare your life after you took our kids from us, you’re delusional. You’ll tell us or take a bullet to the head,” I tell her, removing my handgun from its holster on my leg.

“Okay, okay...They’re on the third floor of the lab, but you’ll never get to them. Not without me.”

It’s ballsy to think we’re going to bargain with her.

“Pass,” Blaine says.

“Where on the third floor? And is it just the kids or are Eden and Hutton there, too?”



Keir asks her.

She sneers at Blaine before turning to Keir. “They’re all up there. But Agent Harrison doesn’t plan to keep them there long.” She shrugs. “You won’t make it inside though. We have it protected.”

She’s bluffing. We were able to grab her when she was entering. I’m not going to take her word for anything.

In the distance, I see a fire toward the lake. Just what we need, for hell on earth to burst into flames. “Christ, let’s go.”

“What are we doing with her?” Keir asks me.

We don’t have to decide. As we’re standing there a bullet tears through the night and hits dead center on her forehead, one of her fellow agents taking her out the way we had threatened.

Blaine’s eyes widen as he says, “That’s a bad way to go.”

“Fuck...Run!”

Chapter Forty-Six

World on fire

Eden

It’s impossible to shut out the pain.

Holding the girls’ hands, we make it out of the hatch into the woods. Within seconds,

I see the peak of the roof over the tree line toward the lake. We're on the move.

"Mommy, M-Mommy...where are we going?"

"Shhh, shhh, Waves, just follow me."

*Source Creation Date: May 20, 2025, 4:53 am*

I hear movement toward the lab building; we're not alone in the woods.

I can't stop...My body screams in pain and my heart breaks ...run, run, run.

It's getting close, we're close.

More rustling and twigs cracking underfoot near us make me lift the girls, one in each arm, to travel the last few steps to the tree with the skull. My voice is broken when I say, "Thank you, baby, thank you." I grab the gun Hutton must've left. My good hand is shaking badly, I stabilize it with the swelling one.

Waverly takes an envelope from inside the jaw bones of the skull. "Mommy?"

I stuff it in my pocket.

I ask the girls to close their eyes; so they avoid seeing the horrific images nailed, tacked, and glued to the walls. "Shhh...we have to be so quiet. Keep your eyes shut. Here, sit here." I have them sit in a corner out of sight of the dilapidated door. "I'm right next to you, okay? I'm right here," I whisper before shielding them with my body.

The movement sounds distant, and I hope it stays that way. Once it's light out, we can try moving from here. Tremors wrack my body, the physical pain overshadowed by the devastation of loss...Greg, six innocent victims meant to terrorize me, my Hutton. My love. My eyes sweep the dark room to see, courtesy of Hutton, there is a pocketknife on the folding chair and another gun in the other corner. He was preparing for war if needed. The realization he never stopped thinking of us makes

the pain in my chest constrict, taking my breath away.

How do I live without him?

Waverly puts her arms around me, her head pressed into my back. “M-Mommy, are you scared?” Her little voice is a whisper.

The throbbing pain in my hand doesn’t stop me from reaching back to smooth over her arm. “No,” I lie. “I’m not scared, because I have a plan.”

Do I? I’m terrified but I can’t show them that. They need me to be strong, to know a way out.

Then a movement close by makes me freeze. Could it be Hutton? Did he manage to get to us this quickly? I reassure the girls softly to stay still and silent before crawling to look out the opening in the doorway. But when I catch sight of the person in night vision goggles, a gun at his side, I know the weapons Hutton left may be the only way out. Because no one is going to hurt my babies.

I fight to get control of the shaking in my arm, reaching over to grab the pocketknife. I barely have time to react when the door is pushed aside, falling off the rusted hinge it was hanging by. Too close to get the gun up, I flick the knife open, stabbing the man dressed in all black in the side. He wheezes, a hand flying to the wound. I’m not waiting around to talk. I reach for the girls, leading them to the door while trying to keep them from looking at the walls. “Come on...come on...”

The man, having fallen, rolls to his side, saying something obscured by a cough...

Zinne pulls a lighter from her pocket. Other than Chris, we have no smokers in our home. I don't know where she acquired it at, but the sight is so shocking I freeze. I watch as the dainty, eight-year-old little girl flicks it, gazing at the flame before

lighting the pants of our attacker on fire.

Gasping for air, I call, “Zinne?! Let’s go.”

We can deal with her arson tendencies later.

Fire spreads through the woods quickly due to the drought conditions. It's getting closer to the lab building. We're running toward the center. People, get to people. I'm looking over my shoulder at the crackling flames as they dance in the treetops behind us.

Waverly's crying while clinging to my hand, and Zinne remains stoic running alongside me. She puts her finger over her lips, looking at Waves to remind her we need to be stealthy.

It's all too easy to lose your way in the woods at night if you don't know landmarks to look for. I stop, out of breath, turning in a circle. I don't know if we're heading to the lake or the center now. I scoop the girls close with my arms. “Just a bit longer...we're close.” Another lie: I don't know where we are. The fire at our backs is the only direction I know to avoid. We pick up speed, and I cradle my broken hand close, wincing at the throb traveling up my arm.

Waverly's shout of “Look!” startles me. My eyes follow where she's pointing. Is that? Please, please, please...

I take the risk of outing our location as I scream at the top of my lungs, “Matt? Matt?!”

Then, like a vision from the best dream imaginable, he turns to see us as he motions to someone. When he turns back we see Keir and Blaine running behind him.

“Daddies!” Waverly breaks away with a hiccupping cry. Blaine reaches her first, pulling her protectively into his arms. They’re both crying as he looks her over.

“Hutton. We have to go back for Hutton. He’s in the labs,” I choke out in Matt’s arms. “We have to-”

Keir, with tears in his eyes, asks, “Are you sure he is?”

We all look toward the fire licking at the large glass structure. To get back, we need to run through the fire. I try to pull away...to return for him as a wail breaks from me. “We can’t leave him...please...”

“Eden?” Keir grabs my hand.

No. He didn’t come to us, so I’ll go to him.

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*Source Creation Date: May 20, 2025, 4:53 am*

I make it a few feeble steps before Matt's arms wrap around me from behind. "Eden, sweetheart, you can't..."

The world tilts. The choked sobs are lost in the void as I break completely. As I start to acknowledge what's happened to all the people I love.

When I understand, I'll never see him again.

I feel myself getting faint. I give it one last shot trying to break free as Matt lifts me into Keir's arms.

Shutdown. My body protects my brain, vision dimming...

The world goes dark.

Chapter Forty-Seven

Letting go

One week later

Eden

Grief has muted the colors in my reality and altered the way I exist in the world. It robs me of the ability to feel happy in moments that should feel magical. It taints my interactions. Because that's grief...it's devastating.

My eyes fill fast with tears, and I'm on the brink of wanting to laugh. All I can think is how horrible and beautiful it is that our eyes blur the truth when we can't bear to see it.

The truth of all that's happened.

The night Zinne's fire burned the abandoned buildings and half the woods on the property to the ground, it's as if the victims of the massacre at Camp Carroll reclaimed the land. When we rebuilt the center, we should've made sure not one of those buildings remained. We should've safeguarded ourselves in countless ways.

The effects of our actions will be long-lasting. A lifetime? The next generation? The one after that? Greg had a plaque in his office that read: There are no happy endings, so make the start or middle happy. It felt morbid. We counseled the patients at the center to help them find a place in life free from control...to give them a sense of happiness.

I understand the statement now.

Goodbye can't be happy; it'll always hurt.

There are regrets, unspoken truths, and bittersweet memories.

"Mommy?" Weston climbs onto my lap, and I wipe away my tears. They're a daily occurrence, bouts punctuated by loss so heavy I'm sinking. His little arms wrap around me. "I love you."

Oh, my sweet baby...He has no idea how much those simple words will always mean to me. "I love you, too. To the moon and back."

The funeral service starts soon, but I needed a quiet minute to get myself together. I



pull my purse up with my good hand, retrieving Hutton's letter from the pocket I keep it in and reading the words I will reread hundreds more times: Eden, you gave my heart a purpose. All my joys came from you. Don't look back. Hold our babies tight, love our family, and let them love you. We are forever.

Trying to keep my tears at bay isn't working. Weston pats the sling supporting my casted hand. "Daddy B says to be careful, but can I touch it?" He places his little hand over my cast, his nose wrinkling. "It feels funny. Can I sign it later?"

He's still our Weston...curious, sweet, and compassionate. Thankfully, what he went through hasn't changed that. The trauma manifests in other ways-wanting someone with him at all times, always having his teddy bear close by, not wanting the lights shut off, and he's now slower to warm up to strangers.

He hops off my lap, grabbing his teddy bear he put on the nearby loveseat. "We should go, huh?" I ask him while standing up to smooth out the black dress I'm wearing, a small gold pin of two figures embracing on the lapel.

There's a soft knock at the door, and Caleb looks in. "I was just checking on you." He looks so dapper in his suit, even if he's not comfortable wearing one. "You don't have to get up and speak. The minister said he can read what you've written."

I owe him that, at the very least.

Taking my arm and picking up Weston along with his teddy bear, in his other arm, Caleb walks me out to the chapel. Casting my eyes down, it's hard to look into the faces of the people we pass. A responsibility for his death rests with me. My existence in his life.

Our family is seated to the right, three rows back from the front of the chapel filled with beautiful floral sprays and bouquets. Keir stands holding Warner, moving aside

for me to sit. Matt finds my hand to squeeze. Waverly points to the picture she had drawn gracing the front of the funeral program. But it's the powerful pair of green eyes at the end of the row that draws my gaze, understanding written in them. He held me tight last night as I shared my guilts with him. Blaine holds Zeb close as he sleeps on his chest. Caleb separates Zach and Wes to keep their shenanigans to a minimum. Zinneah is seated primly beside Matt. It's us...our family.

We lost Greg, but Hutton was spared that night. After being shot in the shoulder he was still able to end the lives of the four agents he found on his way out of the building before the building was fully engulfed in fire.

Gathering strength from their presence, I head to the podium to speak after a prayer from the minister. My breath catches when I spot a framed photo next to his urn of him and I. The wellness center had just reopened in New York, and we'd spent a whole day painting and moving furniture, readying it for patients. We were laughing, an arm around each other. That's what I want to remember...his laughter.

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*Source Creation Date: May 20, 2025, 4:53 am*

Tears threaten to spill as I clear my throat. “Dr. Gregory Wallen was more than an outstanding psychologist, humanitarian, mentor, and advocate. He was a friend...”

### Epilogue

Six months later...

Eden

Tomorrow marks a new beginning of sorts.

If I'd been asked after meeting her if I thought I'd ever work for Dr. Almari or see her as a mentor in the future, I would've been stunned speechless. It started with a heartfelt apology on her part and a degree of understanding on mine. Once she'd met the whole family, told me about her traumatic experience of losing her longtime partner, and I saw how much she was helping Zin, I couldn't resist warming to her. Taking her job offer scared and excited me. The opportunity to change lives on a greater scale. But here I am, the night before I get in front of an audience as a speaker on trauma and embark on a new career path. The Horizon Wellness Center is now closed; there was no moving on without Greg.

“The kids are settled in with their cousins. I'm not sure my sister thought this sleepover through,” Matt says in passing.

Even so, I'm thankful to have all my husbands home...alone. That hasn't happened for so long.

Hutton has stopped traveling, preferring to do his work from home. He is no longer doing any work for government agencies. Instead, he builds programs designed to keep children safe on the internet. To honor Greg, he also manages a global whistleblower network to report crimes against humanity. He's still anonymously hacking bank accounts and leaving money behind.

Matt retired from his position with the FBI once he ensured that Halcyon was exposed and eradicated, starting a private security company for high-profile clients. He picks and chooses whom he works with, not wanting to get involved in scandals or with dangerous people.

Keir took a promotion in the FBI, and now he's the head of a task force looking for missing children. He is sometimes gone a few days at a time, but his main office is close by. Since taking the position, he's wrapped up a cold case from twenty-three years ago, finding answers for the family, and his team found a kidnapped three-year-old from Connecticut.

Blaine is working on his sobriety daily. His relapse scared him more than we could've. He goes to meetings three times a week. He's still a guidance counselor at the alternative learning center, and he's been voted "most loved" by the senior class, which is a stroke to his ego he didn't need.

Then there's my Caleb. We have work to do, but he finally told me his feelings about being neglected by me. We're intentional now in our routines: a walk in the morning and winddown time at the end of the day watching a podcast he enjoys. His "glue" keeps all of us and the kids running smoothly. He's given up the Church of the Good News, realizing he felt further from God while attending instead of closer. Now, he says he gets answers from Him while tending to the animals.

The Abbott children are officially Bradford children now. The adoption was finalized two months ago. Zach is getting more talkative. He loves going along with Wes's

play suggestions, but is expressing more interests of his own, like baseball. Zinnea didn't set the Realists' house on fire, which I was worried about, but the house fire caused her to fixate on burning. Well, we continue to work on it...

Waverly dances, draws, and tries desperately to get Zinnea out of the house to do things with the animals or other kids. Zin, however, prefers adults and reading.

Weston is in his police officer, specifically SWAT team, phase. When he isn't in karate or taking care of his animals, he fights crime in a pair of cowboy boots with a ninja sword on his belt next to his plastic gun.

Our youngest two, Warner and Zeb, are growing up happy, healthy, and loved dearly. May they never have memories of anything else.

In so many ways, we're blessed. I remind myself of this when the dark thoughts press from the back of my mind. Images of Greg's body, Harrison's bloody chest, the man Zinnea set on fire in the woods...

The person I was had to be reinvented to keep myself from going mad.

"Hey, earth to Eden," Matt whispers seductively. He sets his toothbrush back in the sanitizer before kissing my neck. "What are your plans tonight?"

I cock a smile at him. "You have to ask?"

Dinner was a mood all its own. Yes, the food was delectable, but it was the teasing that got me hot.

The exchanged looks, the innuendo, all of us in one room. There's powerful chemistry then, there's explosive heat.

My light laugh trails behind me as I leave the bathroom for the main bedroom where we're all staying tonight. Even if nothing sexual comes of it, I wanted to keep them all close. Despite not expecting anything, I dressed for the occasion. Under my robe is a matching set of lacy red underwear and bra, though I normally sleep naked or in one of my husbands' T-shirts. Lingerie isn't needed to entice any of them, but I thought switching things up might be fun.

Keir and Blaine are getting ready to lie down when Keir says he gets to sleep next to me. Blaine informs him he's too late, since earlier they'd claimed positions; Hutton on one side and him on the other.

"Womp, womp," Blaine jokes, balling his fists to wipe his eyes mockingly.

Caleb looks over from the high-back chair he's sitting in, removing his socks. "And so it starts."

Strains of music come through a speaker placed on the dresser, and Blaine sways to the music. The sexy rolling of his hips makes me feel needier, and I'm salivating watching him move. That man can dance. Keir whistles at him laughing as he walks past to the bathroom in nothing but his boxer briefs.

I keep my robe on, joining Blaine in a dance. Letting the music flow over me, I rest my head back against him, my ass grazing his hard cock inside those black boxer briefs.

Hutton uses his foot to push the door open, carrying an ice bucket with champagne and non-alcoholic sparkly in one arm and glasses by the stem in the other. "A toast? To your first, of many I'm sure, speaking engagements."

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*Source Creation Date: May 20, 2025, 4:53 am*

As a flushed Matt comes back from the bathroom, I can guess just how heated things were getting between him and Keir. I wink at him. “Getting ready, eh?”

“Hard to resist.” He winks back.

Once we’re all in the room with champagne flutes in our hands, Hutton offers words of encouragement and support for tomorrow. “To our wife, the most incredible woman I know.”

Blaine raises his glass filled with the sparkling cider, high. “She’s beauty, she’s grace, she’s got that glorious face...fuck, you’re so fucking hot, Ed.”

“To our wife, worthy of all praise possible,” Keir joins in.

Matt wraps an arm around my waist. “To the strongest woman I’ve ever met.”

There’s a chorus of playful “Hear! Hear!” before Blaine can’t help himself. “Mmmm. Just what exackatackaly are you up to with this robe? That’s coming off...” He tugs the belt to open it. Sucking in a breath, he says, “Fucking let’s go.”

He’s never worried about exposing himself in any way. With that body, he should show it off. Confidently flinging his now-removed underwear toward the hamper in the corner, his dick springs up in appreciation.

Caleb sets his drained glass of champagne down to refill it. “Here we go.”

The robe gets pulled off by Hutton, who kisses my neck. Breathing into my ear, he

says, “You look like a goddess, but I don’t want you covered up.”

Within panting breaths, I order them to all strip, not that they need much encouragement. Keir gives Matt a hungry look to, his hand running over his erection.

Moving me around to face him, Hutton towers over me. I run my hands down his abs to where his impressive cock is sandwiched between us, pressing against him.

“You’re starting with the velvet hammer?” Blaine cracks. He never fails to mention Hutton’s size, which is monumental.

Breaking our kiss, Hutton responds, “Once. Just once I’d like you to refrain from lusting after my dick.”

“Dude, I don’t feel like being torn apart. I’m just giving credit where it’s due...Super dick, Dicktator, Cockonator...”

I pull Caleb toward me, finding his lips while Hutton’s hands caress my breasts. Caleb moves behind me, to slip his hand into my lacy underwear, and Hutton seeks my lips again.

Blaine drops onto the bed, his hand stroking his dick as he watches us. From the corner of the room where Keir had been opening the second bottle of champagne, I hear a deep moan. I have to pull back and look.

Matt has their dicks held together with one hand, giving them both a hand job, while they tongue-fuck. Deep, passionate groaning ratchets up my neediness.

“Mmm...” I look up at Hutton. “I need y-”

I’m cut off when his mouth seals back over mine. He tears the lacy G-string off;



Caleb moves away to allow him to lift me, his length rubbing me just right as I position around him tightly.

I feel Caleb at my back, pressing soft kisses across my shoulder blades and spurring me on with sweet encouragement, “That feel good? That’s right, honey, nice and slow. Ease it in, how’s that...”

Blaine calls Caleb’s name to get his attention as he throws the tube of lubricant he grabbed from the bedside table, along with foil packets of condoms, at him.

I deliriously ride Hutton’s cock while Caleb works my asshole with lube. His fingers are not enough, though. I want to feel full...so fucking full...

My vantage point allows me to see the moment Matt and Keir come. Their heaving, chiseled chests, the post-coital tenderness...it’s spinning the coil of ache tighter. All of them...I want them all touching me. Arching back, my mouth drops open. “Ohhhh, yes, yeeesss.” Caleb, sheathed in a condom and lubed up, works himself into my ass.

Blaine makes a choked noise. “Fuck...that’s ...oh my god, that finger suck at the end was intense.” He’s going back and forth between watching Matt with Keir and us.

I moan, “All...all of you...please, please...”

We move to the bed, where Hutton carefully lies back with me still on him, and Caleb re-enters me. Blaine watches on his side, still trying to crack jokes. “I’m still so impressed with the structural integrity of this bed.”

“Hey, B, your mouth has more important things to do than talk right now,” Keir teases, lying on the other side of us. Matt watches, standing at the end of the bed and taking a drink of his champagne. His dick is hard as a rock again...a recovery time like no other.

A rumbling roar escapes Hutton as he comes hard inside me. I'm sent right over the edge after him, spasming around him. Caleb takes the rhythm over as Blaine massages his hand over one of my ass cheeks and Keir lightly bites my outer thigh.

When Matt joins in, I lose it completely. He crawls past Blaine to kneel facing me, moving in to kiss me. His tongue tangles with mine, giving little sucks on my lower lip before diving back in. Every one of them is propelling me to an earth-shattering release.

*Source Creation Date: May 20, 2025, 4:53 am*

Caleb undoes my bra, his hands moving around me to play with my nipples. Hutton still sits deep inside me. “Fuck, Big Gulp, that’s one helluva sight,” Blaine says to Caleb as I arch back, further pushing my breasts out. Luxuriating in their touches, their love...

We’re all regrouping, having another glass of champagne or cider, when I look at Keir’s glistening hard cock as he’s reclined back against the pillow, only inches from my mouth where I’m lying. Blaine says in a loud whisper to me, “Yeah, go get that dick.”

Keir runs a hand through my hair, resting it on the back of my head. I take him in my hand, running my tongue underneath his veiny cock and giving a light caress of his balls. He’s hard as a rock, leaking pre-cum I lap up. His moans make me want his release. Blaine has moved in closer, the lube in his hand as he lathers it on himself before pulling my ass closer. His wet fingers run through the lips of my pussy, then back up to my clit as he pinches it between his thumb and finger.

My breathing hitches as he slams inside me. “Jesus Christ Almighty...you feel like fucking heaven...” He presses a hand onto my back as he gets his tempo right.

Matt, Caleb, and Hutton watch, eyes filled with a yearning, a desire, we’re all feeling. The pleasure of our bodies...that euphoric release.

My orgasm makes me choke on Keir’s cock as I press too far forward, and he pulls me off him. Lying in front of me, he swallows my moans as Blaine wrings the climax from me. His body strokes me long after he’s unloaded. I feel his sweat on my back, and a satisfied smile takes hold.

I reach my hand out to Matt, who has moved to the side of bed where Keir is lying, to help me up. Caleb throws a washcloth to Blaine. Hutton has opened another bottle and is now digging in the unlocked drawer of toys Blaine adds to occasionally.

Matt pulls me into his arms. “Do you know how well-fucked you look? The flush of your skin,” he nuzzles into my neck, his cologne making me drag a deep breath in, “that moan...dammit, it does shit to me.”

His mouth finds one of my nipples, his hands taking my waist and seating me on the side of bed as he kneels.

I hear Keir ask Blaine behind me, “What else do those fingers do?”

And we’re all hands-on deck again.

As Matt gives my breasts his mouth and hands, Hutton nudges him as a signal to move aside, wanting to eat me out. Matt, taking the not-so-subtle hint, climbs onto the bed to lie next to me as Hutton’s mouth on my pussy causes me to lie back on the bed, writhing. I see Blaine and Keir rolling around beside us on the bed. A nip of a bite from Keir, and Blaine sucks at his neck as their limbs occasionally brush their erections. But they’re more focused on marking each other. The tease... the buildup...

I want that...that’s what I need. I reach out to grab Blaine’s arm as Caleb presses in from the other side of me, his hand running up my torso as he plants a light kiss to the side of my breast.

“Mark me,” I groan out.

The atmosphere becomes more charged as Keir pushes Blaine off to get to me. His mouth is on my earlobe as he says thickly, “Anything you want.”

Blaine slaps Keir's thigh. "Done, huh?"

It's been growing...the tension about their relationship and tonight might tip the scales and finally force them to work it out.

Matt normally isn't one to leave love bites or hickeys, but he takes my order seriously, sucking my nipple harder and causing a zing of pain. "Unnhh.." My chest juts up.

"Shit, are you okay?" he pulls away to ask, his lips swollen from kissing.

Blaine shakes the partially empty bottle of fizzy cider, his thumb covering the opening, then sprays it over us. Putting the bottle back on the dresser, he moves to lick it off me, giving little sucks and bites along the way.

Caleb makes my heart pound with a slow kiss while Hutton uses his fingers and tongue to make me scream out in release. I feel boneless as I grab a pillow to support my head, repositioning to see my hotter-than-hell husbands around me. It has to be a crime somewhere to have this much sexy attention to yourself.

With a languid stretch, I lie back against the pillows, a satisfied sigh escaping, before I crawl over Hutton's legs to the edge of the bed, saying, "Be right back." Peering back over my shoulder to see their eyes on me is another reminder of how damn lucky I am.

I come back into the room from cleaning up and checking out my wild hair and well-marked chest in the mirror to all of them splayed out on the bed with room for me in the middle. The music has been turned down. "You're all tapping out for the night?"

By the looks I'm getting, that's not the case.

I want to address something before snuggling into bed between Hutton and Blaine. Caleb gives Hutton ample room on his other side, choosing to lie close to the edge, and Matt and Keir settle on the other side of Blaine. Naked, my entire body feels strung tight...wanting each of them again. I crawl into bed, shoving the sheet back. The only person redressed in their underwear is Caleb.

“Blaine...baby, love, lover,” I say, getting close. “I think Keir needs a blowjob from you.” He was hinting earlier he wanted Blaine’s mouth, but either Blaine ignored him or was denying him.

“Subtle,” Hutton says, kissing my shoulder.

Yeah? Even so, it works. He only needed the slightest nudge to turn to Keir. An eyebrow is raised, as if in challenge, before Blaine’s hands caress their way to Keir’s erection. He spits in his palm before going back gliding his hand over the head. “Does Keir deserve a blowjob from me is the question.”

Matt grabs the condoms and lube that were haphazardly tossed to the floor. He doesn’t say anything, just rolls a condom on his thickening cock while watching Blaine taunt Keir. The lube is then passed to Blaine.

Keir’s breathing is getting labored watching them. Hell, so is mine.

*Source Creation Date: May 20, 2025, 4:53 am*

Sliding between Keir's legs, Blaine bites his lip. "How badly do you want my mouth, Keir?"

His voice ragged, Keir says, "Why don't you find out?"

I'm getting so horny again I squeeze my legs together with a squeal.

Blaine leaves a tiny bite mark on the inside of his thigh before his tongue runs toward Keir's balls. Sucking one into his mouth, he lightly rolls it on his tongue before popping back off it, then presses his hands down on Keir's chest. Matt's spread lube on his condomed dick, and he moves behind Blaine, running his cock over Blaine's asshole. For a moment, Blaine rears up and turns to place a fierce kiss on Matt's lips.

The whole world slows as I watch Blaine feeding Keir's dick into his mouth, then Matt entering Blaine from behind. I can't sit still. I lean over, kissing Keir as his groans fan a flame inside me.

I feel Hutton's length twitching against my leg. I pull him inside me with a hand between my legs, bucking back into him. My hand goes over Hutton's head to Caleb, who reaches around Hutton to massage my breast. All connected...

Keir is right on the edge with Blaine sucking on him, but Matt pulls out before he comes which makes Blaine stop. Matt tosses the condom, putting lube in his hand as he bends forward on the bed to work his fingers over his ass crack. "Fuck me," he says, looking at Keir.

Holy shit. That was hot.

Space is made on the bed as I move back against Hutton, our climaxes soaking us both. Matt lies next to me, giving me a kiss that makes my insides feel shaky.

Keir strokes his cock a few times, getting in position to enter Matt as he moves his ball sack back then strokes himself lazily. Blaine bites Keir's shoulder as he gets out of the way, but Keir looks back at him, grabbing his arm. "Stay."

Everyone stops.

Keir has never allowed anyone to touch his ass or his asshole, always a top because of his abuse. It's a sensitive topic no one breaches. Is he...

But no. He's wanting to keep Blaine in the mix.

He moves so Blaine can ride Matt's cock while Keir follows Matt's order to fuck him. For a few stunned seconds Blaine seems confused Keir is including him. It's not the first time there has been intimacy between the three, but it's never been like this. It's always been more aggressive, bordering on rough, between Keir and Blaine.

I don't move myself off Hutton's beautiful cock, sating my craving to have him rooted deep inside me as I watch them...it's passionate, it's love making. Keir kisses Blaine's shoulder gently after coming, leaning his head on him while regaining control of his breathing. They ease apart as Caleb hands over a couple washcloths. Blaine decides instead to wipe his cum across Keir's chest, pressing him to the bed for Matt to lick it off.

They turn to me. "I bet you're ready to cum again, sweetheart," Matt says, kissing my hand.

Maybe we'll set a record tonight.

My heart is in my throat as I take the podium in front of a ballroom full of medical



professionals. I feel like a fraud. Why would they listen to me? Then, I remember what Dr. Wallen said. “What’s an expert, Eden? The title is subjective...People will listen when someone has something to say. When they’ve experienced and learned something valuable.”

I take a deep breath, then begin. “The primary reason people are stuck in trauma cycles is not because they can’t heal from it. We are all born with an innate capacity to triumph over the hardships we endure. The issue is not the capacity, but that the body is not in a condition to heal itself because you’re either at war with the biologically correct symptoms for the state you’re in, or you’re talking about past childhood trauma, which will do nothing but make you feel worse. The trauma is not a past event, it’s your brain perceiving a threat in the here and now and your body preparing to address that threat. We should be working on conveying safety to your nervous system in real time, repeatedly.”

They listen as I talk for almost an hour. With each word my chest opens wider, my breathing slows, my eyes adjust to the lights shining on me, and the words feel like I’m setting myself free.

Leaving the stage to enthusiastic applause, I think of Greg’s last words to me. I think about them daily. “Time always knows when to show up and who to bring, because everything happens for a reason.”

\*Is it ever really the end? \*