



Holden (Southern Moon Trilogy #1)

Author: *Phoebe Moss*

Category: Suspense Thriller

Description: She was destined to be mine—until I found her in bed with my stepbrother and my best friend.

Holden

I've spent years hiding—behind my books, my angst, and a wall of indifference that shields me from pain and pleasure. Then Moon pulls at my defenses like the tide against a crumbling shore. I can't resist her pull—even if it leaves me adrift. Falling for her is inevitable. But sharing her with my stepbrother and my best friend? That might drown me.

Hendrix

I've spent years chasing freedom—wild nights, no strings, and casual fun that never asked for my heart. Then Moon draws me in like a tempest, making me crave something deeper—something I've never dared to want. She's impossible to resist, but can I share her when Holden and Conrad are already caught in her storm?

Conrad

I've spent years behind the lens—capturing everyone else's truths while hiding my own in the shadows. Then Moon pulls me into her light, making it impossible to stay unseen. But stepping closer means risking everything—because some shadows are darker than we ever imagined.

Moon

They say Charleston hides its secrets beneath layers of charm and elegance, but I wasn't looking for them when I came here for college. Then I met three men who challenge me, transform me, and make me crave what I never thought I'd want. I'm the force pulling them closer, yet I feel like I'm caught in a storm, torn by the tides of their desires. How can I give my whole self to three men when it feels impossible to hold them all? And with them comes danger—in a city where old money protects its own, nothing stays hidden forever.

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HOLDEN

The bookstore smelled like old pages and dust, with just a whisper of coffee wafting in from the café next door. Housed in an old apothecary, some sections featured new bestsellers and some featured used books ranging from rare finds to dusty old dime novels. It was quiet, except for the soft shuffle of feet and the occasional sigh from people pretending to be more profound than they really were. I sat in my usual spot—nestled by a back window between two shelves of leather-bound classics nobody actually ever picked up. Hawthorne and Melville stared down at me like disappointed fathers, judging the cigarette tucked between my fingers. Holden Goodloe, rebel without a cause, and proud of it.

I liked this corner. It felt safe, hidden, like I could disappear into someone else's words. I skimmed my tattered copy of *Don Juan*, my favorite lines underlined in various markings—some in pencil, some in ink—depending on how many times I'd come back to them.

Society is now one polished horde,

Formed of two mighty tribes, the Bores and Bored.

If Byron had wandered Charleston's streets, his pen would've sliced through its charm with a sharper edge. Far away from his nineteenth century London, the biting commentary applied just the same. Charleston, perched on the shores of South Carolina where the marshes meet the Atlantic, wore its charm like a mask. The

flickering lanterns lining the piazzas and pastel-painted facades whispered of old money and gentility, but beneath the Spanish moss and cobblestone streets, it was bourbon-fueled gossip and garden parties curated with surgical precision. It was a city where the tides ebbed and flowed with secrets, and the Bores and the Bored thrived, swapping small talk as sharp as oyster knives.

“Excuse me,” a silken voice cut through the quiet. “Do you know where the poetry section is?”

I didn’t look up right away. I didn’t have to; I already knew it was trouble.

I’d seen her earlier. I’d followed her, actually—into a book club meeting at Press, the hybrid bookstore and coffee shop that was practically my second home. The twin storefronts on King Street connected inside, letting you flow between caffeine and literature.

They were hosting a Spring series marketed as a revisiting of classics you were supposed to have read in high school (but probably let SparkNotes do the heavy lifting). I figured I could stomach public discussion on *The Great Gatsby* if it meant watching her.

“I guess that depends on what you’re into,” I muttered, still tracing Byron’s words with my thumb.

“Well,” her tone dipped into a playful edge, “in an ideal world, something that bites me and then kisses me.”

That made me glance up. Her face matched her voice—trouble, in the best way.

She looked like she’d stepped out of a vintage film. Her warm chocolate-brown curls, loosely gathered with a clip, framed her face as a few strands brushed the shoulders

of her faded Velvet Underground tee. A row of chunky silver rings glinted on her fingers above short, dark-polished nails, and her smile was like a dare—dangerous, magnetic, impossible to ignore.

High-waisted jeans hugged her body—long and lean like a dancer's, with just enough softness to accentuate her curves—while her knotted tee revealed a sliver of her toned stomach.

Moon, written in an artistic scrawl, covered the side of her designer leather bag, the artistic script painted in bold blues and lilacs. The bright rebellion against the signature brown checkerboard made me chuckle. A girl who gave no fucks about vandalizing a thousand-dollar bag was my kind of paradox.

She stared through me with heather-gray eyes lined in silver, her dark lashes curled like punctuation marks. I felt nervous all of a sudden, like she was reading my fortune, my past, and all my secrets in between.

“Good luck with that.” I flicked ash into the coffee cup I’d been using as an ashtray. “Most poetry barely knows how to touch you, let alone leave a mark.”

She leaned against the shelf, arms crossed, her eyebrow arching like she’d just decided I might be worth her time. “And Byron? Does he leave a mark?”

She gestured at the book in my lap. “You looked like you were having a moment.”

“Byron?” I said, closing the book as I stared up at her. “He’ll kiss you slow, deliberate, like velvet dragging over bare skin—leaving you breathless. But his bite? That’s where it burns, sharp and electric, sinking in just deep enough to leave your lip swollen for days.”

“Well, when you put it that way, a date with Byron doesn’t seem too bad. It is a

Friday night. You going out later?”

I scoffed.

“You must be fun at parties.”

“A real ball. How’d you know?”

She tilted her head, studying me like a painting she wasn’t sure she liked yet. “You a student at CSAL?”

I shrugged. “On the days I can be bothered to go.”

“Let me guess.” Her grin widened. “Broody literature major?”

“Wow, you’re psychic.”

“Not really, Heathcliff. You scream the tortured artist type.”

“Heathcliff,” I grinned, impressed with her literary reference—and her boldness in making fun of me. “Close, but drop me in Manhattan with cigarettes, cocktails, and some ducks, and you’d be closer.”

Her eyes widened, her grin sharpening. “Shut the fuck up. Your name isn’t actually Holden?”

“Guilty,” I said with a shrug.

She rolled her eyes but smiled. “That’s a bit on the nose. I’m Moon, by the way.”

“Like the ball in the sky?”

“Like the ball in the sky,” she deadpanned.

I tilted my head slightly, really looking at her now. Her face was striking, all the delicate angles softened by full lips painted in a soft neutral that highlighted the faint dimples appearing when she smiled. Her silver earrings, clustered up her left ear, glittered like constellations, with a crescent moon charm dangling behind her curls.

“You go to CSAL too?”

“I do.” Her lips curved into a sly smile. “I moved here for their musical theatre program. It suits me, I think—free spirited, artsy, always chasing a spotlight.”

“Fitting. The moon’s always putting on a show—just enough light to draw you in, but never close enough to catch.”

“Oh, so you want to catch me now, Heathcliff?” She gestured toward the café. “I was just about to grab a coffee. Want to come?”

I should’ve said no. Every instinct I had screamed at me to stay in my corner with my dead poets and my cigarettes. But the way she looked at me—it felt like a challenge.

“Sure.” I started standing before I could talk myself out of it.

As we stepped into the café part of Press, the air wrapped around me, warm and heady with the smell of coffee and cinnamon. Press was always buzzing but never loud, its sounds more like a hum of turning pages, quiet chatter, and the rhythmic hiss of the espresso machine.

The space felt like a time capsule, mismatched in a way that somehow worked. Old mahogany shelves lined the walls, crammed with books and knick knacks—ceramic owls, antique clocks, and half-burnt candles in brass holders. The tables were just as

mismatched, ranging from scuffed oak to sleek, modern surfaces, paired with a hodgepodge of chairs and armchairs that looked like they'd been scavenged from a hundred different homes.

Moon strode up to the counter like she owned the place, her silver rings glinting as she tapped her nails rhythmically against the glass display case.

"I'll have a double cappuccino," she told the barista, her voice light but confident, like she knew she didn't have to ask twice.

The barista, a wiry guy with glasses and an apron too clean to belong in a place like this, grinned as he started making her order. The way he smiled said he'd seen her here plenty of times, enough to know what she liked.

I lingered behind her, my gaze sliding down to the curve of her waist and landing on the round, perfect swell of her ass. Her jeans hugged her so tightly, and fuck, my hand tensed at the thought of grabbing it.

Moon glanced over her shoulder and smirked, catching my eye. "Are you just gonna stand there and brood, or would you like to order?"

I blinked, caught off guard for just a second. The gangly teenage girl at the cash register tilted her neck to look up at me when I stepped forward. "Dark roast. Black."

The girl stared, her hand hovering awkwardly over the register. Her gaze flicked to my face—my chestnut hair, slightly tousled, my cheekbones that always made me look a little sharper than I felt, and my eyes, pale green with flecks of amber. She lingered on them, and I could see the moment her breath hitched. Moon did too.

The girl stammered slightly as she keyed in the order, her hand brushing against mine as she handed back my card. She flushed pink, her lips slightly open like she wanted

to say something but couldn't get the words out. Moon caught the whole thing and let out a chuckle, shaking her head as we walked away from the counter. "You've got a real fan there, Heathcliff," she teased.

I raised an eyebrow at her. "You jealous?"

She led the way to a small table tucked near the window. "Should I be?" she asked, her voice light but laced with challenge.

The table she chose was surrounded by two armchairs that didn't match but looked equally worn, the fabric on the edges smoothed and faded from years of use. Moon dropped into one of them, leaving me the one closest to the window.

We weren't quite sitting across from each other—it was more diagonal, our chairs angled just enough to make the space feel intimate. She set her cappuccino on the table and leaned back, crossing her legs as she stirred the foam with the tip of her spoon.

As we settled into the café, Moon toyed with a sugar packet on the table, her silver-ringed fingers catching the light.

"So, what's your deal?" Her voice cut through the soft hum of the café as she settled into the chair across from me. Her elbows rested on the table, her fingers absently tracing the edge of her cup.

I raised an eyebrow, leaning back in my chair. "What do you mean?"

She shrugged, her expression light but curious, her voice softening just enough to make me pay attention. "You just give off this 'I'm too cool for everything' vibe. Some of it's the look—your classic white Oxford with a few buttons undone, your sleeves rolled in this effortless nonchalance. And the hair. You have that perfect

disheveled ‘I didn’t do anything to my hair, but it just naturally falls like that’ guy thing. But some of it’s just you. You’ve got this quiet intensity, like you’re constantly observing the world, deciding what deserves your attention. It’s compelling, honestly, but also infuriating.”

I tilted my head, a faint smile tugging at the corner of my mouth. “So you think I’m cool?” I prodded, my tone half-teasing, half-disbelieving.

She rolled her eyes, with a trace of dry amusement. “No. I said ‘too cool.’ Big difference.”

That earned a soft chuckle from me, quiet but real. “I don’t think I’m ‘cool,’” I set my empty cup on the table. “I just don’t really care about the shit most people think is important.”

Her gaze sharpened, and she leaned forward slightly, her elbows resting more firmly on the table. “Is that what it is? A lack of caring? Or are you just really good at pretending you don’t?”

She was watching me too, like she was trying to piece me together—figure out if I was worth her time. Most people pretended they had the world figured out, but Moon wasn’t like most people. And something about her felt like she’d see through any bullshit I threw at her.

“I think you care more than you let on.” The way she looked at me, like she was reading between the lines, made my chest tighten.

I tilted my head, narrowing my eyes slightly. “So, what are you really asking?”

She smiled then, quick and playful, like she was letting me off the hook just enough to keep me guessing. “So, what are you really doing here?”

I raised an eyebrow. “Here as in this coffee shop, or here as in life?”

She laughed at that, her grin widening. “Either.” She leaned closer, her elbows now firmly planted on the table. “You seem like the kind of guy who does a lot of thinking but not much doing.”

I let the silence stretch, turning her words over in my mind. “Maybe I’m just trying to figure out what I should do, what I want to do. Not just...do what everyone expects me to.”

I kept my voice steady, but even as I said the words, I felt the weight of them settle between us. She didn’t push, didn’t break the moment with something clever or flippant. Instead, she just watched me, her expression unreadable but open in a way that made me feel like she might actually understand.

And for once, I didn’t mind being seen.

“Why’d you really join the book club, Holden? Don’t tell me it was for *The Great Gatsby* .”

“It wasn’t,” I admitted. “I saw you going in.”

Her eyebrows arched, and her lips curved into a knowing smile. “Bold.”

“Figured if it sucked, I could leave early.”

“And?”

“Fitzgerald doesn’t suck,” I said. “The club? Jury’s still out.”

She laughed, low and smooth, leaning forward like she was letting me in on a secret.

“You know, I’m not even a Gatsby girl. I prefer *The Beautiful and Damned* .”

I tilted my head, smirking. “Ah, I see. So which one are you—the beautiful or the damned?”

Her heather-gray eyes locked on mine like she had the answer and was daring me to guess. “Aren’t we all a bit of both?”

“Touché,” I murmured, the corner of my mouth curling. “So you think I’m a little beautiful,” I teased with a cheeky grin.

She raised an eyebrow, her lips curling into a languid grin that sent a ripple through me. “You’re definitely a little beautiful, Heathcliff.”

I stared into her eyes, the silver lining catching the light, and couldn’t help breaking the banter with honesty. “In this scenario, I think you’re the beautiful one. And I’m the damned.”

She sipped her cappuccino, her lips curling into a wry smile as she set the cup down. “Well, you got half of that right. But I like my men a little damned. Makes saving them more fun.”

“Well, fuck me.” My eyes widened as I shook my head, the grin spreading across my lips. “You make salvation sound like foreplay.” I leaned in, my voice dropping low, letting the weight of the words settle between us. “The kind that starts slow—warm, sweet, teasing—until you’ve got a man begging to sin all over again, just to see if you’ll save him twice.”

Her fingers paused mid-motion against the rim of her cup, her eyes darkening as they met mine. “And would you beg?” she asked, her voice soft, almost taunting.

“Do you want me on my knees?” My lips curved into something wicked as I let the words hang between us, daring her to answer.

She didn’t hesitate. Leaning in, her breath brushed against the shell of my ear, her voice low and smoky. “Oh, I’d take you on your knees, Heathcliff,” she murmured, pulling back just enough, her silver-lined eyes locking onto mine. “But you wouldn’t be praying for salvation. You’d be begging me to sin.”

She flicked the sugar packet onto the table like a gambler laying down a winning hand.

“You’re something else, Moon.” My gaze dragged over her, lingering on the curve of her neck, the line of her collarbone, and the subtle shift of her hips. “The easy confidence. The poise. The sexy banter laced with sweetness. Not to mention how stunning you are. And your style. It’s such a nice change from Charleston’s pearls and pastel cardigans.”

I paused, looking at her with a faint smile. “You’re this perfect mix of wildness and charm. And it’s doing me in.”

Moon’s eyebrows lifted just slightly, as if caught off guard, but the spark of delight in her eyes was unmistakable. “I’ll take it.”

She leaned forward, resting her elbows on the table, her voice dipping just enough to draw me in. “So I guess you’re not unshakable after all? A guy who acts like he’s above it all, but deep down? You’re just waiting for someone to call your bluff.”

I let out a low laugh, shaking my head. “And you think you’re the one to do it?”

Her eyes gleamed as she sat back, her fingers toying with the rim of her cup. “I guess we’ll see.”

She stood, her silver-lined eyes holding mine for a fraction longer, daring me to look away. “Maybe I’ll be seeing you, Heathcliff,” her tone feather-light but threaded with intent. “Let’s see if you leave a mark.”

I watched her walk away, her steps unhurried, her dancer’s body graceful and light. There was something in the way she moved; it felt like the pull of the tide—steady, inevitable—and I wasn’t sure if I wanted to resist or let it take me under.

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MOON

The air was thick with Charleston's saltwater tang as I pushed open the creaky iron gate to our home. I lived on the second floor of a restored historic row house, one of three apartments in the building, which I shared with my roommates, Callie and Olivia. The soft peach exterior, with its crisp white trim, glowed faintly in the late afternoon light. I dug out my keys from my Moon bag as I walked up to the door, where a lantern flickered gently, adding a cozy charm. The balcony above was dotted with ferns, vibrant flowers, and a few potted herbs, while an open window let soft music drift down onto the quiet street.

My head was still spinning from the bookstore. I wasn't sure if it was the lingering buzz of caffeine or something else entirely, but my chest felt tight, charged—like a live current humming under my skin.

Holden.

He was a walking contradiction—sarcastic, aloof, and yet somehow so earnest it made my pulse trip. And sexy too. That line about Byron kissing you slow and leaving your lip swollen for days. Fuck. The way he'd said it, low and deliberate, had left me warmer than I'd like to admit.

Inside, the place was its usual brand of cozy chaos. The living room stretched out before me, a mix of furniture and lived-in charm. The inky-blue velvet couch sat scattered with jewel-tone pillows that didn't match but somehow worked. Across

from it was Callie's floral settee, the one she'd rescued from the curb, and Olivia's "rustic" coffee table, scratched but still functional, piled with our stuff in artsy disarray. Our fairy lights zigzagged across the ceiling, and I could whiff the scent of incense and coffee mingling with the faintest trace of lavender from Olivia's endless collection of oils. It wasn't perfect or polished, but it was home—vibrant, a little messy, and alive in a way that always made me feel at ease.

I kicked off my boots by the door and tossed my bag onto the chair near the window.

"Book club ran late?" Olivia questioned from the couch, where she was curled up in her usual editing corner. Her oversized hoodie made her look like a sentient pile of laundry, her glasses reflecting the glow of her laptop.

"Not that late," I said, heading to the kitchen. "I ended up getting coffee. With a guy," I trailed off.

Callie was perched on the counter with a plate of toast balanced in one hand and her phone in the other. She wore a pair of bright leggings and an oversized sweatshirt that fell off one shoulder, her blonde hair pulled into a messy bun. She looked up as I grabbed a glass of water.

Callie raised an eyebrow, taking a bite of toast as she perched on the arm of the couch. "Do we get details, or are you going to leave us hanging?"

"He's an odd one." I slid into the worn armchair across from them, my legs curling underneath me. "Sarcastic, broody, the whole Heathcliff package—minus the moors. But he's witty, you know? Like, he actually says things that make you want to listen."

Callie gave me a knowing smirk. "And? Did he make you swoon?"

"Not exactly swoon," I said, rolling my eyes. "But he definitely left an impression."

“Okay, spill. What’s he look like?” Olivia demanded.

I leaned back against the counter, letting my glass dangle loosely in my hand. “He’s hot. Tall. Muscles but not in a gym bro way. He’s got this quiet intensity about him.”

Callie raised her eyebrows. “Okay, and?”

“Chestnut brown hair, kind of wavy. Not too neat, but not a total mess either. He’s got broad shoulders and sexy forearms. High cheekbones with a smattering of freckles right across his nose, strong jaw, and these lips that look like they should say kind things but rarely do.”

Callie grinned. “Damn, Moon. Save some adjectives for the rest of us.”

I waved her off, my fingers tapping the counter. “No, but it’s his eyes. They’re light—green or maybe hazel. I don’t know, there are flecks in them. But there’s this...contrast. His mouth smirks, but his eyes give him away. Like he’s guarded, but not really. Like there’s something softer under all that judgment.”

Olivia tilted her head. “So, he’s cute but complicated.”

“Exactly,” I said, setting the glass down. “And his hands?—”

“Big hands?” Callie cut in, laughing.

“Yes,” I said, unfazed. “Strong, long fingers, clean nails. The kind of hands that look good holding something small, like a book. He’s got this faint stain on his finger—ink, I guess—and these light callouses.”

Callie leaned forward, eyes gleaming. “You’re into him.”

I sighed, crossing my arms. “He’s caught my attention, okay? He’s probably dangerous to fall for, but there’s something about him that feels...real.”

“Yeah, okay, you’re toast,” Olivia said, her tone dripping with amusement.

I rolled my eyes and made for my room, ignoring their laughter. The door clicked shut behind me, the quiet rushing in all at once.

The moment I sat on my bed, the tightness in my chest turned into something warmer, something that flushed my cheeks. I pushed to my feet and headed for the bathroom, hoping a shower might ease the restless heat curling beneath my skin.

I thought about the way he’d looked at me, like he was trying to figure out if I was a puzzle he wanted to solve. His green eyes, flickering with that sharp mix of challenge and amusement, had lingered on me—on my body, but also searching my own, like he was trying to read me.

His voice echoed in my head, low and deliberate. Most poetry barely knows how to touch you, let alone leave a mark.

The way his lips had moved when he said it—controlled, but just soft enough to make you wonder what they’d feel like—sent a ripple through me.

The bathroom filled with steam as I peeled my clothes off, piece by piece, until I was bare, my skin already damp from the humid air. The mirror was fogged, but I could still see the faint outline of my body—flushed cheeks, taut nipples, the curve of my hips—and I couldn’t stop myself from imagining how he would see me. Would his gaze linger the way mine did? Would his lips twitch in that almost-smile, like he’d found some secret in me that he wanted to tease to the surface?

Holden.

The thought of him made my core ache, longing for attention. His light eyes that unraveled me, tracing over me like they could strip me bare with a single look. And his hands—God, those hands—big, masculine hands, like they'd take their time exploring every inch of me until I was trembling beneath them.

I stepped into the shower, gasping softly as the first spray of water hit me. It was scalding, and I turned the knob of the faucet back a bit. But the heat spreading under my skin and pooling low in my belly wasn't from the water. My head fell back, my wet hair sticking to my shoulders, and I closed my eyes, letting the water drown out everything but him.

I could feel him here, just behind me, his tall, lean frame pressing into mine. His hands would slide over my wet skin, starting at my hips and moving upward, calloused fingers tracing every curve, every dip, every line. I could imagine him grabbing my breasts, massaging them with his long fingers, his thumb flicking my nipple and pinching it until I moaned. My breath hitched as I imagined his lips brushing against the back of my neck, soft at first, then rougher as he bit down gently, teasing me until I couldn't take it anymore.

I let my hands mimic his, trailing down my stomach, my slick fingers slipping between my thighs. A shudder ran through me, my lips parting as I moaned, the sound swallowed by the steady pounding of the water. My fingers lingered over my folds, sliding back and forth between the tight little nub of my clit and my slick opening, filled with heat. I slipped a finger inside my warmth, imagining it was his.

"Holden," I whispered, his name slipping out before I could stop it.

In my mind, his hands were everywhere—gripping my hips, sliding down the backs of my thighs, pulling me against him until I could feel the hard line of his body pressed into mine. I imagined his erection pressing into my back, long and solid, fully hard as he fisted himself, rubbing the tip slowly from the plush curve of my ass up to

the small of my back. He'd take his hand, splayed on my belly, and pull me back into him, his dick rigid and pointing straight up between us.

His mouth would travel down the L of my neck, licking from my ear down to my shoulder, leaving a wet, burning path on my skin. He'd whisper something low, something filthy, something that would have me begging him to keep going. I want to bite and kiss every inch of you, and then I want to fuck you and fill you.

My fingers worked faster, circling that aching spot as my other hand pressed against the cool tile for balance. I bit my lip, imagining him kneeling behind me, his mouth replacing my fingers, his tongue flicking, caressing, driving me insane as he plunged his tongue into my pussy, licking me from the inside out. I could almost feel his breath, hot against my skin, his hands gripping me tighter, keeping me exactly where he wanted.

"Fuck," I moaned, louder this time, my hips grinding into my hand as the tension in my core built higher and higher, coiling tighter with every thought of him. In my mind, he'd stand, spinning me around to face him. Those light eyes would burn into mine, and he wouldn't wait—he'd kiss me hard, his hands tangling in my hair as he pinned me to the wall, the water pouring over us. Holden wouldn't be a gentle kisser. I'm sure he'd ravage my mouth, sucking my bottom lip into his mouth, nipping with his teeth, owning me.

With his mouth at my ear, groaning my name like he couldn't hold back any longer, he'd pick me up and line up his cock with my entrance, swiping the tip of his dick that was coated in pre-cum dripping from his slit. He'd rub into my folds and, staring into my soul, push into me then, one deep, deliberate thrust of his cock. With the heat and the wetness of the shower, my pussy dripping from thoughts of Holden taking me, and my fingers working furiously to push into me like his cock would, my body clenched as the orgasm ripped through me, leaving me trembling, as my fingers slowed, drawing out every last tremor of pleasure.

I leaned against the tile, the water streaming down my back, my legs weak, my chest heaving. But even as my breathing steadied, the tension wasn't fully gone. Holden Goodloe was still there, living rent free in my mind.

And the worst part? A part of me never wanted him to leave.

I bit my lip, trying to steady my breathing as the thought of him swirled deeper, hotter, impossible to shake. For a moment, it was just me, the water, and the ghost of his touch—perfectly imagined, perfectly impossible.

And when I finally stepped out of the shower, skin flushed and chest heaving, I knew I was already in trouble.

HENDRIX

Press was buzzing tonight. Open mic nights always had this energy, an undercurrent of something electric that made the air feel heavier. People packed into the mismatched chairs and couches, sipping coffee or cheap wine while the low hum of conversation swirled around the room.

It wasn't like I'd planned on playing tonight. Conrad had been the one to push me.

"You've been hiding behind that damn guitar long enough," he'd said earlier as we sat in the living room of Granny Goodloe's old house, the one we shared with Holden. "Get on stage. Stop being a coward about it."

"I'm not hiding," I shot back, leaning into the worn leather of the couch.

"Bullshit. You write all this music, Hendrix, but you never play it for anyone but us." He smirked, the kind of smirk that said he was enjoying getting under my skin. "What's the point if you don't let the world hear it? I know you're comfortable playing in front of an audience, but you've got a great voice too."

I'd rolled my eyes, knowing he was baiting me, but it worked anyway. Conrad had this way of pushing me just far enough to make me prove him wrong, like a big brother who couldn't resist stirring the pot. It was irritating as hell.

He was supposed to come with me tonight, but, in true Conrad fashion, he'd been

nowhere to be found. I'd shown up at Press anyway, guitar slung over my shoulder, ready to perform a song of mine just to shut him up.

I leaned against the counter, nursing a coffee that was more room temperature than hot now, deciding what I wanted to play. The air smelled like old books and espresso, and the soft glow of the Edison bulbs above cast shadows over the swirling mural on the back wall. The place felt like home—warm, messy, and full of people trying to make something of themselves.

The door swung open, and that's when I saw her.

She moved like she owned the room, but not in a showy way—more like she didn't care if anyone noticed her or not. Her brunette curls framed her face, wild and untamed, and her heather-gray eyes scanned the room with sharp precision. She was all long legs and confidence, wearing a crocheted crop top and jeans that hugged her hips in a way that made me pause mid-sip.

She was trouble, I could tell, the kind that sneaks up on you and leaves you questioning everything.

Before I could stop myself, I studied her movements, noting the way her fingers tapped against her bag, painted with bold strokes of color against the designer leather. She wasn't like anyone here.

I shifted my attention back to the stage, trying not to think about her too much. But then I saw her talking to Caleb, her voice carrying just enough for me to catch bits and pieces. Something about needing a guitarist, her friend bailing last minute.

I didn't realize I was moving until Caleb called out to me.

“Yo, Hendrix. You looking to jump in? Moon here needs backup.”

Moon. So that was her name.

Her eyes turned to me then, heather-gray, cool and piercing, and I felt heat unfurling low in my stomach as they lingered just long enough to make my skin prickle.

“I’m singing ‘Moon River,’” she said, holding out a piece of sheet music. “Do you know it?”

I nodded.

Her voice was smooth but edged with uncertainty. “The arrangement’s a little different. Can you handle it?”

Moon River. I almost smiled. Of course, she was singing that. It wasn’t just the name; it was the way she said it, like the song held some kind of secret only she understood.

The first time I had heard the song, it was Audrey Hepburn’s soft, wistful voice, strumming a guitar by a window in *Breakfast at Tiffany’s*. Classic. Elegant. But then there was Frank Ocean’s cover—raw, haunting, and drenched in a kind of longing that settled under your skin. Moon could go either way, and I wasn’t sure which I wanted more. Would she channel Audrey’s understated grace or Frank’s smoky, aching depth?

I tilted my head, letting a lazy grin tug at my lips. “I think I can manage. If you don’t mind a little improvisation.”

She hesitated, studying me like she was deciding whether or not to trust me. Finally, she nodded. “Okay. Let’s see what you’ve got.”

When Caleb called us to the stage, the noise in the room quieted to a low murmur. I struck the first chord, the familiar weight of my guitar settling against my chest, and

then she started to sing.

Damn.

Her voice wasn't what I expected—it was sultry, with a little rasp, weathered with experience she looked too young to have. Her confidence grew with every note, and by the time she hit the second verse, I wasn't even looking at the sheet music anymore.

Our eyes met, and something clicked. It wasn't just a performance; it was a connection. The kind of spark that didn't happen often, the kind that made you forget there was an audience at all.

When the last note faded, the room erupted into applause, but I wasn't listening to them. My eyes stayed on her as she tucked a curl behind her ear, her cheeks flushed from the spotlight.

“Not bad, heartbreaker,” I said, my voice low enough for only her to hear.

She laughed, soft and breathless, and it was like a jolt to my chest. “You weren't too bad yourself.”

“Just ‘not bad’?” I teased, leaning in. “I think we made magic up there.”

Her eyes held mine, and for a moment, the noise of the room faded.

“Yeah,” she said, her voice quieter now, almost shy. “We did.”

And just like that, I was hooked.

I spotted him leaning against the bar, sipping from a short glass of something that

probably wasn't coffee. Conrad. One of my best friends and my housemate.

I hadn't seen him arrive, but there he was, moving through the room with a quiet ease that drew attention without demanding it. Sandy blonde hair just long enough to curl at the ends, sun-streaked and perpetually windblown. His eyes were a shifting mix of color—like an artist's palette where blue and green swirled together, with a darker ring catching the edges. A faded long-sleeve tee clung to his frame, the sleeves pushed up to his elbows, his posture loose and unassuming, oblivious to the way everyone took an extra second to look.

His eyes met mine first, then slid to Moon. He smiled, slow and wicked, like he already knew what she tasted like.

“Decided to show up, huh?” I called out, my tone half teasing, half exasperated. “Could've used you earlier.”

“Doesn't look like you've been lonely,” Conrad replied, pushing off the bar and strolling toward us. His gaze landed on Moon, a smirk playing at the corner of his mouth. “Hendrix always has a knack for finding trouble.”

“Moon, actually,” she said smoothly, tilting her head with a faint smile.

“Moon,” he repeated, like he was testing the word out, his smirk deepening. “Trouble by any other name.”

“And you must be Hendrix's backup plan,” she added with some heat of her own.

Conrad chuckled, low and rich, and I felt the weight of his presence as he stopped close, his shoulder brushing mine.

“More like his moral support. But I like to not show up until things get interesting.”

His gaze drifted down Moon's body, taking her in as if she were a painting he couldn't quite figure out. "And I'm guessing you're the reason things are interesting tonight."

Moon tilted her head, returning his scrutiny with a playful smile. "I guess you could say that."

4

MOON

My pulse was still thrumming from the performance, each beat heightened by the way Hendrix had looked at me on stage, his eyes holding mine like he'd seen something no one else had. His words after—smooth as his guitar playing—reverberated in my mind, blending with the adrenaline coursing through me.

Hendrix was magnetic up there, his fingers moving over the strings like he wasn't just playing music—he was living it. There was an ease to him that I envied, the way he seemed to fold into the sound without overthinking it.

I honestly was enchanted by this guy, and I couldn't help staring at him playing across from me while I lost myself in the lyrics. Hendrix looked like he was born for the stage, though his casual, almost careless demeanor said he didn't think about it at all. His dark espresso brown curls tumbled in thick waves that brushed the tops of his shoulders, held back by a faded bandana folded as a headband, the edges frayed with age.

On stage, his stormy blue eyes had flicked between his guitar and me, their intensity softened by a hint of mischief. He wore several silver rings, rugged with carvings in them, that caught the light while he played. Tanned olive skin stretched over rugged muscles, pronounced even through his long-sleeve soft washed Henley, which seemed to ripple with each strum.

His well-worn jeans, slung low on his hips and faded to a soft, pale blue, carried a rip at one knee that told a story of use, not fashion. When he reached up to strap his guitar, the hem of his t-shirt rode up, exposing well-defined V-muscles and abs carved from years of living rather than a gym. Scuffed boots tapped out the beat on the stage floor, the rhythm pulsing through him like a second nature.

But before I could lose myself in the memory of Hendrix on stage, I felt someone else's attention sweep over me, cool and unhurried, like a hand gliding up the back of my neck, lingering just long enough to stake a claim.

Hendrix guided me over to a guy leaning against the bar, one I hadn't noticed during the performance. Tall and lean but with strong shoulders, his sandy long hair, golden at the tips where it had been lightened by the sun, brushed his neck with boyish disarray. His features held a mix of quiet confidence and something darker, and his eyes locked onto mine with a look that made me blush. His eyes—God, his eyes—were like the ocean swirled on the rocks.

After exchanging banter and names, Conrad handed us each a glass, his movements effortless and assured. He pressed a whiskey sour into Hendrix's hand with a knowing smirk, then turned to me with a glass of something creamy and swirling with ice.

"A White Russian," he said, his sea glass eyes glinting as if he'd just told me a secret.

The drink was pale and inviting, the faint aroma of coffee liqueur curling up like a whisper. I took a tentative sip, the velvety smoothness coating my tongue before a hint of vodka cut through. It was rich, indulgent, and surprisingly perfect.

"How did you know what to get me?" I asked, my brow arching in suspicion as I glanced up at him.

He leaned closer, his grin widening. “I have a knack for knowing what people need before they do.”

The smoothness of the drink spread through me, mingling with the heat of his gaze. Damn him—he was right.

“You like that, trouble?” he asked with a knowing smirk.

“Careful, Conrad,” Hendrix cut in, stepping closer to my side. The scent of his cologne—a mix of something warm and musky—wrapped around me as his arm brushed mine. “You might find she’s more than you can handle.”

Conrad raised an eyebrow, his grin widening. “Is that right?”

The tension between the two men was palpable, a silent battle of wills playing out before me. And yet, I could feel myself at the center of it, the spark drawing them both closer. Hendrix’s dark eyes lingered on my face, quiet and intense, while Conrad’s gaze dipped lower, his lips twitching like he was already imagining my reaction to something he hadn’t yet said.

“What do you think, Moon?” Conrad asked, his voice dropping into a husky murmur. He reached out, his fingers brushing mine as he gestured toward the drink in my hand. “Are you more than I can handle?”

I laughed softly, but the sound came out more breathless than I intended. “That depends on what you can handle,” I said, meeting his eyes.

Conrad chuckled low in his throat, the sound vibrating against my skin as he leaned in. “You have no idea.”

His fingers grazed the small of my back, light but deliberate, sending a shiver up my

spine. Hendrix noticed the movement, and his eyes darkened slightly as he stepped closer, closing the space between us. His hand came to rest on the bar beside mine, his body leaning just enough to make me feel the heat of him.

“Well aren’t you a mysterious moon,” Conrad said, his voice low and intimate. “You’ve got both of us curious, and that’s not easy to do.”

I glanced between them, my heart racing at the intensity of their focus. Conrad’s thumb traced a slow, teasing circle at the small of my back, while Hendrix’s arm brushed against mine, his closeness making it impossible to ignore the way his gaze seemed to drink me in.

“What can I say?” I replied, my voice soft but edged with challenge. “I have that effect on people.”

“Clearly,” Hendrix said, his lips quirking into a half-smile. He shifted slightly, his chest brushing my shoulder as he leaned in to take the drink from my hand. His fingers lingered over mine as he lifted the glass to his lips, his dark eyes locking on mine as he took a slow sip.

Conrad tilted his head, watching the exchange with a faint smirk. “You’re playing with fire, Hendrix.”

“Maybe,” Hendrix replied, his gaze still on me. “But this fire is sweet.”

The air between us grew heavier, charged with unspoken tension. I could feel the heat of their bodies, the way their movements seemed to orbit around me like gravity pulling us closer. My breath hitched as Conrad’s hand slid up the bar, his fingers brushing the inside of my wrist in a touch that was both casual and electric.

“You don’t scare easily, do you?” Conrad asked, his voice dipping lower as his

fingers traced my pulse. “You seem like the type who likes to see how far things can go.”

My lips parted, my reply caught in my throat as Hendrix leaned in, his voice a murmur against my ear. “He’s right. You do have a way of pushing limits.”

My cheeks flushed, but I didn’t pull back. Instead, I turned my head slightly, my lips brushing dangerously close to Hendrix’s jaw. “Maybe I like seeing who can keep up.”

Conrad’s hand tightened on my wrist, his thumb grazing the sensitive skin there as he leaned closer. “Careful, you might find that some of us don’t play fair.”

“Neither do I,” I replied, my voice steady despite the whirlwind of sensations racing through me. I shifted slightly, my arm brushing Conrad’s chest as I leaned back against the bar, my gaze darting between them.

I couldn’t help but wonder where this was going. Where did I want it to go? Did I want Hendrix, or did I want his friend Conrad? The thought twisted through me, sharp and intoxicating, warming me like the lull of my drink. But it wasn’t just about choosing one or the other. It was the way they existed in the same space, the heat of their combined presence igniting something inside me I hadn’t fully grasped yet. They were opposites in so many ways, yet both pulled at different pieces of me, equally enchanting. The question wasn’t just what I wanted. It was whether I was ready to chase it, to dive into the storm they both created and see where it led.

The air around us felt electric, each touch, each glance layered with possibilities that none of us seemed willing to deny. As Conrad’s hand trailed up my arm, his fingers brushing the curve of my shoulder, I realized I didn’t want it to stop.

Hendrix leaned casually against the bar, his dark eyes catching mine as Conrad

finished his drink with a grin that felt like a challenge.

“You should come back to our place,” Hendrix said, his voice low, almost as if he didn’t want anyone else to hear.

Conrad nodded, tilting his glass in agreement. “Yeah, Moon. We’ve got better drinks and worse ideas. Perfect combination.”

I laughed, the sound a little breathless. “Worse ideas, huh? Should I be worried?”

Hendrix smirked, pushing off the bar and slipping his hands into his pockets. “Only if you scare easy.”

I didn’t.

Their place was a short walk away, tucked on a quiet, tree-lined street. The house itself was something out of a dream—or a movie set in a picturesque Southern coastal town. I couldn’t help but wonder how in the hell did a couple college guys end up living in such an elegant, expensive home. This was no typical frat house, that’s for sure. A sprawling antebellum home, its soft teal exterior glowed under the flicker of black lanterns flanking the door. Cypress shutters framed tall windows, and intricate wrought-iron railings wrapped around the double piazzas.

“Wow,” I said as we stepped onto the wide porch, the creak of the floorboards under my boots breaking the stillness of the night. “This is...not what I expected.”

Hendrix chuckled, unlocking the heavy front door with a twist of his wrist. “What did you expect?”

I shrugged, following them inside. “Something...smaller. Messier. College dude apartment, maybe a frat house. This looks like it belongs in a magazine.”

Conrad grinned, brushing past me to flick on the lights. “It’s all thanks to Granny Goodloe. Fanny couldn’t bring herself to sell the place after her mom passed, so she handed it over to us—responsible adults that we are.”

“Fanny is my stepmom,” Hendrix clarified. “We live here with my stepbrother who is probably holed up in his room—the guest house out back—with his books and his cigarettes. Conrad and I pretty much have the run of the place to ourselves most of the time.”

I took in the interior which was just as stunning. High ceilings stretched above us, with dark wooden beams crisscrossing the space. The living room opened up with an elegant yet lived-in feel. A mix of modern furniture and vintage accents gave the house personality—an expansive sectional wrapped around the room in a sumptuous pale grey, large plush oriental rugs, and a white brick fireplace topped with a stately wooden mantel in cream.

The walls weren’t just walls—they were a gallery. Art everywhere, from oil paintings to photography, some framed prints, some large canvases left unframed. I caught sight of a bold piece done in oils hanging above the fireplace and couldn’t help but stare.

It depicted the Charleston coast, but not the idyllic, sunlit scene you’d find on postcards. The water was restless, painted in churning shades of gray and blue, the waves rising and crashing as if frozen mid-turmoil. The sky above was heavy with clouds, dark and layered, streaked with flashes of pale yellow light breaking through. In the distance, the silhouette of a pier jutted out into the storm, stark and lonely. It felt alive, as if the scene were still unfolding, the storm ready to pull you in if you got too close.

“Who did that one?” I asked, moving closer, unable to tear my eyes away.

The boys exchanged a glance, something heavy and unspoken passing between them.

Hendrix cleared his throat, his voice quieter than usual. “James.”

“James?” I repeated, glancing back at him.

“My older stepbrother,” he explained, his tone carefully even. “He’s...not with us anymore.”

The words carried a weight I couldn’t ignore, but the way Hendrix’s dark eyes held mine told me not to ask.

“It’s stunning,” I said, turning back to the painting. “It feels like it’s alive.”

For a moment, silence settled between us, the storm in the painting reflected in the room. I wanted to ask more—who James was, what had happened to him—but something in Hendrix’s expression warned me not to push.

“You all have good taste,” I said instead, forcing a lightness into my tone. “This place feels like it has stories.”

Hendrix’s lips curved into a faint smile, but it didn’t quite reach his eyes. “Yeah, it does. The good taste is all my stepmother, Fanny, though. We just have to keep things looking decent.”

Conrad clapped his hands together, breaking the tension as he stepped into the room. “Alright, let’s stop standing around like we’re in an art gallery. Drinks and games, people. Let’s go.”

Conrad disappeared into the kitchen, leaving me alone with Hendrix for a moment. His gaze lingered on me, a little too long to be polite but not long enough to feel

uncomfortable.

“Want a tour?” he asked.

Before I could answer, Conrad reappeared with a tray of drinks—another whiskey sour for Hendrix, something dark and neat for himself, and a fresh White Russian for me.

“Tour later,” Conrad said, handing me the glass. “Game first.”

“Game?” I asked, taking the drink and arching an eyebrow at him.

Hendrix leaned against the back of the sofa, his smile lazy but loaded. “Conrad thinks games are the fastest way to figure someone out.”

“That’s because they are,” Conrad countered, settling into one of the chairs and motioning for me to sit. “Besides, games tell you a lot about a person. Are they honest? Bold? Competitive? Or,” he added with a wicked grin, “are they more interested in bending the rules?”

“Depends on the game,” I said, lowering myself onto the couch across from him.

“Truth or dare?” Hendrix asked, leaning forward just enough to close the space between us.

I laughed, shaking my head. “That’s not a game. That’s a setup.”

“Exactly,” Conrad added, his voice smooth as he took a sip of his drink. “The best games are. But I’ve got a different version in mind. Just dares.”

The air between us felt charged, each glance and smile a move in a game we hadn’t

officially started playing yet.

“Alright,” I said, setting my drink on the coffee table. “But if we’re doing this, we’re playing my way.”

Conrad’s grin widened, his eyes sparkling with curiosity. “And what’s your way, Moon?”

I leaned back against the sofa, crossing one leg over the other as I met his gaze head-on. “No holding back. No skipping turns. And no complaints if you don’t like the dares.”

Hendrix chuckled, his lips curling into that half-smile that had been driving me crazy all night. “I think we can handle that.”

“Good,” I said, picking up my glass and taking a slow sip. “Because I play to win.”

A moment later Conrad reappeared with a collection of ceramic bowls and pens.

“All set,” he said, his voice carrying a playful edge that hinted this wasn’t going to be your average drinking game. “Here’s how it works.”

He set the bowls down on the coffee table, then handed me the stack of cards. “We’re going to divide these cards into categories. Our names go in the first bowl. Actions go in the second. Recipients in the next, and body parts in the fourth. Finally, the tone or mood—think adverbs—goes in the last.”

“Adverbs?” Hendrix rolled his eyes. “Is this a game or grammar class?”

Conrad smirked. “If you don’t know how to use adverbs by now, I don’t know what to tell you, man. Besides, they’ll make things interesting.”

The air between the three of us was charged with flirtatious tension as we each started scribbling down our choices on the cards. I couldn't help but peek at Hendrix as he wrote on his cards, his wolfish grin suggesting that whatever he'd written was particularly bold. Conrad was all business, scribbling quickly and dropping each card into the bowls with ease.

I hesitated, my pen hovering over the cards. What did I want to write? I decided to range between the edge of coy and daring. For actions, I chose "kiss," "tease," and "suck." For body parts, I picked "neck," "inner thigh," and "cock," my cheeks heating slightly as I tossed in my cards. And for the tone, I went with "seductively," "playfully," and "skillfully."

Conrad put cards with our names in the "doer" and the "recipient" bowls, and when we had added the rest of the cards, he leaned back in his chair, his whiskey glass catching the light. "Alright, Moon. You're up first."

The rules were simple: draw one card from each bowl and act out the combination. My heart beat faster as I reached for the first bowl and pulled out a card. I unfolded it slowly, Hendrix's dark eyes watching me with an intensity that made me feel like I was under a spotlight.

I read the cards in order — "Moon...tease...Hendrix's...neck..."

I bit my lip, glancing at him as I pulled the last card, "playfully."

Hendrix leaned forward slightly, the corner of his mouth twitching into a grin. "Guess I'm the guinea pig. Let's see what you've got."

I downed the rest of my drink and leaned closer to him. His scent filled my senses—clean with a little spice—as I pressed my lips just below his jawline, my breath warm against his skin. I dragged my lips slowly up to his ear, grazing it lightly

before pulling back.

“Mm okay. Strong start,” he said as he winked at me.

Conrad raised his glass in a cheeky toast. “Strong start, but let’s see if you can finish.” He wiggled his brows at me.

I laughed, the tension easing as I settled back into the couch. This was going to be a night to remember.

CONRAD

I leaned back, a slow grin spreading across my face as Moon settled back onto the couch after her round. Damn, she played it like a pro—bold, but not too much. That teasing kiss on Hendrix’s neck? Just enough to make me wonder how much further this game could go.

“Moon made that easy,” I said, swirling the whiskey in my glass as I locked eyes with Hendrix. “But let’s see if you can keep up, man.”

Hendrix ran a hand through his hair like he wasn’t fazed, but I caught the slight twitch of his jaw. He hated losing, even in stupid games like this. Especially when I was involved. That competitive streak of his? One of my favorite things to needle.

“Alright,” Hendrix said, reaching for the bowls. “Let me get this done.”

His fingers dipped into the first bowl, then the second, the cards crinkling as he unfolded them.

“Hendrix...kiss...Conrad’s...inner thigh...longingly. Well, fuck me,” he said with a laughing groan and a shake of his head.

Moon burst out laughing, her eyes sparkling with delight. “I’d pay to see this.”

“Hendrix, you gonna chicken out, or are you actually going to play the game you’re

so keen on winning?”

He leaned forward, meeting my challenge with pointed heat. “Don’t tempt me, Conrad.”

There was a beat of silence, the kind that thrummed with electricity, before Hendrix set his glass down and moved toward me. His gaze didn’t waver as he knelt between my knees. The weight of his hands rested on my thighs, and I had to bite back a laugh.

“This better count,” he muttered, his voice low enough that it sent a shiver through me.

“Don’t half-ass it, man,” I shot back, my grin widening. “You’ve got an audience.”

Moon leaned forward, her elbows on her knees, and Hendrix shot her a glare that only made her laugh harder. “Fine,” he growled, sliding his palms higher up my thighs. My breath caught when he leaned in, his lips brushing against the skin on my thigh right where the hem of my shorts stopped. The heat of his breath, the featherlight drag of his lips—it was enough to make my pulse quicken.

His mouth moved up a fraction, pressing his lips to my skin and lingering for just a moment, and then he pulled back. “Satisfied?” he asked, his tone clipped, but there was something darker under it.

“For now,” I said, my voice steady despite the way my body hummed. I reached for the bowls, eager to see what would come next.

“Your turn, Conrad,” Moon said, her grin wicked. “Better make it good.”

I grabbed the cards and unfolded them one by one, my stomach tightening as the

pieces came together. Since they had each pulled their own names to start, I knew I was going to be doing this one.

“Conrad...lick...Moon’s...fingers...slowly.”

Moon’s lips curved into a smirk as she held up her hand, her fingers wiggling, the chunky silver rings adorning them catching the light like tiny challenges. Her dark, glossy nails glinted under the glow, sharp and polished. “Think you can handle this, Conrad?” she teased.

“Oh, I think I’ll manage,” my words wrapped in a sly drawl as I leaned toward her. “Can you?”

I took her hand in mine, my thumb brushing over the smooth metal of her rings before sliding across her knuckles. Slowly, I brought her index finger to my lips. The air between us thickened as my tongue traced the length of her finger, slow and sultry, tasting the faint tang of the silver while the cool edge of her nail grazed my tongue. I looked her dead in the eyes as I dipped my tongue into the pocket between two of her fingers, the warm, delicate space making her breath hitch. I let my tongue glide there, slow and sensual, before trailing back to the tip of her index finger.

She let out a soft exhale, her lips parting slightly, and it sent a jolt of satisfaction through me.

I released her finger with a flick of my tongue and leaned back, smirking. “Not bad, right?”

The game had started with light banter, playful dares to loosen us up, but by now, each round had turned the room electric. Every card draw shifted the dynamic, unraveling inhibitions one action at a time.

“Hendrix, you pick,” I said, sliding cards toward him. Moon leaned forward, her eyes dancing with mischief, her bottom lip caught between her teeth. I didn’t miss the way her gaze lingered on Hendrix’s hands as he drew the cards—strong, broad, the veins on the back of his hand standing out as he fanned them in front of him.

Hendrix read aloud, his deep voice sending a ripple through me. “Moon...bite...Conrad’s...ear...mischievously.”

She rose from her seat, closing the distance between us with deliberate grace. Her scent hit me first—something floral, warm, and uniquely her. She stood over me, her fingers grazing my shoulder before leaning in and settling on my lap. Her breath ghosted over my neck, and I felt my pulse quicken as her lips brushed my skin, the lightest pressure sending shivers down my spine. She licked my earlobe and then kissed it.

“Is that all you’ve got?” I challenged, my voice low, rougher than I intended. My body betrayed me as I felt the heat rush south, my cock twitching in my boxers.

Moon pulled back just enough to meet my eyes, a sly smile playing on her lips. Then she went in for it, biting my lobe before sucking it between her lips. Hendrix chuckled from across the room, his gaze fixed on the interaction, his Adam’s apple bobbing as he swallowed.

The air was heavy now, thick with something I could only describe as primal anticipation. Hendrix straightened, his lips still slightly parted as he looked at Moon. She caught his gaze, her teeth grazing her lower lip as she adjusted her top, her thighs trembling just enough for me to notice. My chest tightened at the sight, a mix of arousal and possessiveness curling in my stomach.

“Moon, your draw,” I prompted, my voice rougher than before.

She hesitated, her hand hovering over the bowls as if she already knew the cards would push boundaries further. Finally, she plucked five in quick succession, her eyes scanning the combinations before she read them aloud. Her lips curved into a cheeky smile as she read them aloud.

“Conrad...nibble on...Hendrix’s...throat...passionately.”

I froze for half a second, the weight of the words settling in the pit of my stomach. Hendrix looked at me, his jaw tight, but there was no mockery in his expression this time. Just curiosity—and maybe something more.

“Don’t wimp out,” Moon challenged, her voice lighthearted but her gaze serious. She leaned back, watching us like a cat with a cornered mouse.

“Never,” I muttered, standing and brushing my hands against my thighs, as though it would calm the sudden rush of heat through my body. Hendrix didn’t move as I stepped closer, but I caught the slight hitch in his breath when I reached out, my fingers brushing the edge of his open neckline.

“You good?” I asked softly, not wanting to push him further than he was willing to go.

Hendrix nodded once, his Adam’s apple bobbing as he swallowed. “Do your worst.”

I curled my fingers around the back of his neck, leaning in, my breath mingling with his as I angled his head to the side. My lips brushed his throat, and he shivered beneath the touch. Taking my time, I kissed along the curve of his neck, letting my tongue flick against his skin before I bit down gently. He let out a low, involuntary groan, his hands gripping the edge of the couch.

“Fuck, Conrad,” he muttered, his voice strained. The sound sent a jolt straight

through me, my cock hardening further against the press of my zipper.

When I pulled back, Moon's gaze was locked on us, her chest rising and falling faster now. "Damn," Moon whispered from her seat, her legs crossing and uncrossing, a flush spreading across her cheeks.

"Your turn, Hendrix," I said, pulling back, though my body screamed against the loss of contact.

Hendrix sat forward, his movements slower, more deliberate now. He drew his cards and read them with a smirk that promised trouble. "Moon...suck...Conrad's...lower lip...seductively."

My mouth went dry at the thought, my tongue darting out unconsciously to wet my lips. Moon stood, her movements unhurried as she came to stand between my knees. Her hands rested lightly on my shoulders, and she leaned down, her breath warm against my face.

"Don't forget to breathe," her voice hummed, honeyed and low. Her tongue darted out, flicking over my bottom lip in a way that was both fleeting and devastatingly sensual. She took her time, her eyes locked on mine as she licked again, before nipping me and sucking it between her lips lingering just enough for me to feel the pressure before she pulled back.

My hips jerked involuntarily, the friction against my shorts unbearable. Moon noticed—of course she did—and her lips quirked in satisfaction. "You taste good," she murmured, stepping back with an air of nonchalance that only made me want her more.

The next round brought us even closer to breaking the game's pretense entirely. Hendrix's turn delivered another blow to the group's already wavering boundaries.

The tension was unbearable now, and the cards almost seemed redundant as the three of us exchanged glances that said far more than words ever could.

It was my turn again, and I couldn't resist the temptation to push things further. The cards almost felt redundant now, but I drew them anyway, reading the combination aloud with a smirk.

"Hendrix...massage...Conrad's...chest...skillfully."

Hendrix didn't flinch, his stormy blue eyes flicking toward Moon with a knowing glint before settling back on me. He stood, his movements languid as he unhurriedly crossed the space between us. His hand hovered over my chest for a moment, his hesitation subtle but there.

"Don't be shy," I teased, though my voice was steadier than the heat unfurling in my gut.

"When have you known me to be shy?" Hendrix scoffed, his mouth curving into a crooked grin. "Don't worry; I'll be thorough."

He placed his broad hand flat against my chest, his warm palm pressing against the worn fabric of my long-sleeve tee. His touch was firm, his fingers spreading to knead my pecs with slow, deliberate pressure. His thumb brushed over my nipple, and I inhaled sharply, my cock stirring against the tight confines of my khaki shorts. Hendrix's grin widened, a glint of satisfaction flashing in his eyes.

"Thorough, huh?" I managed, though my voice came out rougher than I intended.

Hendrix didn't respond, his focus turning wholly to the movement of his hands. His other palm joined in, pressing into my muscles, his thumbs rolling in rhythmic circles that had my chest tightening with every pass. He worked with purpose, his rough

fingers grazing the peak of my nipples again, sending a jolt of sensation rippling through me. He took the hem of my shirt in his hands and pulled it up over my head, leaving my chest bare.

“Yeah,” he murmured, his voice low, almost to himself. His fingers brushed the edge of the tattoo on my left pec—a design of a camera with Charleston’s coastal seascape inked into the wide lens. He traced it lightly, the calloused pads of his fingers brushing over the ink as if committing the lines to memory. “I love this,” he said, almost absently, his tone rich with approval.

I bit back a groan as his thumbs pressed just beneath my pecs, working the taut muscles there with maddening precision. My chest rose under his touch, my breathing heavier now, each stroke of his hands pulling a fresh wave of heat through me.

Moon’s voice broke through, warm and laced with playful mischief, as she sauntered closer. “I can’t decide what’s hotter,” she mused, her lips curving into a slow smile. “Watching you squirm under his hands...or imagining how good he must be with them elsewhere.”

She didn’t wait for an invitation. Sliding in beside Hendrix, her nails grazed my chest, their sharp, glossy edges a contrast to the rough warmth of his hands. Her touch traveled downward, and she leaned in close, her lips brushing the peak of my nipple before her tongue flicked over it, sending my head tilting back with a soft groan.

“Fuck,” I exhaled, my voice cracking. “That just shot straight to my dick.” My fists clenched at my sides as Moon hummed her approval.

She pulled back, her lips curling into a wicked smile as her hand skimmed lower, trailing over the hard ridges of my abs before cupping the bulge straining against my shorts.

“Well, hello there,” she taunted, giving me a light squeeze that sent a sharp wave of heat through me.

Hendrix chuckled, his voice rough and low, his gaze shifting between us.

“Don’t laugh too hard,” Moon said, shifting her attention to him with a playful smirk. Her hand left me to press against the front of his jeans, her fingers brushing over the unmistakable ridge of his arousal. “You’re just as bad.”

His grin widened, his eyes darkening as he leaned into her touch. “Not denying it,” he murmured, his voice dipping softly.

Moon laughed, her hand lingering on him. “I don’t know who’s enjoying this more—you or Conrad.”

“Pretty sure we all are,” Hendrix replied, his hands still resting on my chest, the warmth of his touch steady as Moon glanced between us.

Her lips curved into a slow, deliberate smile. “Maybe it’s time we stop holding back.”

Moon stripped off her crocheted top slowly, and then her jeans, letting them pool around her feet. My gaze roamed over her as she stood before us in nothing but a pale lace bra and sheer panties, the delicate fabric doing little to hide the curves beneath.

“Christ, Moon,” I murmured, my voice rough. “You look like you were sculpted out of something sinful.”

“You’re one to talk. But thank you,” she said, with a cheeky shake of her ass. “Dancing for theatre keeps me in shape.”

Her body was a mix of softness and strength. Her tanned, toned skin glowed in the

low light, highlighting the elegant slope of her collarbones and the faint swell of her breasts. My cock twitched at the sight of her, my pulse thudding as I took in every detail.

Hendrix's gaze swept over her too, his voice dropping as he added, "So, she sings, she dances—and she's standing there looking like every dirty thought I've ever had."

She gave us a heated smile, her dark nails tracing the edge of her bra strap before letting her hands fall to her sides. "Your turn," she said with a suggestive glint.

Hendrix moved first, his confidence as natural as breathing. He tugged off his shirt with one smooth motion, revealing the tattoos that snaked down his back and chest, the ink shifting with the play of his muscles on his tan skin. He slipped out of his jeans and boxers, standing completely naked in the dim light.

I couldn't help but stare. His cock, long and elegant with a slight downward curve, rested against his thigh, its prominent veins visible. The dark ink that dipped below a hipbone framed his V-lines perfectly, drawing the eye downward to where his neatly trimmed hair blended into the sharp lines of his body. His eyes met mine, a flicker of amusement and understanding passing between us.

"Enjoying the view?" he teased, his voice low and gravelly.

Moon stepped closer to him, her fingers tracing the lyrics etched just above his patch of hair. "This is beautiful," she murmured, her touch lingering as she followed the swirls of waves and palm fronds. Her hand brushed lower, her breath catching slightly as she explored him with a featherlight tease.

"And you," she said, her eyes sparkling as she crossed the space between us. I followed her lead, slipping out of my clothes until I stood naked before her. Her gaze roamed over me, her lips parting slightly as she looked down at my dick, already

mostly hard and hanging heavy.

“A photographer?” she guessed, her voice curious as her fingers traced the ink on my shoulder.

I nodded, my throat tight as her hand moved lower, trailing over the ridges of my chest and down to my dick. When her eyes dropped and caught sight of my piercing, she froze, her eyebrows lifting in clear surprise.

“Wow,” she murmured, her fingers trailing along my length, her touch exploratory but confident as she teased the silver barbell that pierced my crown. “That’s...unexpected.”

Hendrix let out a sharp laugh, his dark eyes widening as he leaned closer. “Fuck, Conrad, I knew you were a little wild, but I didn’t know you’d put a needle through your dick.”

I smirked, feeling the heat rise in my chest. “Guess I don’t tell you everything.”

“No shit, bro. Way to hold out on that secret.” Hendrix shook his head, though there was no mistaking the flicker of admiration in his expression.

Moon’s lips curved into a wicked smile as her hands moved between the two of us, her gaze flicking back and forth. “Sit,” she said, her voice suggestive but firm.

We obeyed, settling side by side on the edge of the couch as she knelt between us, her hands and eyes roaming over our bodies with unabashed curiosity. Her fingers wrapped around each of us, her grip firm and exploratory as she stroked us both in unison.

Moon’s lips curled into a mischievous smile, her gaze flicking between Hendrix and

me as her hands continued to stroke us at a lazy pace. Then she tilted her head, her voice playful but edged with command as her eyes glittered with mischief. “I’m curious. I want to compare you.”

The air thickened as her words sank in. Hendrix shifted slightly, his eyes flicking to me, a trace of hesitation mingling with his arousal. “Compare us?” he echoed, his voice rough but tinged with intrigue.

Moon’s grin widened as her hands tightened their grip, her thumbs teasing over the sensitive heads of our cocks. “Don’t tell me you’re scared,” she ribbed, her gaze darting between us. “I just want to see...up close. Stand up and face each other.”

I caught Hendrix’s eye, the tension between us palpable. A moment of hesitation hung in the air, unspoken questions passing silently: Are you good with this? The exaggerated wideness of his eyes—half an eye roll, half a silent here we go —gave me my answer as we both did as Moon asked.

“Fuck it,” Hendrix muttered, stepping closer until we brushed one another. His cock jutted out, long and rigid, the prominent vein along its underside pulsing in the dim light. He glanced at me, his expression caught between amusement and challenge. “If he’s game, I’m game.”

My pulse hammered in my ears as I moved to close the gap between us, our dicks aligned as we faced each other with Moon on her knees in between.

Moon’s excitement was palpable as she leaned back slightly, her hands sliding down our shafts as she examined us. Her lips parted, her breath hitching slightly as her gaze darted between us.

“Hendrix,” she began, her tone almost reverent as her fingers traced his length, “fuck, you’re long. Really long.” She tilted her head, her thumb brushing down his shaft.

“And this vein is sexy.”

Her attention shifted to me, her fingers widening to wrap around my cock, her thumb grazing over the piercing at the tip. Her breath caught as she explored me. “And Conrad...so fucking thick.” Her tone dropped lower, her mouth parting as her hand cupped my weight. Her gaze flicked between the two of us, a spark of mischief in her eyes. “And this piercing. Goddamn. You two could be dick models. Is that even a thing?” she laughed.

Hendrix chuckled, though his breathing was rough. “Guess we’re a good pair,” he murmured, his voice tinged with arousal as he glanced down at both of us, hard in her hands.

Moon knelt between us, her hands gripping the bases of our cocks firmly, her fingers splayed against our heated skin. “Come closer to each other,” she murmured, her voice a sultry command that sent a jolt straight to my gut. She tugged us forward, and our hips nearly brushed as the slick, swollen tips of our cocks hovered just inches apart.

“Now,” she said, her tone dripping with sultry control, “let’s see how you boys handle this.”

She guided us with her hands, pressing our tips together until they bumped, the first contact drawing a sharp hiss from Hendrix.

“Fuck,” he muttered, his voice rough as his chest rose and fell. “That’s...so fucking weird. Hot, but weird.”

“It’s more than weird,” I bit out, my voice strained as the cool glint of my piercing slid against his slick, flushed head.

Moon's grin widened as she angled us closer, her fingers squeezing as she moved our cocks against each other. "That's it," she murmured, her voice like honey. "Rub against each other. Tell me how it feels."

Hendrix groaned, his voice breaking into a low growl. "The way his piercing presses against me—it's like it's fucking taunting me."

Moon wet her lips, obviously aroused as she guided this sexy experiment. "And what about you, Conrad? How does it feel to rub your cock against his?"

"Like I'm gonna fucking lose it," I admitted, my grip tightening on the couch for support. "He's so smooth, and every time we slide together, it's like my brain just shuts off."

"Good boys," she purred, her tone dripping with amusement. Her hands slid higher, holding us tighter together as she worked us in tandem, gripping us to push our heads flush against each other. We both had a bead of pre-cum on our tips, making the glide even slicker, and Moon's delighted hum only added to the unbearable tension coiling in my gut.

"Look at you," she said, her voice thick with approval. "Leaking all over each other.."

"Moon," Hendrix rasped, his hips jerking forward slightly, making our tips grind together harder. "Fuck—just...lick us. Please."

"Yeah," I groaned, my voice barely steady as her hands shifted, angling us so that her lips were just inches away. "God, Moon, please. I need your tongue."

Her laugh was low and wicked as she leaned in, her tongue flicking out to glide over the sensitive undersides of our cocks where they met. The wet, firm pressure made

my hips jerk, and Hendrix let out a sharp hiss, his hand gripping the back of the couch for balance.

“Jesus Christ,” he muttered, his stormy eyes dark with lust. “That’s gonna kill me.”

“Is it?” Moon murmured, her tongue dragging slowly upward, her lips brushing the swollen heads of our cocks before pressing them tighter together. “Because you both seem like you’re enjoying this.”

“Too fucking much,” Hendrix admitted, his voice cracking slightly as Moon’s tongue pressed between us, teasing the slits at our tips. “I’m—shit, I’m gonna lose it.”

“Not yet,” she whispered, her voice a taunt as she squeezed us together, her tongue sliding between us with maddening precision. “I want more. Keep rubbing. Keep leaking for me.”

I couldn’t hold back the growl that rumbled in my chest as Hendrix’s slick head slid against my piercing, the friction combined with her tongue nearly making me collapse. “Moon,” I groaned, my voice desperate. “I’m so fucking close.”

“Good,” she said, her tone wicked as she pushed us tighter. Moon’s tongue pressed firmly between our tips, flicking against the sensitive slits as her hands squeezed the bases of our cocks, holding us tightly together. The slick glide of Hendrix’s smooth head against my pierced tip made both of us groan, our hips moving instinctively, thrusting forward into her touch.

“Fuck,” Hendrix rasped, his words splintered as his body tensed. “I can’t—Moon, I’m gonna?—”

“Do it,” she urged, her voice low and commanding as her tongue swirled deliberately over his tip. “Give it all to me.”

Hendrix's groan was guttural as his hips snapped forward, his cock jerking hard against mine. The first thick spurt of his release shot out, hot and forceful, shooting onto my cock before pooling on Moon's waiting tongue. More streams followed, coating her lips and dripping from the corners of her mouth. "Jesus Christ," Hendrix choked, his thighs trembling as some of his cum slid down her chin, dripping onto her breasts.

The sight of it—her lips coated in Hendrix's cum, the creamy mixture spilling onto her tits—made my cock throb painfully. Without thinking, I pressed forward, rubbing the sensitive tip of my cock into the slick pool of Hendrix's cum that still lingered on her tongue. The warm, sticky heat of it coated me instantly, the texture and the obscene sight pushing me to the brink.

"Moon," I gasped, my voice strangled as my hips jerked forward. "Shit?—"

"Do it," Moon whispered, her lips brushing against my tip as her tongue flicked over the piercing, spreading the mix of cum along my length. "Come for me, Conrad. Let me feel it."

That was all it took. A guttural groan tore from my throat as my balls tightened, the first thick spurt of cum mixing with Hendrix's and spilling onto her tongue. My cock pulsed violently, as I rode it out. Moon moaned as swallowed, her hands still gripping us tightly as I came down from the release.

She pulled back slightly, her tongue darting out to catch the remnants clinging to her lips before she grinned up at us, her chest still rising and falling. "Double the pleasure, double the fun—Isn't that the saying?" she laughed, her voice light and heady.

I slumped against the couch, my body still trembling, and Hendrix let out a weak laugh, dragging a hand through his damp curls as he shook his head. "Goddamn,

Moon. That was...orgasmic. Literally.”

Moon grinned as she leaned back with a stare. “Well you’re both not done yet,” she said, her tone dripping with promise. “Because I’m not nearly satisfied.”

Moon sat in the side chair, sprawled seductively, her gaze flicking between Hendrix and me. I dropped down to the floor and leaned forward, gripping her thighs firmly, my voice low and rough. “Come here,” I said, the command clear in my tone. “I want you on my face.”

Her eyes widened slightly, a spark of excitement flashing in them as a wicked grin spread across her lips. She sat up slowly, her body moving with a fluid grace that sent a fresh wave of arousal through me. “You think you can give as good as you got?,” her voice playful but dripping with intent.

“Oh, sweetheart,” I murmured, my voice still raw as I dropped down on my back beside Hendrix. “We’re about to ruin you.”

Moon didn’t hesitate. She climbed up and swung a leg over me, straddling my chest before shifting up, her knees pressing on either side of my head. The heat of her pussy was intoxicating as she lowered herself onto me, her hands bracing against my chest as she sank down.

I groaned as her pussy pressed against my lips, her arousal slick and warm as I licked a broad stripe along her folds. “Mm,” I murmured against her, my tongue diving between her lips to taste her deeper. “You taste so fucking sweet.”

Moon moaned softly, her hips rocking against my face as I thrust my tongue inside her, curling it to explore every inch of her. She tilted her head back, her hands gripping the couch tighter as her body moved in time with my strokes.

From the corner of my eye, I caught Hendrix watching us, his storm blue eyes dark with hunger. He licked his lips, and then he smirked, leaning down to rest his forearms on the couch beside me. “You’re not hogging her all to yourself, St. Clair,” he said, his tone rich with unspoken challenge.

“Get in here, then,” I growled, my voice muffled against Moon’s pussy as my hands gripped her thighs tighter, holding her in place as my tongue thrust deeper.

Hendrix shifted, positioning himself sideways as he leaned into my chest. His hands slid up Moon’s legs, his thumbs brushing over the soft skin of her inner thighs as he angled his head closer to her clit. “Don’t mind if I do.”

Moon gasped sharply as Hendrix’s tongue flicked over her clit, the quick, deliberate strokes sending a shudder through her body. “Oh fuck,” she moaned, her hips jerking forward as my tongue pressed deeper inside her and Hendrix’s tongue circled her clit in perfect sync.

“Shit,” she gasped, her voice trembling as her hands gripped the couch tighter. “You’re...you’re both—oh my God.”

I groaned against her, the vibration making her hips buck as Hendrix worked her clit with maddening precision. “She’s so fucking responsive,” Hendrix muttered, his voice rough as he glanced at me briefly. “You feel how she’s trembling?”

I nodded, my tongue thrusting deeper, savoring the way her body clenched with every flick and press. Moon’s fingers tangled in Hendrix’s hair, her breath catching in sharp, broken gasps. Her hips bucked again, pressing harder against me.

Moon’s breathing grew ragged, her chest heaving as her hips rocked between us. Hendrix sucked her clit gently, his tongue flicking over the swollen bundle of nerves in quick, precise strokes, while my tongue explored the soft, slick heat of her pussy,

curling to press against the spots that made her cry out.

“Fuck, I’m so close,” she gasped as her thighs trembled against us. “Don’t stop, please—don’t fucking stop?—”

Hendrix pulled back slightly, his lips brushing against her clit as he murmured, “We’ve got you, Moon. Just let go.”

Her body tensed, her head falling back as her orgasm ripped through her. She cried out, her hips jerking against our mouths as her thighs clenched around my head. I didn’t stop, my tongue continuing to thrust inside her, coaxing out every wave of pleasure as Hendrix worked her clit, his lips pulling it into his mouth as his tongue flicked relentlessly.

Her cries filled the room, her body trembling violently as her orgasm peaked, the slick heat of her release tart against my tongue. I groaned deeply, savoring her taste as Hendrix licked her clit one last time before leaning back, his stormy eyes gleaming with satisfaction.

Moon collapsed forward, her chest heaving as she braced herself against the couch, her body still trembling with aftershocks. “Holy fuck,” she breathed out, her voice shaky as she tried to catch her breath. “That was like being shattered and remade in the same breath.”

Hendrix grinned, his lips glistening as he sat back, his hand brushing over her trembling thigh. “Told you we’d ruin you.”

MOON

The morning light filtered through the curtains, soft and hazy, casting the room in a golden glow. I blinked slowly, the fog of sleep still clinging to me, and became acutely aware of the weight and warmth surrounding me. I woke up sandwiched between two walls of heat, the faint scent of amber, vanilla, and musk mingling with something earthier. My cheek was pressed against a firm, bare chest—Conrad's, I realized, as my eyes fluttered open. His heartbeat was steady under my ear, his arm draped heavily over my waist. Behind me, Hendrix was sprawled out, one of his long legs tangled with mine, his hand resting on my hip.

And both of them had massive morning wood.

Conrad pressed against my stomach, thick and heavy, with the slight pressure from his barbell. Behind me, Hendrix's erection nudged against the curve of my ass, his body radiating heat as his hand flexed lightly on my hip, pulling me closer.

I glanced down, remembering I was in the oversized t-shirt they'd lent me last night—one of Hendrix's band tees, soft and worn, hanging loosely to mid-thigh. The memory of everything that had happened last night made my cheeks flush, and the insistent press of their bodies against mine sent a fresh pulse through me.

"Morning, Moonshine," Hendrix's gravelly voice murmured behind me, the warmth of his breath brushing against my neck as he stirred. His hand tightened on my hip before sliding lazily down to rest just below the hem of my shirt.

“Morning,” I mumbled, my voice still deep with sleep as Conrad shifted beneath me, his eyes cracking open.

“Sleep okay?” Conrad asked as his eyes met mine, stunning, like aquamarine, in the morning light.

“Like a rock between two boulders,” I replied, my lips curving into a small smile as Hendrix’s arm snaked around my waist, pulling me back against him.

“What can we get you?” Hendrix’s voice was still rough, his tone casual but loaded with suggestion. Conrad’s grin widened as he shifted beneath me, his cock twitching against my stomach.

“I’d kill for a cup of coffee,” I purred, stretching my back in an arch. “And a shower.”

“Not exactly what I meant,” Hendrix chuckled, his hand brushing against the bare skin of my thigh beneath the shirt. “But fair enough.”

Sliding his hand lazily up my back, “You can have both,” Conrad murmured. “If you promise to get your sexy ass back in bed after the shower.”

I rolled my eyes, laughing softly. “Maybe you two can help each other out while I’m in the shower,” I teased, biting back a grin as I felt Hendrix’s laugh rumble through his chest.

“You wouldn’t want to miss the fun, now would you?” Hendrix asked with a laugh as he squeezed my ass cheek.

Conrad groaned, pushing himself up on one elbow before swinging his legs over the side of the bed. “Fine, I’ll get the coffee,” he said, tugging on a pair of boxers before

padding toward the door.

I slipped out of bed, making my way to the adjoining bathroom. I pulled off my borrowed tee and stepped into the shower. Through the open bathroom door, I could hear Conrad return a few minutes later as he brought in the coffee.

“Still naked?” Conrad challenged as he eyed Hendrix leaning back against the headboard.

“Why wouldn’t I be?” Hendrix replied, his tone lazy.

“So, we’ve hit the point where you’re just openly stroking your cock in front of me now?” Conrad asked.

“Why the fuck not?” Hendrix snipped back. “It’s not like you haven’t seen it. Remember when you came all over me last night? Besides,” he added, and I could hear his tone turn wicked, “I can’t stop thinking about her in there...all hot and soaped up, water running down her body.”

“Fuck, I guess you’re right,” Conrad muttered, shifting on the bed. His gaze flicked toward the open bathroom door, and he ran a hand through his hair with a resigned groan.

I peeked out of the shower, steam curling around me as I caught a glimpse of them through the open door. Hendrix was sprawled out on the bed, his chiseled body on full display, while Conrad sat at the edge, his coffee in hand.

“You’re staring, St. Clair,” Hendrix drawled, his storm blue eyes narrowing slightly as he tilted his head.

“Question is...what’s making you hard again, thinking about her in there or watching

me?” he continued, his tone merciless as his gaze flicked to Conrad’s boxers, where I’m sure the outline of his boner was pressing against the fabric.

“Oh fuck off, what does it matter,” Conrad scoffed as he flipped Hendrix off, his face flushing slightly as he adjusted himself.

“Don’t bother,” Hendrix said with a smirk. “Just get naked again. You know she’ll want you ready when she comes out.”

I bit my lip to stifle a laugh, quickly rinsing off before stepping out of the shower. These two obviously had some heat between them, and last night had definitely pushed their boundaries with my help.

Wrapping a towel loosely around me, I padded back into the bedroom to find both of them exactly as Hendrix had suggested—naked and very ready, their cocks standing proud, flushed and heavy, the heat in their gazes matching the teasing curve of their lips.

“Get your sexy ass over here,” Conrad said, his voice low and warm as his ocean eyes raked over me.

“And lose the towel,” Hendrix added, his smirk widening as he reached for me.

I dropped the towel, feeling their eyes on me as I climbed onto the bed between them.

“Now,” I murmured, “about that coffee...”

HOLDEN

The morning was one of those rare Charleston gifts—cool enough to feel alive, warm enough to remind you summer wasn’t far off. The air smelled faintly of salt, with just a whisper of jasmine from the vines climbing the trellises along the path. Dew painted the grass and the hydrangeas lining the walk, and the whole property seemed to hum softly, a Southern rhythm that matched the slow creak of the guesthouse door swinging shut behind me.

Ahead, the main house stood stately but welcoming, its weathered teal paint and wraparound piazzas bathed in the soft morning light. Fanny had kept the original color when she restored the house, swapping out fragile antique window panes for modern efficient ones. “You honor the past,” she’d told me, “but you make it livable for the present.”

Inside, the kitchen was neat, its marble countertops gleaming and farmhouse sink clear under the garden window. A French press sat waiting by the coffee grinder, next to a bowl with fresh fruit. There was a whiskey bottle and vodka left on the counter, and oddly, some of Granny’s ceramic bowls sat out—the only signs of what Hendrix and Conrad had been up to last night.

I poured myself a cup of coffee, grabbed a slice of sourdough, and carried them to the counter, where Gatsby waited. The worn cover dared me to find something new in its pages before book club. But I wouldn’t be reading long because I planned to hit Folly Beach before the weekend crowds descended, the thought of cool Atlantic waves and

the rhythm of paddling out into the surf calling to me.

I couldn't ask for anything more, really—living just a short drive from Charleston's beaches, sharing my beautiful family home with two of my closest friends, all thanks to my mom's generosity when college began. Sunday dinners at home with a delicious Southern spread and family that loved me, despite my ornery temperament sometimes. It was the perfect balance of freedom and comfort.

When Granny died during my senior year in high school, Mom couldn't bear to sell her childhood home. She and Blanton, my stepfather, had just finished fixing up their new home for the blended family. Mom had given Hendrix and me Granny Goodloe's, wanting us to have our own space while attending Charleston School of Arts and Letters.

The small liberal arts college sprawled throughout Charleston's historic district, the academic buildings located in ivy-draped antebellum mansions and the dorms in some converted historic warehouses in the arts district. The college drew an eclectic mix of students: old-money Southerners alongside bohemian creatives—bow ties and bandanas—both drawn to the city's reputation as a cultural hub. I'd chosen it without hesitation; its English literature program was one of the best in the region, and staying local meant staying close to my mom.

Losing James had left a void neither of us could fill. He'd been her anchor, her firstborn, and when he died, she poured herself into her art, trying to paint her way out of the grief. I stayed because she needed someone. Because I couldn't let her face that pain alone.

"You don't have to stay, Holden," Fanny had told me when I was applying to schools. Her voice had been gentle, but her hands trembled slightly as she folded the corner of her apron. "You should go where your heart pulls you."

“My heart’s here,” I’d said simply, meaning every word. She didn’t push after that, just nodded, her lips pressed into a thin line as she turned back to her easel.

Hendrix hadn’t been as convinced. Blanton’s voice echoed in my mind. I could still see him standing in the kitchen three years ago, his hands braced on the counter as he looked at Hendrix. “Your mom was wild, sure, but she didn’t throw away responsibility for fun. Stella wanted you to have choices for your future. College is a way to have more of them.”

Hendrix had leaned against the fridge, barefoot, his arms crossed. “I don’t know, Dad. College doesn’t feel like me.”

Blanton had sighed but didn’t press. “It doesn’t have to be forever. Just try. For her.”

That quiet moment had shifted something in Hendrix. He’d agreed, though the compromise was clear—he’d show up, but he’d do it his way. For him, CSAL became less about academics and more about soaking in the creative energy. The campus always hummed with activity—impromptu poetry readings in the courtyards, late-night painting sessions by the harbor, and jam sessions that spilled out into the streets. Hendrix fit right in, of course. I had to admire how effortlessly he lived in that world while I kept my nose in a book.

I set my coffee down, my gaze landing on a framed family photo on the mantle. It was one of Conrad’s—golden hour on the piazza, all of us smiling against the light. Fanny looked radiant, Blanton steady at her side. Hendrix and I flanked them, with Conrad between us after he had set up the shot, his grin boyish and irreverent. Seeing it now, it felt like a miracle we’d all ended up there, stitched together by second chances and shared grief.

My mom deserved every bit of that happiness. Losing James had nearly destroyed her. When he died, it was like a part of her went with him. Then my dad left, like

grief was something he could walk away from, leaving her to pick up the pieces. She poured herself into her art, trying to fill the void with vibrant colors and broad strokes. But it wasn't until she met Blanton that her laughter came back for real. Blanton wasn't perfect—polished, meticulous, and sometimes too concerned with appearances—but he was solid. He loved my mom the way she deserved to be loved, and for that, I'd always be grateful to him.

I turned to head back into the kitchen to clean up my breakfast plate before heading out to surf when I noticed them—women's boots, casually kicked off and lying near the coffee table. Black leather, worn but striking, with a pointed toe and a heel. They weren't just tossed aside; they spoke of someone who made herself at home. I smirked. One of them had company last night. Probably Hendrix, though Conrad wasn't exactly a stranger to morning-after scenarios.

And then I saw it slouched on the sofa. Its distinctive Louis Vuitton checkerboard pattern caught my eye first, but what froze me was the bold, looping script painted across the front. Moon, in deep cobalt and lilac strokes. My coffee cup stalled halfway to my lips, my chest tightening as my pulse spiked with confusion and something sharper. Her bag. Her boots. She was here. Upstairs. And if they were still here, that meant she'd stayed—with one of them.

My stomach twisted, a slow burn rising in my chest as I stood paralyzed, staring at her bag as if it held all the answers I didn't want to know.

Moon.

She was here .

With Hendrix? Or Conrad?

The thought clawed at my insides, a mix of fury and something uglier. My jaw

clenched as my hands tightened around the counter's edge, the plan for my morning blown to bits. The sunlight in the room now felt too bright.

My mind spun in too many directions at once, tripping over itself. The image of her laughing, the sound of her voice, her touch—all of it tangled up with the stark reality of her presence here. In this house.

With one of them.

I needed answers.

I turned toward the stairs, each step I took heavier than the last. The creak of the wood echoed in the silence, the house too still. Yet, faint noises filtered down—murmurs, the rustle of sheets, a soft laugh that I didn't want to recognize but did anyway. It was her. I knew it.

The laugh twisted something deep in my chest, sharper than I expected. My jaw tightened further, a bead of sweat slipping down my temple as I reached the top of the stairs. I saw Conrad's room first, the door cracked open. The bed was a mess—sheets tangled, pillows askew—but empty.

The door to Hendrix's room was closed.

I froze outside of it, my hand hovering over the doorknob. My breath was shallow, the muscles in my neck taut. Part of me wanted to turn around, to walk back downstairs, grab my board, and pretend I hadn't seen anything. But I couldn't.

My hand closed around the knob, slick with sweat. I twisted it slowly, the click of the latch loud in the quiet hallway, and pushed the door open.

The scene inside hit me like a punch to the gut.

Conrad was sitting up in bed, the sheets barely covering him, his broad chest bare. Hendrix leaned against the headboard beside him, also shirtless, holding a coffee cup like he didn't have a care in the world. And Moon faced them. Her hair was a mess of wet waves, cascading down her bare back with a towel pooled on the bed behind her, as she faced them both and laughed, clearly comfortable sitting naked in front of them.

She turned, and her eyes widened when she saw me, her smile faltering like she'd been caught doing something she couldn't take back. She clutched her towel, covering herself.

"Holden?" she said as if in disbelief, her voice barely audible, her lips parting as if to say more.

I couldn't breathe. My chest felt tight, my hand still clutching the strap of her bag like it was the only thing tethering me to reality.

"What the fuck is this?" The words came out before I could stop them, harsh and raw, cutting through the air like a blade.

Conrad didn't even flinch. He just grinned lazily, tipping his mug toward me. "Morning, bro. Coffee's brewing downstairs."

I wanted to hit him. I wanted to wipe that smug look off his face—to grab him off the bed and throw him out of the room. But I couldn't even move. My gaze was locked on Moon, on the way she shrank slightly under my glare, her lips pressing together like she was bracing herself.

"Holden!" she said more emphatically now, "What?—"

"Don't," I snapped, cutting her off. My voice was lower now, quieter, but no less

furious. I looked at Hendrix and Conrad, my lip curling. “Both of you? Fucking really? ”

Hendrix shrugged, his face infuriatingly calm. “We’re all adults, man. No one’s hiding anything.”

His words hit like a slap, stinging and unnecessary. My grip tightened on her bag, the anger simmering dangerously close to boiling over. My gaze snapped back to Moon.

“Why here?” My voice cracked slightly, the edge softening for just a moment. “Of all places, why here? With them? ”

She didn’t answer. She just looked at me, her expression unreadable. Guilt? Shame? It didn’t matter. She wasn’t saying what I needed to hear.

My hand dropped the bag, the thud as it hit the floor making her flinch. “You know what?” I said, my voice bitter. “Forget it. Enjoy yourselves.”

Without waiting for a response, I turned and walked out, the door slamming shut behind me. My chest heaved as I took the stairs two at a time, the anger mixing with something else, something I refused to name.

I grabbed my board from the corner and left. The ocean would fix this. It had to.

MOON

I bolted upright as the bedroom door clicked shut, the sound slicing through the hazy warmth of the morning. My heart hammered against my ribs, every beat a reminder of what had just happened—Holden’s face, the shock in his eyes, the way his mouth opened as if to say something before he turned and walked away.

My guy from the bookstore, with his quiet simmering demeanor and sharp green eyes that lingered on mine like they saw through me, had just stood frozen in the doorway, staring at me in bed with two other guys. My skin prickled with embarrassment as the puzzle pieces snapped together. Holden, Hendrix, Conrad—connected in ways I had completely overlooked.

“Moon?” Hendrix’s voice broke into my spiraling thoughts. His hand brushed my shoulder, but I flinched away, swinging my legs over the side of the bed.

“Wait. Stop.” My voice cracked, half-panicked. “How do you all know each other?” I yanked my shirt over my head, the fabric hot against my skin, feverish hot since Holden had walked in.

Hendrix’s face went pale. He ran a hand through his hair, glancing at Conrad. “Holden is—shit. Moon, he’s my stepbrother.”

I froze, fingers still on the hem of my shirt. “What?”

“He’s also my best friend,” Conrad added, a touch quieter, like he was wary of setting me off further.

I sat rooted on the edge of the bed, my pulse roaring in my ears. My skin had tingled with pleasure where Hendrix and Conrad had touched me moments ago, but now shame crawled over every inch of me.

It clicked into place with jarring clarity, dragging along every memory of Holden’s piercing charm at the bookstore that day. The warmth of that connection now twisted into a cruel knot in my stomach. He’d seen me— us .

“You said you lived with your stepbrother, but you never mentioned?—”

“I didn’t think his name mattered!” Hendrix cut in, his voice edged with defensiveness. “How could I know you two knew each other?”

Conrad held up a hand, his expression calm but questioning. “Wait, hold on. How do you know Holden?”

“I—” My words caught in my throat as the weight of everything settled on me. I ran a hand through my hair, trying to steady myself. “I met him a few days ago at Press. He was in the poetry section, and we just...started talking. It was one of those conversations that sticks with you, you know?”

Hendrix raised an eyebrow, but Conrad’s expression shifted, a flicker of understanding crossing his face. “Go on.”

I swallowed hard. “We got coffee after book club. We just talked. But there was...something. A spark. I don’t know. We didn’t exchange numbers yet or anything, but I couldn’t stop thinking about him. I knew I’d see him again at book club.”

The room fell silent, and I could feel their gazes on me, waiting for more. When I glanced up, Conrad and Hendrix exchanged a look that made my stomach tighten.

“Oh shit,” Conrad muttered, rubbing the back of his neck. “You’re the girl .”

My brow furrowed. “What girl?”

Hendrix groaned, leaning against the wall. “The girl Holden’s been obsessing over. He wouldn’t shut up about meeting someone at the bookstore.”

“He seemed quite taken with you,” Conrad confirmed. “The girl with the silver eyes and the gypsy soul.”

“Yeah. That’s what he said. We ragged on him for not getting your number or your socials, but Holden’s always been more old-fashioned.”

My knees buckled, and I sank onto the edge of the bed. Everything was spinning too fast, the connections clicking into place in a way that made my chest ache. “He told you about me?”

“Yeah. He seemed...spellbound,” Conrad said, his voice quieter now. “And now he thinks—well, you can guess what he thinks.”

I buried my face in my hands, heat crawling up my neck. “Oh my god. This is a such fucking mess. I just didn’t know. I swear I didn’t know.”

“We get it,” Hendrix said, his voice softer now. “But that doesn’t change what he saw.”

I looked up at him, my stomach churning. “I need to explain. I need to tell him?—”

“Tell him what?” Hendrix’s jaw tightened, his tone brusque. “That we didn’t matter? That it was just a mistake?”

“It wasn’t a mistake,” I snapped, standing abruptly. “I’m into you guys and want to keep getting to know you. But I’m into him too—” My voice broke, and I shook my head. “I don’t fucking know. But I can’t leave things like this. I have to find him.”

Gravel crunched under my boots as I followed the direction Hendrix and Conrad had given me to Holden’s room. As I approached the guesthouse, I paused, taking in its charm. The white clapboard siding was crisp in the sunlight, and a pergola draped in wisteria shaded the entrance.

I pushed open the French doors, stepping into the stillness of the space. I hesitated, my nerves tightening as I thought about the way Holden had looked at me before—angry, hurt, betrayed. My heart raced as I called out, “Holden?” hoping he’d be here, hoping I could find him and somehow make things right.

But the room remained quiet, his absence heavier than I expected. I moved through the space, the silence pressing in around me, until I realized—he wasn’t here. And the weight of that emptiness settled in my chest, deepening the ache of the mess I’d made.

As I took in my surroundings, it felt like stepping into Holden’s mind—orderly, introspective, and steeped in solitude. The living area was sparingly furnished, yet everything seemed intentional. Built-in bookshelves lined one wall, filled with classics and more obscure literary works. The scent of old paper and faint traces of tobacco lingered in the air. A desk dominated one corner, an old-school typewriter at its center, flanked by a half-filled ashtray and stacks of loose pages with elegant, tight handwriting. The idea of Holden, so reserved in person, expressing himself so freely here, was intoxicating. It was as if this room held a part of him no one else ever saw.

My boots made soft thuds against the wooden floor as I ventured further in, drawn to the recessed alcove where his bed was. I hesitated, feeling like an intruder, but my curiosity won out. There was a brass lamp on the bedside table, casting warm light over the gray linens and duvet. Above the bed hung a single piece of artwork, a muted landscape that I instinctively knew was James's work. There was something haunting about it, a quiet sadness that seemed to echo the emotions Holden kept bottled up.

I sat on the edge of his bed, surveying his room from this vantage point, drawn to the bookshelves again. His collection was impressive and daunting—everything from well-worn editions of Austen and Dickens and shelves just devoted to the old world poets to more experimental modern stuff like Kerouac and Didion. As I scooted up further onto the bed, resting against his headboard, I glanced at his bedside table where there was a leather-bound journal left open with a pen marking his page.

Beside the journal was a small silver-framed photo. It was a picture of two boys—Holden and another older boy who must have been James. They were laughing, their arms slung over each other's shoulders, their faces suffused with a happiness that felt almost foreign compared to the Holden I'd met.

I hesitated briefly before reaching over to look more closely. As I took in the photo, I couldn't help but notice his writing in the open pages before me. His writing was neat, filled with Holden's tidy, masculine script. A draft of a poem caught my eye, and as I read, my heart tightened:

In the shadow of her smile, the world fades,

A moonlit grace that bends the night to her will.

Her laugh, a press of light on ink-dark days,

Her gaze, a tether, her absence a bitter chill.

The words were tender, romantic, and undeniably about me. My cheeks flushed, a mix of guilt and flattery washing over me. Turning the page, I found another poem, this one darker, filled with yearning:

To kiss the bite-mark I left on her skin,

To taste the heat where her hunger begins.

Her breath ignites, her sighs ensnare,

My name a plea in the midnight air.

Her softness presses against my need,

A velvet ache, a hunger freed.

I pull her closer, as our breaths sway,

A dance of desire where shadows lay.

Fingers tangled, hearts undone.

A rhythm building until we're one.

Her pulse a song I long to chase,

Her body, my refuge, her bite my grace.

This one left me breathless. The visceral longing in his words stirred something deep

inside me, a heat that I couldn't ignore. I pictured him here, late at night, his cigarette smoke curling through the air as his pen moved over the page, writing about me, every word scorched with desire. The thought of him alone, lost in his words, and the way he must have felt—writing about wanting me—sent a shiver through my body. I couldn't help but imagine him close, his hands on me, the roughness of his touch matching the rawness of his poem. My pulse quickened, and I shifted on the bed, the heat between my legs building with each line, his words making me ache for something I hadn't tasted yet. And something he now might never want.

But then, the image of Hendrix flashed in my mind—his deep blue eyes, his easy confidence, the way he made me feel electric. And then I thought of Conrad's wry cheeky smile, the ache inside me twisting. How could I want this—want Holden—when part of me was tangled up in them, too? Each connection felt real, and yet none of it made sense. I glanced down at the desk again, my fingers lingering over the typewriter, my mind swirling with confusion. I wanted Holden, badly, but how could I be drawn to him when I knew what I had with Hendrix and Conrad was equally undeniable?

How the fuck had I fallen for three guys without knowing they were stepbrothers and childhood best friends, woven together so indelibly that I could never come between them. The thought made me dizzy. My body still hummed with the tension from Holden's words, but my heart was heavy with uncertainty. I couldn't decide which part of me to give into. I wanted him, wanted all of it, but I didn't know how to reconcile the tangled mess of feelings inside.

The breeze from the open window shifted, breaking my thoughts. I felt like an intruder here, caught between the pull of Holden's poetry and the ties I had to the others. I couldn't stay, and yet I didn't want to leave. I placed the journal back where I'd found it and turned to leave, my body still aching from the fantasy his words had sparked.

The soft spring air greeted me as I stepped outside, the guesthouse's quiet charm a stark contrast to the turbulence inside me. The words I'd read lingered, their weight and beauty settling deep in my chest. If he'd written about me like this, how could I not find him and see if I had ruined it for good.

HOLDEN

The ocean felt like my mind—wild and unruly, full of currents I couldn't control. Folly Beach was supposed to be my escape, the one place I could strip it all away—the weight of Moon, Conrad, and Hendrix, the mess they'd tangled me into. But today, the waves felt more like a trap, shoving me back into the shit I was trying to swim away from.

I paddled further out, the salt biting at my skin, my arms aching, but none of it dulled the image burned into my brain: the three of them naked, piled into Hendrix's bed, Moon's wild curls a messy halo around her face, her laugh low and wicked. Conrad beside her, stretched out perfectly at ease, his hand trailing up her thigh, his grin easy. Hendrix leaned back against the headboard, his broad chest bare, drinking coffee like he didn't have a care in the world.

They were tangled together, bare skin and easy touches, like they'd been doing it forever. The sheets barely covered them, giving up any pretense. And Moon—Moon had looked like she belonged there, pressed between them, her body too comfortable, too inviting. She didn't look conflicted, didn't look guilty. She looked fucking radiant.

They'd been laughing. That's what gutted me. Like it was all so natural, so effortless. They weren't hiding, weren't worried about being caught. I wasn't supposed to be a factor. I was just some outsider, standing there like an idiot while they shared something I wasn't part of.

Conrad—my best fucking friend—had been so in his element, like he didn't even realize what it meant for me to see him like that. Hendrix—my stepbrother, my infuriating, carefree stepbrother—had only added to the punch. And Moon? She wasn't just chaos; she was the storm itself, all wild energy and unapologetic beauty. She'd torn through me without even trying.

Maybe it was simply jealousy over Moon, or maybe it was the idea of Conrad slipping out of reach, finding connections I couldn't touch. It was Conrad and Hendrix sharing something that didn't include me. It was all of it, tangled and knotted into something I didn't want to name.

The waves slammed against me again, knocking me sideways, and I let it happen, the saltwater burning in my eyes. I wanted to lose myself in it, to let the ocean strip away the mess, but it wasn't enough. The truth was too loud: they were all mine, in different ways, for different reasons. And I hated it. Hated that I cared, that I wanted to belong in their cocoon, even though I knew I didn't.

It hit me now—how much I was into her, how much I wanted her to be mine, and how fucking foolish I'd been to think she could feel anything close to what I felt. She'd been with them—while I was writing poetry about her. The anger boiled again, but it mixed with something else—embarrassment. Because deep down, I knew I was the one who'd been too damn invested, who'd let myself fall for a girl who probably never thought about me past the brief entertainment of our banter at Press.

Nothing had happened, not really. They hadn't crossed a line. It's not like they were supposed to notify me to hook up with someone or ask me for permission.

I turned back toward the shore, my chest still raw, my arms burning. I should've stayed longer, let the water drag me under until I couldn't think anymore. But as I approached the sand, I saw her.

She was standing by the water's edge, watching me with those eyes that saw everything I wanted to hide. My blood pulsed with a mix of desire and frustration.

I should've kept paddling. I should've turned back before she saw me, before she could get close enough to make my heart race and my fists clench.

But I didn't. I couldn't.

Instead, I moved toward the shore, fighting the pull of my own confusion.

This was it. The moment I had to face it all. To confront the way she made me feel—and the way I couldn't fucking escape it.

I dragged my board up the sand, the cool water dripping from me as I made my way toward her. Moon stood there, her silhouette framed by the mid-morning light, and I could see the tension in her posture, the way her shoulders were pulled tight, like she was preparing for a blow.

I didn't know what I expected—maybe for her to apologize, maybe for her to defend herself—but when she looked up, her eyes met mine with a mix of vulnerability and uncertainty, and it threw me off.

"You're here," she said, her voice almost too soft, like she was testing the waters.

"Yeah," I muttered, standing a few feet away from her, still wet from the surf, my muscles tight. I felt awkward, like I didn't know how to approach her, like every word that came out of my mouth might be the wrong one. "What are you doing here?"

She hesitated, then let out a shaky breath, like she'd been holding something in for far too long. "I...I needed to talk to you."

I crossed my arms over my chest, trying to appear indifferent even though my heart was pounding in my chest. The cool air felt too sharp against my skin, making me feel exposed, vulnerable in a way I wasn't ready for. "About what?" I asked, my tone colder than I meant it to be.

Her lips parted like she was searching for the right words, and then she exhaled slowly. "About what happened. About everything."

I didn't respond immediately. Instead, I took a step back, staring out at the water, trying to focus on anything but the way my chest felt tight. "You don't owe me an explanation. No one did anything to me."

Moon shifted, a frown pulling at her features. "But I do," she said quietly. "Conrad and Hendrix and me. I wasn't—I didn't want to hurt you. But...I don't know what I was doing. I definitely didn't want to make you feel like you didn't matter." Her eyes were full of something raw, apologetic, and it made my chest tighten again. "I just...I don't know where I stand with you. We had just hung out the one time. I don't know how to feel about this."

I turned to face her, trying to read her expression, but all I could focus on was the way her voice cracked at the edges. It was too honest. Too real. And I had no idea what the hell to do with it.

"You think I don't know that?" My words came out harsh, jagged with bitterness. "You think I'm not sitting here, thinking about how I caught you in bed with my friends? But also that I have no claim to you. They're fair game. You can do whatever you want."

She stepped back slightly, her hands nervously fiddling with the hem of her shirt, her gaze dropping to the sand for a second. "I didn't know what a fucking mess it was going to be," she said, her voice quieter now. "I didn't know, Holden. I didn't know

that they were connected to you in any way. They're just guys I met."

I raised an eyebrow in question, not fully understanding. "What do you mean? Just guys you met last night? How the hell did that even happen?"

She let out a soft sigh, her eyes meeting mine again, full of something that looked like regret. "I met them at an open mic night at Press. Hendrix was going to perform, and we ended up doing this song together. The connection was immediate—just this wild energy between us. He's so intense, so present, and we both just got lost in the moment. I've never felt anything like it before. I didn't expect to feel so crazy connected to him. And then after the performance, Conrad came up to us. He was so easy to talk to, so fun and...elusive but alluring, you know? I wasn't expecting anything serious. I thought it would just be a night of drinking, playing a silly game, maybe a little flirting, but?—"

The weight of her unspoken implications—how she truly saw my friends, how her feelings for them ran deeper than drunken fun—pressed down on me. I clenched my jaw, forcing back the words I wanted to spit out.

"I didn't know they were your friends," she continued, her voice almost pleading now.

I swallowed hard, my thoughts racing. "And now? What does all of it mean to you?"

Moon took a deep breath, her gaze softening as she looked at me. "Honestly, I don't know. We had a lot of fun together. I'd be sad to give up the creative vibe I have with Hendrix. Or the way I feel when Conrad turns his attention on me like I'm a mystery he's meant to solve."

I felt a sting in my chest as she spoke about them, and I tried to push it down, tried not to show how fucking jealous it made me.

"And with me?" I asked, my voice quiet but edged with something raw I hadn't meant to let slip.

She smiled faintly, her fingers grazing my arm in the lightest touch, as if testing the space between us. "I couldn't stop thinking about you after our coffee date." Her voice was soft but deliberate, each word landing with a quiet weight. "You didn't just look at me. You saw me—like I was something worth really seeing."

Her gaze held mine, unwavering. "You made me feel like living art—something raw, untamed, but worthy. It's the way your words wrap around a moment and distill it into poetry. It terrified me and drew me in."

She paused, her fingers curling slightly against my arm. "And the way you look at me, Holden, even now,—it's like a caress and a challenge all in one. Like you're daring me to be better, while making me believe I already am. You've studied the greats. You know what beauty is, what greatness looks like. And somehow, when I'm with you, it feels like you see some of it in me."

Her voice softened, the weight of her words settling between us. "You make me feel like I'm not just some impulsive, messy person, but that my messiness is splattered with instinct and intent—like a Jackson Pollock painting."

The weight of her words settled in my chest, warming me with how she saw herself reflected through my eyes. But my jealousy still simmered beneath the surface. I clenched my fists for a moment before relaxing them.

"So, you have feelings for all three of us?" I asked, my voice tight with something I didn't want to face.

She nodded, her eyes full of sincerity. "Yes. I didn't expect it to happen like this. I didn't expect to have feelings for you, or for them. But I do. And I can't just turn that

off. I can't just pick one of you."

I stared at her, feeling a mixture of frustration and something deeper—something I didn't have a name for yet.

"I get it I guess," I said finally, my voice low. "I'm just fucking jealous, okay? I have feelings for you too, and yeah, it's hard seeing you with them. They're my best friend and my stepbrother, Moon. And I don't want to just be some guy in your rotation. I can't pretend to be okay with it."

Her expression softened, and she stepped closer, her hand gently resting on my chest. "I'm not trying to make you just one of the options. I just—I need some time to figure out what I'm feeling. I'm usually so cautious to care, barely dipping my toes in, but the three of you have just hurled me into the deep end."

I took a deep breath, the tension in my body finally starting to ease, though the knot in my stomach still hadn't fully untangled. "So, what now?"

Moon looked at me, her eyes filled with something real, something that felt like a beginning. "We figure it out. Together. I can't promise I'll stop seeing them. But I just—I don't want to lose you."

I nodded slowly, the truth sitting heavy in my chest. But standing there with her, the sound of the waves crashing behind us, it felt like maybe we could find a way through it, messy and complicated as it was.

I threw my surfboard on top of my Jeep, the sun now higher in the sky, casting a warm, lazy glow over the parking lot. The breeze was still cool, but it felt good, like the kind of day where anything could happen. Moon walked up beside me, her hands in her pockets, and that damn smile of hers was back, like she knew how much she had me tangled up in her.

"You want a ride back?" I asked, keeping my voice casual, even though I could feel the tension between us like a live wire.

She nodded, her eyes sparkling in that way that made it hard for me to focus on anything but her. "Yeah, sounds good. Want to stop by Press and I'll grab us some coffees to go?"

I nodded and opened the passenger door for her. She slid into the seat, kicking off her boots before pulling her legs up. I couldn't help but glance over at her as I slid into the driver's seat, the space between us feeling both familiar and foreign at the same time.

I started the engine, and we rolled out of the parking lot, the tires crunching on gravel as we hit the road. The warm air came through the open windows, and the smell of the ocean still clung to the air, mixing with the faint scent of salt and sand that followed us.

For a while, there was just the sound of the engine and the hum of the wind. The silence wasn't uncomfortable, but there was something unspoken in it, like we both knew there was more we needed to say.

Finally, she broke the quiet. "I went out to your room earlier." Her voice was soft, careful, like she was stepping over broken glass and unspoken boundaries.

I glanced over at her, my grip tightening on the steering wheel. "Oh yeah? What were you looking for?"

I could see her hesitating before she answered. "You, but you obviously weren't there."

I raised an eyebrow, keeping my eyes on the road. "And did you find anything

interesting?"

She shrugged, but there was something in her eyes—something playful, teasing. "Maybe."

My heart skipped a beat. I didn't ask outright if she'd read my journal, but I couldn't shake the feeling that she had. I knew it was sitting right there by my bed, ripe for the reading. And I thought about what I had written—about her. I shifted the Jeep into a higher gear as we sped down the winding road, the tension between us building again in the quiet moments. My mind kept drifting back to how her body had felt against mine when we'd talked earlier, how every word she said felt like an invitation.

"So," she said, her voice low, like she was divulging a secret, "what if I told you I liked the idea of exploring things more? Between us, I mean."

My pulse quickened. "You like the idea?" I repeated, glancing at her quickly. "Or you like me?"

She laughed, a soft, seductive sound that made my dick pulse. "I think you know the answer to that."

I couldn't help but smirk, feeling the shift in the air around us.

She turned toward me, her eyes darker now, more serious, but still full of the feistiness that turned me on. She put a hand on my thigh. "I think you've had me figured out since we met, Heathcliff."

I didn't say anything, just kept my eyes on the road, letting the silence linger between us like a promise.

We pulled outside of Press a few minutes later, the familiar storefront humming with

quiet energy. I let the engine idle while she opened her door and hopped out of the Jeep.

"How do you want it?" she asked me.

"Just like my soul," I joked.

"Dark and hot it is then," she quipped without missing a beat. "But I know your soul is secretly marshmallow soft."

I watched her walk inside, and my mind kept wandering back to everything we hadn't said, everything we were still dancing around. The way she made me feel like I was both at the edge of something and completely out of my depth.

When she came back, holding two cups of coffee, she slid into the passenger seat again, and I couldn't resist. "Thank you," I murmured, letting my fingers trail up her thigh in a light playful dance. Then I leaned in and nipped at her ear.

"You're dangerous." The words left my mouth before I could stop them, hanging between us like a confession and a warning.

"I know," she whispered, leaning in just enough that her breath brushed against my ear. "But I think you like it."

I gave her a quick, sideways glance, my hand still resting on her leg, but the distance between us felt smaller now. Everything in me was pulling her closer, wanting to see where this would go, knowing we were both walking a fine line.

"You don't even know how much I like it," I said softly, giving her thigh a final squeeze before I pulled away, taking the coffee from her hands.

She didn't say anything else, but the look she gave me was enough.

I started the Jeep again, turning back toward my place. I didn't know what was going to happen next, but as I drove, the air between us was charged, like everything was up for grabs, and nothing felt off-limits anymore.

The steam from the shower still clung to my skin as I walked back into my room, dripping with water, my towel slung low on my hips. It felt like everything was charged—like even the air between us had a pulse, and I could feel it in my body as I moved. I wasn't sure if it was the shower, the conversation we'd had, or just the fact that Moon was sitting on my bed, skimming through my copy of *The Great Gatsby*, but I was already half hard pressing against the towel. She didn't miss it.

Her eyes flickered from me to the book in her hands, her finger tracing over my annotated notes with a soft laugh. "I didn't take you for someone who thinks *Gatsby's* that tragic," she said, her voice teasing, but there was something almost provocative in the way she spoke, like she was challenging me with every word.

I leaned against the doorframe, unable to take my eyes off her. "Really? You wanna debate *Gatsby's* demise right now?" I asked, my voice huskier than I meant it to be, the heat between us rising in the space where we hadn't even touched yet.

Her gaze flickered to mine then dropped to the bulge beneath my towel, her lips parting for a second as if she was taking in every detail of the moment. She smiled, her eyes darkening. "Yeah, we'll save that for later. You're kind of hard to ignore at the moment." She looked at me like she was waiting for me to make a move.

"I won't write you a tragedy, baby. I've got a different kind of drowning in mind."

Moon's laugh was soft but knowing, and then she set the book down beside her on the bed, the weight of her attention completely on me now. "What does that involve?"

she asked, a naughty gleam in her eye.

I reached for her, trailing a slow finger down her arm, savoring the warmth of her skin beneath my touch. “You’ve been torturing me all morning.” I let my hand slip lower, skimming over the delicate bones of her wrist. “Dragging me under with every look, every little tease. And now? I just want to drown in the taste of you.”

She leaned forward, her breath catching as I slid my hand down to her wrist, guiding it up my chest, feeling the way her pulse quickened beneath my touch. She was so close now, just a breath away, and I could feel the pull of her body, the way her warmth seemed to fill the space between us.

“It doesn’t hurt to torture you a little,” she murmured, leaning in just enough to brush her lips against mine—light at first, restrained, and then deeper, as if we couldn’t resist the pull of each other any longer.

I groaned softly, my hand cupping the back of her neck as I deepened the kiss, tasting the sweetness of her lips, the urgency in her movements matching mine. Her mouth molded against mine, our breaths in an intimate rhythm that left no space between us. My body was pressed against hers now, and I couldn’t ignore the way she felt—sexy soft curves over toned lean muscle. Her hands slid up my chest, fingertips grazing over my wet skin, and I pulled her closer, desperate for more.

"Moon," I groaned against her lips, “you’re killing me here.”

She chuckled softly, the sound low and rich, like she couldn’t get enough either. “What a sweet death it’ll be though,” she breathed. “I know all about it. I sat on your bed this morning, imagining your bite, feeling that velvet ache.”

So she had read my poetry. I sucked in a breath, even more turned on hearing her repeat my words.

It consumed me—mixed with the heat of her touch, the way her fingers trailed over the outline of my hardening cock, the towel doing nothing to hide the pulse of my erection against her hand. Her hands slipped under the towel tucked at my hips, pulling it down in one swift drop.

I stood there, watching as Moon's gaze dropped lower, like she was drinking me in, and it made my skin flush, my pulse quicken.

She hesitated for just a moment before trailing her fingers down my ribs, over the tattoo on my side—a quote in a line of small script running up the side of my ribcage. She lingered there, her touch soft but purposeful and looked up at me questioningly.

“For beauty is nothing but the beginning of terror,” I recited the quote for her. “It’s Rilke’s Duino Elegies .”

She nodded in recognition and then moved lower, her fingers tracing my V muscles, dancing through the short, trimmed hair at the base of my cock, teasing me with her fingertips, before brushing against the swollen pink head. I shuddered at the sensation, my cock twitching in her hand as she slid her thumb along the edge.

She traced the slit again, pressing just enough to make me twitch, a sharp pulse of pleasure shooting up my spine. “I could stroke you just like this, barely touching, teasing you with your own slick until you’re shaking for me—until you’re desperate enough to beg.”

My breath hitched as she continued to tease me, the pressure building with every slow stroke. “You feel so good,” she murmured, her fingers moving with more confidence, rubbing the head of my cock in soft circles. “Like silk stretched over iron.”

I groaned, my hands instinctively reaching for her, pulling her closer, but she stayed

just out of reach, her eyes locked on mine as she continued to explore.

“You’re so fucking beautiful,” she breathed out with awe.

“Hush,” I ground out, my voice thick with intent. “You’re the beautiful one. I’m the damned, remember?”

Her fingers lingered for a moment longer, feeling the weight of me, the heat radiating from my skin, before she slowly pulled her hand away. Her gaze never left mine, and I could see the anticipation building in her eyes, the way she was just as ready as I was.

I reached out, my hands moving to her top, and with a deliberate tug, I pulled it over her head, revealing the delicate lace of her bra—a pale lavender, barely containing the softness of her breasts. The fabric was sheer, revealing the slight outline of her nipples, hard and eager for my touch. My hands moved quickly to the clasp, undoing it in one smooth motion, the fabric falling away to leave her breasts bare.

She stood there before me, her body soft and exposed, the light catching the curves of her skin. I let my fingers trail down her sides. As I slid the lace panties down her hips, my eyes followed the motion, taking in the way her legs parted slightly, revealing her pussy, bare and smooth, soft folds hinting at secrets between them. And then I noticed it—the small birthmark on her hip, just a little above the lace, shaped like a star. I traced my finger over it gently, a smile pulling at my lips.

"You have a star on your hip," I whispered, my fingers lingering on the spot. "It's perfect."

Moon looked down, a soft laugh escaping her lips as she blushed slightly, her eyes meeting mine. "It's always been there," she said softly, her voice a little breathless. "Fitting, right?"

I guided her down onto her back, my hands running over her skin. I could see the way her eyes fluttered, the way her body was so vulnerable and exposed. Her legs spread wider to make room, her pussy glistening, so ready for me. I moved above her, keeping my hand on her hip, adjusting her until her pussy was lined up with the edge of the bed. I stood at the foot, her legs bent and spread, as I slid inside her, the wet heat of her pussy swallowing me whole. I was aching, desperate to feel her in every way.

My hips began to move in a rhythm that kept the pressure constant—using the crown of my cock to drag against her walls, my body swiveling as I pushed deeper with each stroke, teasing and stretching her, pulling every sweet moan from her lips.

As I shifted my angle, the head of my cock pressed against her walls. Her breath caught, and I could feel her body respond, the ridged texture drawing me back to it with every thrust, like a hidden magnet pulling me deeper.

"Fuck, that feels good," she gasped, her voice ragged. I kept circling my hips, letting the head of my cock nudge against her sensitive spot, the sensation almost unbearable as her body reacted to every small shift. "Fuck, Holden, you're...making me feel something...something different."

"Yeah?" I whispered back, my voice rough, my hands gripping the sides of her hips as I pushed harder, hitting that spot again and again. "Let yourself feel it all. You feel incredible, clenching me so fucking tight."

Her legs wrapped around my waist, pulling me deeper as she matched my rhythm, her breath coming in shallow gasps. I kept moving against her, letting the crown of my cock slide against her walls, each swivel making her shudder more, her pussy tightening around me with every thrust.

My hand moved between us, finding her clit, circling it with the same rhythm, the

same force. Her hips bucked up to meet me, and I felt her body tense, a soft cry escaping her lips. "Holden," she moaned, her voice a mix of pleasure and disbelief. "I'm going to?—"

And then it happened. I felt the unmistakable pulse of her orgasm starting to build, and before we even knew what was happening, her body jerked violently beneath me as a wet surge rushed out of her, soaking me and the bed.

Her breath came in short, panicked bursts. "I—I didn't know—I didn't know I could do that. I haven't before," she gasped, her chest rising and falling in shallow breaths.

I looked down at where we joined, mesmerized by the sight of her folds swallowing me. "That was incredible. You came so hard. Seeing you lose yourself like that—feeling your body give in—it was the sexiest thing ever."

Her body trembled beneath me, her pussy still clenching around my cock, and I groaned at the sensation.

Her cheeks flushed a deep pink, her gaze flickering down to my chest as she hesitated. Then, in a voice so soft I almost didn't hear it, she whispered, "Can you keep going? I think I've got...more."

My cock throbbed at her words, the shy vulnerability in her tone igniting something feral in me. I leaned down, brushing my lips against her ear. "More?" I repeated, my voice rough with arousal. "Then let me give you everything."

The way her walls gripped me so tight made it impossible to hold back any longer. My fingers tightened around her hips as I thrust deeper, feeling her pulse around me, the pressure building in both of us.

"I've got you," I whispered, pushing harder into her, my hand still on her clit, adding

just the right amount of pressure, knowing exactly how she needed to feel me.

She gasped again, her back arching off the bed as her body trembled with another wave of pleasure. "Holden," she moaned, her legs wrapping around me as her hips bucked up to meet mine. The second orgasm hit her with even more force, a loud cry escaping her lips as her body tightened around me, her pussy gripping me so tightly I couldn't hold out anymore.

I lost myself inside her, my cock twitching, and with one final thrust, I shot my cum deep into her, my release flooding through me. I buried my face in her neck, breathing hard as we both trembled in the aftermath, our bodies shaking with the intensity of the connection we'd just shared.

Moon's breath slowed, her hands still on my chest as she caught her breath, her fingers tracing absentminded circles on my skin. "God," she whispered, her voice filled with awe. "That was—I didn't know it could feel like that. You—" she paused, her body still shuddering from the aftershocks of her orgasm. "You just made me feel things I didn't even know were possible."

I kissed her forehead softly, holding her close as the aftershocks of our pleasure faded. "That was mind-blowing," I whispered, my hands smoothing over her body, keeping her close.

She smiled, her lips curving into a sly grin. "Maybe next time I'll blow your mind," her voice light and suggestive as she wiggled her eyebrows.

I laughed, shaking my head as my hands slid down to rest on her hips. Before I could reply, her fingers lightly ran up and down my back, and her tone softened, dripping with satisfaction. "You sure know how to fuck a girl right, Heathcliff."

"It was my pleasure. And you can blow my mind anytime you want, baby," my voice

laden with innuendo and lust.

HENDRIX

I could hear Holden before I saw him, the sound of him pacing through the living room, like he was trying to figure out the best way to start the conversation. It was early still, but the house already felt heavy with what we were about to discuss. Conrad was sitting at the kitchen counter, his mug in hand, but it was clear he wasn't actually drinking. He was just staring into the steam rising from his cup, lost in thought.

Holden finally stopped pacing and walked into the kitchen, looking at both of us, his eyes intense, like he was already bracing for whatever was coming next. He had a cigarette tucked behind his ear which he plucked and lit in one practiced motion. "Moon just left," he said, his voice a little more clipped than usual. "She spent the night with me. I know that might feel weird, considering...well, you know." He let the words hang there as he exhaled a trail of smoke, like he was waiting for one of us to bite. "But I'm not sorry for it."

I glanced over at Conrad, who was now looking at Holden, but his expression didn't give much away.

"I am sorry, though," Holden continued, his gaze softening just slightly. "For barging in on you guys yesterday morning. That wasn't cool. I shouldn't have done that. I saw her Moon bag down here, and I was in disbelief. All sense left my mind."

I could see the apology was genuine, but there was still something about the way

Holden spoke about Moon that made it clear he wasn't backing down. He was fully invested in whatever this was, and it wasn't just the heat of the moment talking.

"But I'm not apologizing for pursuing her," he added, his voice firm now. "I get it. You didn't know she was the girl from the bookstore, but now you do. And I'm not backing off. She's pulled me too far in."

There was a beat of silence. Holden's words hung in the air, and for a second, I felt the weight of everything that had been left unsaid between the three of us. Conrad's eyes were still on Holden, his jaw tight, but then he finally looked away. I knew what he was thinking—he wasn't entirely comfortable with Holden's bluntness, with the fact that Holden wasn't exactly worried about our feelings in all this. But Conrad didn't say anything.

Holden pushed on, his voice a little softer now, like he was testing the waters. "So, what happened between you guys and Moon? How do you feel about her?"

Conrad shifted in his seat, setting his mug down on the counter with a soft clink. "Well," he started, looking over at me for a second, "it was kind of spontaneous, you know? We were just having fun—playing a game. And then, well...things just escalated." He shrugged, trying to sound casual about it, but there was an edge to his voice, like he wasn't quite sure how much he wanted to share.

"Yeah," I added, leaning forward, my elbows on my knees. I wasn't sure how much Holden wanted to know, or how much I wanted to say. But at the end of the day, we were family, and we were in this together. "We were just messing around—some sexy dares, the usual. But it wasn't just a game. We got pretty close. She got under my skin." I glanced at Conrad, silently acknowledging the tension between us.

"Honestly, it started before the game. She needed me to play guitar for her when her friend didn't show up. And then she had to go and pick 'Moon River.' She sounded

so wistful and sexy singing up there. It felt like we were meant to perform together. I couldn't help but be drawn to her—her sassy confidence, those smoky eyes that kinda sparkle.”

“Okay, yeah, I get it. You're under her spell too, brother. And I guess you are too, lover boy?” Holden nodded in question to Conrad.

Conrad shifted in his seat, looking at Holden with a tight nod. He paused, running a hand through his hair, like he was trying to find the right words. “It's the way she's real—like nothing fazes her. She owns the room she's in, and when she looks at me, it's like she's got this fire in her, this raw, unfiltered energy that I can't resist. I don't know if it's just the attraction or something more—but when she's around, everything feels alive. I can't ignore that.”

Holden's eyes flicked back and forth between us. He wasn't pushing, but he was definitely waiting. “And what happened after your game? I mean, you guys had sex, right?”

Both Conrad and I looked at him. I could see the hesitation in Conrad's eyes, the way he wanted to play this off as no big deal, but I knew he was feeling it too. We were both trying to figure out what this meant. What she meant.

“I mean, it definitely got intimate,” Conrad admitted finally, his voice a little hoarse, like he'd been holding it in too long. “Not full on fucking, but like...she rode my face. And she uh...messed around with the two of us. She was into it. So was I.”

I nodded, keeping my face neutral. “Same here,” I said, trying to keep it simple. “We didn't plan on it going that far, but it felt...exciting and natural. You know?” I shifted uncomfortably in my seat, glancing down at the floor for a second, and I wondered if I was the only one who still didn't have a clue what this meant.

Holden's eyes narrowed slightly as he took this in, and for a moment, I felt like he was about to ask something else—something we weren't quite ready to talk about. But he didn't. Instead, took a long drag and he exhaled, then leaned back, running a hand through his hair.

"So, we're all in this together, huh?" he said after a pause. "No one's making her choose, right? She leads, we follow. Simple as that?"

I glanced at Conrad again, and for the first time, the weight of what we were agreeing to hit me. I didn't want to make Moon feel like she was in some kind of game. But I also didn't want to be left behind, bowing out before it really got going.

"That's the deal," Conrad finally said, his voice steady. "We let her figure it out, let her call the shots. We don't push her into anything. If she wants all of us, cool. If one relationship becomes bigger than the rest, we have to accept it gracefully, yeah?"

I felt like a weight had lifted off my shoulders hearing that, even though the situation was still far from clear. It wasn't perfect, but it was the only way to keep it from getting messier than it already was.

"And," Holden said, his voice softening again, "we don't make it weird. Even if it is. No matter how awkward things get between us."

"Yeah," I replied, looking at Conrad, trying to figure out where we both stood. "No weirdness. Not unless it's her call," I added with a chuckle.

Holden nodded, looking relieved, like he was happy we were all on the same page, but we all knew the truth. It was easier said than done. I still wasn't sure where Moon and I stood, or where she stood with Conrad, and there was a lot we hadn't figured out yet. But this—this was where we started.

“Oh, hey,” Holden started, his voice casual but with that tone that said he was about to share something important. “Remember, Fanny wants us home for dinner an hour early tomorrow. Something about getting a family photo taken outside on the porch while the azaleas are in bloom. She’s making mint juleps, too.” He paused, grinning a little. “And we’re supposed to wear button-downs, so make sure you’ve got one pressed.”

Sunday dinners were Fanny’s tradition, something we all looked forward to—mostly for the food, but also because it felt like home. She always cooked up a big Southern spread: smoked gouda shrimp and grits, skillet cornbread with honey glaze, braised mustard greens, crispy fried green tomatoes topped with remoulade, pimento cheese deviled eggs that disappeared the moment they hit the table.

Fanny’s dinners left me so full I could barely move, let alone think about dessert. I knew it was coming, and honestly, I was never mad about it.

Conrad put his mug down and looked over at Holden. “What’s she cooking this week?”

Holden grinned, a small, almost mischievous smile tugging at the corner of his lips. “Well, she’s got gumbo on the menu, and I’m pretty sure she’s making her famous peach cobbler for dessert. It’s going to be a feast, as usual.”

I rolled my eyes, but it was all in good humor. “Fanny and her feasts,” I muttered, already imagining the food coma I’d be in by the end of the night. “My dad’s got some new bourbon for us to try, too. He’s been raving about some small-batch stuff he found last week. I think he’s planning on getting us all buzzed just in time for the cobbler.”

“God help us,” Conrad said with a grin, feeling the familiar pull of nostalgia and comfort that came with every Sunday dinner. “Blanton and his bourbon. Maybe he’ll

crack open the bottle of Pappy Van Winkle he's been holding onto. The one he swears will 'change our lives.'"

We all laughed, and I felt the weight of everything else in the air lighten, even if just for a moment. It was always the same—Fanny's cooking, Blanton's whiskey, and the casual chaos of our family dinners. We couldn't exactly avoid it, and honestly, I wasn't sure we'd want to.

"But seriously," Holden said, his tone shifting slightly. "We're not talking about Moon with them, right? We're keeping that off the table until we figure it out."

I nodded quickly, agreeing with the call. "Yeah, no point making it weird. We'll deal with that when we've got a handle on it." I met Holden's eyes, making sure we were all on the same page. "No need to throw Moon into the mix with Fanny and Blanton. It's enough to figure out what the hell we're doing without involving them yet."

Conrad nodded too, his voice steady. "Agreed."

I leaned back, feeling the weight of it all slip a little. We had our own mess to sort through, but for now, good food, bourbon, and family would be enough.

The sun was still hanging low, casting a warm, golden glow over the backyard as we stepped out onto the porch. The air was thick with the smell of freshly cut grass, and the azaleas were in full bloom, just like Fanny had planned. She was all smiles, waving us into place for the family photo. Conrad had his camera out, adjusting the lens and positioning the tripod with a practiced hand.

"All right, everybody," Conrad said, stepping back and adjusting the focus. "Let's make it look like we like each other for once." He flashed a grin, and even Holden cracked a smile. Conrad had always been the one to handle the photos—he had that perfect mix of patience and precision when it came to capturing a moment.

We lined up on the porch—Blanton with his arm wrapped around Fanny, the rest of us standing behind them in varying degrees of casualness. I couldn't help but notice how natural it all felt, even if it was posed. Conrad got the shot setup with the timer and ran over into the frame, the click of the camera echoing across the yard, and just like that, it was over.

“Perfect,” Conrad said, glancing at the screen before tucking the camera away.

“Thank you, my favorite child,” Fanny teased, leaning up to press a light kiss to his cheek. Her label of “favorite” would no doubt be recycled and rotated through the three of us several times before the night was over.

I loved how she claimed Conrad as her own, just as she did with me now. Conrad had grown up next door to Holden, and Fanny had always folded him into her flock. With his mom working long hours, their home became his second, a safe haven where he was treated like a son alongside James and Holden.

Inside, the smell of gumbo hit me the second we stepped through the door, and I swore Fanny had some kind of magic touch with food. The table was set with all the usual Southern staples: skillet cornbread, a tomato and cucumber salad, and the gumbo bubbling away in a big pot at the center. I was already getting hungry, my stomach rumbling in anticipation.

Fanny was moving around the kitchen, making sure everything was perfect, while Blanton had his bourbon on the counter, already pouring himself a few fingers worth in a crystal highball glass. “Boys,” he said, with that satisfied grin of his, “you’re in for a treat tonight. I’ve got a small-batch, cask-strength Kentucky gem that’s been aging for fifteen years—deep amber, legs for days, and a finish so smooth it’ll make you believe in God.”

I chuckled. “You say that every week, old man. But sure, let’s see what you’ve got.”

Conrad was already seated at the table, his usual calm demeanor still in place, but there was something lively about him tonight. He leaned forward, his elbows on the table as he caught Blanton's attention. "Blanton, I've been working on a new series of nature shots—some places in Charleston that most people don't even know about. There's this creek out near the marshlands that has this wild, overgrown bridge. The sunlight in the morning hits it just right—like a tunnel of green."

Blanton nodded, his gaze sharp with interest. "That could be stunning. Are you thinking about medium or large-scale prints? You could frame some large-scale for display at the gallery."

"I was thinking large," Conrad replied, his tone confident. "Three feet, maybe wider for the key pieces. I want people to feel like they're standing in the marsh."

Blanton clinked his glass against Conrad's. "That's why it works—you know exactly what your vision is. Bring me the proofs when you've got them, and we'll start planning the display. This could be a strong centerpiece for a Lowcountry collection."

"I've got a few ideas," Conrad said, his grin widening. "There's a creek bed I've been meaning to revisit, and the way the light plays off the water there is incredible. I can work it into the series."

Blanton's smile softened, a mix of pride and approval. "Good. Let's make it happen. You've got the eye for it, Conrad. And you know I love featuring local artists."

As they talked, I fell into my thoughts. It was easy to get lost in my head as the conversations swirled around me. I sipped my bourbon slowly, feeling the warmth spread through me as I looked around the table, trying to keep my mind from wandering too far. I couldn't help taking in this scene—my family—but with one monumental part missing.

My mind drifted back to my mom. She died when I was twelve. I could still feel the ache of it, the emptiness in the house after she was gone. My dad was never the same. He just...withdrew. It was like the light left our house with her. I was just a kid back then, not fully understanding what losing her meant for my life. She had this massive collection of vinyl records. All kinds of stuff, but she wove classic rock into my bones—The Stones, The Beatles, Fleetwood Mac, The Doors—and of course her beloved Jimi, my namesake. My favorite memories were picking a record with her, sitting on the floor of our living room, jamming out, singing our throats dry and our hearts full, so carefree, so alive.

I had saved all of her band T-shirts. I wore them when I was younger and could still fit into them. Now I had them in a box at the back of my closet, tucked away. I thought of how Moon would like them. They fit her style, but more importantly, she had that kind of spirit, the one that would appreciate the raw poetry of the lyrics—the electric wails, the smoky, soul-stirring riffs, the kind of music aching with truth and rebellion. It wasn't just sound; it was emotion carved into vinyl, spinning out stories of freedom, heartbreak, and untamed dreams.

I looked across the table at Blanton and Fanny, and I saw the life they'd built. I got that my dad was lost before he met Fanny—he didn't know who he was without my mom. And now, after all these years, I found myself caught in the in-between, imagining her here with us, even though I knew it could never have been.

I had zoned out, staring at the gumbo in front of me, the steam rising, wondering if my mom would've liked to be a part of these dinners. Would she have sat here with us, laughing at how we made fun of Blanton's endless bourbon talks and pretended to be annoyed at Fanny for always harassing us about never bringing girls home? She would've been a presence here, someone with stories to tell, a calming influence when things got too chaotic. This was my family now, but the thought of her being here with us was a happy fantasy.

Nudging myself back into reality, I thought of how she would be really happy to see Fanny in my life now. Fanny could never replace my mom, but at least I had a compassionate, warm motherly presence in my life. Fanny always could anticipate when I needed her, but I guess she was practiced in raising a son, and in handling grief.

I thought back to the first time Holden and I met. Strangers made brothers at sixteen when our parents got married. Holden, buried deep in his wall of solitude, barely let me in, even when we started living under the same roof. He was more a shadow than a sibling, someone you could see but never quite reach. But as time went on, we found our way within the blended family. Still, there were moments—those little moments—where the line between what was familial and something different blurred.

I squashed it down every time. He was my brother now, and there was no going back from that. No matter what, we had to stick together. But now, with Moon involved, I couldn't help but think how that could make the boundaries more blurred. I shoved the thought away, focusing instead on the food, the bourbon, and the comfortable noise of our family.

Fanny looked around at the table, raising an eyebrow at the three of us, her voice pulling me back to the present. "Another Sunday dinner, surrounded by my guys. Not that I'm complaining since I love being the belle of the ball," she said with a wink, "but won't y'all find some nice girls to bring home so I'm not surrounded by a pack of hungry wolves?"

We quickly glanced at each other, all of us definitely thinking about Moon, but no one said a word. The air between us felt charged, but we all pretended it wasn't.

"Hungry wolves?" Conrad laughed. "Yeah, okay, the way I wolfed down your gumbo, I guess that's fair, Fanny."

“Well, you know I’m not getting any younger, boys.”

Holden looked up from his plate with a smirk. “Oh hush, Mom. You’re plenty young. But sure, we’ll get right on that. You know, maybe next time we’ll have a few lined up just for you, too, in case you’re trying to spice things up,” he said with a naughty smirk.

Fanny smirked right back, raising an eyebrow. “Oh, don’t worry about me, Holden. I’ve got plenty of spice. But I do hope you boys find a little spice and a little sweet in your lives.” She patted the table with a grin. “Speaking of sweet—it’s time for the peach cobbler.”

It was late, hours after we’d gotten home from our parents’, and I wouldn’t usually have headed over to the guest house this late, knowing Holden was probably in bed. But the sharp edges of the business card I’d found earlier practically burned a hole in my pocket as I walked across the lawn. The night was quiet in the way that made everything sharper: the distant hum of cicadas, the rustle of leaves, the sound of my own heartbeat.

Holden’s light was still on, faint and golden against the dark. I slowed for a moment, tugged between foggy memories and the mission I was on now. How many times had I walked into his room uninvited? How many times had I wanted to? Maybe I should’ve turned back, but the tension in my chest pulled me forward. This wasn’t something I could sit on.

I knocked softly, then pushed the door open without waiting for an answer. The years hadn’t dulled his glare—sharp and immediate when he looked up from the book in his hands. Holden made brooding look effortless.

“Hendrix,” he said, dragging out my name like it was some kind of crime. “It’s almost midnight. What do you want?”

I shut the door behind me, taking my time as I crossed the room. “Relax. I’m not here to steal Byron from you.” My eyes flicked to him, sprawled in bed, his hair tousled, the sheets a little too low on his hips. The memory of walking in on him years ago flashed through my mind, unbidden but potent. He was different now, more defined muscle but still tense, like he carried the weight of too many thoughts.

“Then why are you here?” His tone was sharp, but I saw the flicker of curiosity in his eyes. Holden could never quite hide his intrigue.

“I found something.” I sank into the armchair by the window, letting it creak under my weight. “In Blanton’s car.”

The book lowered just enough for me to see his expression shift from annoyance to suspicion. “Okay? ...Why were you in Blanton’s car?”

“I was looking for the car insurance card to take a picture of it since I lost mine.” I fished the card out of my pocket and held it up between two fingers. “This was in his glove compartment. Ever heard of The Silver Vine?”

Holden frowned, setting his book aside as he swung his legs over the edge of the bed. Bare feet hit the floor with a soft thud, and for a second, I was distracted, watching him walk over in his low-slung sweats, chest bare. It made the memory of that awkward, charged moment years ago feel closer than it should.

“No,” he said finally. “What is it?”

“No clue,” I admitted, tossing the card onto his nightstand. “But the business card is mysterious. No address. No phone number. Just the name and five digits. Seems too long to be a street address. You got any ideas?”

He picked up the card, his thumb brushing over the silver embossed lettering. His

brows furrowed, the kind of look he got when he was overthinking.

“The card was just tucked in there. I’m not saying he’s hiding something, but it’s my dad. You know him. He always feels like he’s hiding something.”

Holden was quiet, staring at the card like it might offer him answers if he looked hard enough. Finally, he set it back down and met my gaze, his expression unreadable.

“And you want me to do what?”

“Come with me,” I said simply. “We’ll investigate, see if it’s some pretentious wine bar or something more interesting. Worst case, we waste an evening. Best case? We figure out what he’s up to. Tomorrow night. You in?”

His jaw tightened, and for a moment, I thought he’d say no. But then he sighed, dragging a hand through his hair, making it stand up in every direction. “Fine. But if this turns into one of your wild goose chases, you’re doing my laundry this week.”

“Deal.” I grinned as I stood, heading for the door. “Wear something decent. Who knows what kind of dress code they’ve got.”

“Hendrix.” His voice stopped me just as my hand touched the doorknob. When I turned, he was staring at me, his hand still resting on the card.

“Yeah?”

“Why ask me?” The question hung in the air, heavier than I’d expected. “You could’ve gone to Conrad or Moon.”

The truth was more complicated than I wanted to admit. None of them would understand the knot of tension that tied Blanton to Holden, not like I did. And maybe

there was a part of me that wanted a space for us to connect, even if I was the one forcing it.

“Because you’ll get it,” I said finally. “And because if Blanton’s hiding something, it’ll hurt us the most.”

Holden didn’t respond, just nodded and looked back at the card in his hand. For a moment, the room felt too small, too charged, like the air was pressing in on us. Then I stepped out into the cool night, leaving him to his thoughts—and maybe mine.

11

MOON

Press was buzzing, a hum of chatter wrapped in the scent of roasted beans and warm pastries. I'd grabbed the corner table with the leather chairs, the one Holden picked last time, but my focus wasn't on the room. It was on him. The second he walked in, I noticed everything—his tall, broad frame, the quiet confidence in his stride, the faint trace of sandalwood and leather that reached me as he approached. Then there were his eyes, piercing green and unrelenting, locking on mine like he'd already decided this whole place didn't exist without me in it.

"Moon," he said when he saw me, his tone casual but his eyes lingering. Always lingering.

"Heathcliff," I replied, letting the nickname roll off my tongue like an invitation.

He dropped into the chair across from me, shrugging off his jacket. "You're early."

"You're late," I countered, drumming my fingers against the table, feigning impatience.

He raised an eyebrow. "I didn't know we were on a tight schedule."

"Aren't you always on a tight schedule?" I joked. "Daily brooding from noon to four."

Holden's lips quirked into a half-smile, but there was heat in his gaze. "And what's your schedule? Charming the world into submission?"

"Depends on who's asking."

"I think you know who's asking." His voice dipped, and I felt the air between us shift. Holden had a way of doing that—taking a playful jab and spinning it into something deeper, something that left me breathing faster.

I leaned forward, resting my elbows on the table. "What would you do if I said I wasn't feeling very charming today?"

Holden's gaze didn't waver. His smile faded into something more intent, his voice dropping lower. "Then I'd say I'm not here for charming."

There was no teasing in his tone, no room for misdirection. It was raw, unfiltered, and it left me staring back at him, feeling like I'd stepped into a game without knowing the rules.

He set his cup down, his fingers brushing the rim like he was toying with the idea of saying something he shouldn't. Finally, he leaned forward again, his voice low and deliberate. "You wanna know exactly what I want to do to you right now?"

The words hit like a spark to a dry fuse, and I felt my cheeks flush.

"Think about it, Moon. Right here, with everyone around. Imagine the way you'd squirm if I slid my hand up your thigh, the way your breath would catch if I leaned in close, and licked your neck like I licked your—" He squiggled his brows pointedly.

My pulse kicked into overdrive. He wasn't bluffing—I could see it in his eyes, the way he studied me like he already had me figured out.

“You’re all talk, Heathcliff. I’m a girl of action.”

The shift in his seat gave him away, and I didn’t hold back the satisfied smile that spread across my face. Slowly, I slid my foot out of my ballet flat and stretched it under the table, brushing it lightly against his leg.

His eyes widened for a fraction of a second, but he didn’t move. I let my foot trail higher, pressing it against the unmistakable bulge in his jeans.

“Careful,” he warned, his voice low and dangerous, but there was no hiding the flush creeping up his neck.

I tilted my head, feigning innocence. “Why, Holden, you’re looking a little...uncomfortable. Something bothering you?”

“Moon,” he hissed, his voice barely above a whisper.

I felt my cheeks flush, but I didn’t let him see me falter. Instead, I leaned forward, letting my foot press more firmly against him, teasing him just enough to make him shift uncomfortably in his seat. His jaw tightened, and his fingers curled around the edge of the table like he was holding himself back from grabbing me right then and there.

“What?” I asked with a coy smile? “You were getting awfully cocky...” I let a laugh slip into my voice, dropping my gaze as if I could see under the table where he was straining hard against denim. My smile turned wicked as I arched a brow and added, “For someone who would be begging me to touch them again after I dragged my tongue?—”

“Enough,” Holden growled, his voice a low rasp of frustration and need.

But I wasn't done. I pressed my foot more deliberately, sliding it slowly, mercilessly up and down the seam of his jeans, letting my toe trace the line from the heat of his balls to the aching length of his tip. His hips jerked slightly, just enough to tell me I was driving him to the edge.

"Something wrong?" I asked innocently, tilting my head as my toe continued its slow, torturous rhythm. "You look...tense."

His hand slammed down on the table, not hard enough to draw attention, but enough to let me know I'd pushed him to his breaking point. His other hand gripped his thigh like he was trying to keep himself still, but the way his body strained against my foot told me it was a losing battle.

"You're playing a dangerous game."

"Oh, I'm not playing," I said sweetly, flexing my foot just enough to press harder against him. His breath caught, and I felt a rush of satisfaction at the way he squirmed, trapped and completely at my mercy. "I'm winning."

Holden exhaled sharply, his eyes blazing as he leaned forward, close enough that his breath brushed against my cheek. "You won this round," he said, his voice a soft, dangerous promise. "But don't forget who had you trembling last time."

"And don't forget who has you completely undone with just a foot," I countered, giving him one last deliberate stroke that made his hips twitch.

Abruptly, he pushed his chair back, the legs scraping softly against the floor as he stood. "I'll be back in a minute," he muttered, his tone rough and strained as he adjusted himself as subtly as he could.

I didn't bother hiding my knowing grin as he stood. "Oh, sure," I said sugared with

amusement. “I’ll hold down the fort.”

“Watch yourself, Moon. You know I bite.”

“And you know I bite back.”

As I was waiting for Holden to return, I absently turned the cover of his book on the table, curious to see his handwritten notes. As I flipped through, I found a bookmarked page, a business card tucked between the pages.

I picked it up, running my fingers over the embossed lettering. No address, just the name and a random number. Holden returned just as I set the card down. His eyes flicked to it immediately, his expression unreadable.

“You always snoop through people’s things?” he asked, sliding back into his seat.

“Curiosity killed the cat,” I shrugged, holding up the card. “So kill me.” Holding up the business card, I asked, “What’s this?”

He shrugged. “Hendrix showed it to me last night.”

“The Silver Vine,” I read, turning the card over in my fingers. My excitement surged.

“No way. Is this the Silver Vine?”

Holden glanced at the card, his expression carefully neutral. “You’ve heard of it?”

“Are you kidding?” I leaned in, lowering my voice conspiratorially. “It’s, like, a Charleston legend. Some friends in my theatre company were talking about it a few months ago. They were trying to figure out if it was real, saying you had to find this random back alley off Calhoun Street to even get close.”

He raised an eyebrow, the faintest flicker of intrigue crossing his face. “Back alley off Calhoun?”

“Pretty sure that’s what I heard,” I continued, my words spilling out in excitement. “They claimed there’s this unmarked door, and if you knock the right way and say the right thing, you get in. They couldn’t agree on what you’re supposed to say, though—someone swore it was the name of a classic cocktail, but nobody could agree on which one. A sidecar. A gin rickey. Something like that...I don’t know.”

Holden’s lips twitched into the faintest smile. “And you believe all that?”

I shrugged, setting the card back on the table. “I don’t know. The way they talked about it made it sound...like a hidden world you could only get into if you knew the secret handshake.” I paused, tilting my head. “So, do you know how to get in?”

He picked up the card, turning it over in his hands. He said finally, “Hendrix found the card. He’s the one trying to figure it out. I’m just along for the ride.”

“Hendrix doesn’t strike me as the speakeasy type. You, though? I can totally see it.”

“Oh, really?” he asked, arching an eyebrow.

“Absolutely,” I said, caught up in the scene I was imagining. “Picture it: you, in a three-piece suit, drinking some obscure Prohibition-era cocktail. Me, your Daisy Buchanan, wearing something scandalously sparkly. We’d fit right in, old sport.”

Holden laughed softly, shaking his head. “You’ve got it all figured out, don’t you?”

“Well, if you ever decide to make the trip, let me know. I’ll make sure to bring the sparkles.”

He chuckled again, but his gaze lingered on the card, thoughtful now. “What else do you know about it?”

“Not much,” I admitted. “Just that it’s supposed to be one of those places you can’t find unless you already know where to look. My friends couldn’t get past the rumor stage—no one could figure out the right address or what you’re supposed to say to get in.”

He nodded slowly, setting the card down and tapping it against the table. “Interesting.”

“Interesting enough to go check it out?” I asked, my smile widening.

“Maybe,” he said, his voice noncommittal. “But if it is real, it’s Hendrix’s thing. I’m just tagging along.”

I tilted my head, studying him. There was something more beneath his words, a weight he wasn’t sharing. But I knew better than to push.

Then, as if feeling out the meaning himself, he added “It’s a thing we’re doing together.”

That made me pause. “You and Hendrix,” I said slowly, choosing my words carefully. “What’s the story there?”

Holden’s gaze darkened slightly, his fingers brushing the edge of the card on the table. For a moment, I thought he wouldn’t answer. Then he sighed, leaning back in his chair and running a hand through his hair.

“It’s complicated,” he said, his voice quieter now. “We’ve lived together since our parents got married five years ago. They both had a rough go of it, so I was happy for

them. It was...good, in a way. It was a relief to see my mom happy again. Not that you want to hear all the sordid details, but my dad is a dick and basically checked out of our family after my brother—" he trailed off for a moment and looked down at his lap.

"She had been lonely for a while and had lost her luster. And Hendrix's deal—well, it's probably best that you hear the whole story from him, but his mom died when he was younger and Blanton had been single for several years. When Blanton and Hendrix moved in with us, I don't know. Hendrix and I never really felt like family. Not exactly."

He hesitated, his lips pressing together like he wasn't sure how much to say. "We were in different worlds, physically and mentally. I went to Wrenmoor Academy, and he went to Charleston Collegiate. He was wild in high school—parties, drinking, all of it. A real free spirit. I was more...I don't know. I kept to myself. Hung out with Conrad, went to the occasional party. Mostly, I stayed in my own lane."

"Why?" I asked gently.

Holden exhaled slowly, his gaze flicking to the card again. "A lot of reasons, I guess. My older brother James died not long before our parents got married. I didn't really know how to deal with it, so I didn't. I kind of shut down."

The mention of his brother was unexpected, and I could see the flicker of something raw in his eyes. "Tell me about him," I said softly.

Holden nodded, his voice tight. "James was three years older than me. He was creative, smart, warm. He was...everything I'm not, I guess. An artist. His work is in a few galleries around Charleston. He was going to CSAL too, but he was really focused on his art career when...uh, he died five years ago. He had a congenital heart problem, but he had been on steady medication for years, and we thought his health

was good. There was a car crash. They think it was caused by him having a heart episode while driving.” Holden rushed through the last part, his voice raw. “I don’t usually talk about it.”

I didn’t hesitate. “That’s fucking awful.”

The bluntness of my words hung in the air, but I didn’t regret them. Because it was awful. There was nothing to soften, nothing to dress up in a polite apology or a meaningless platitude.

Holden looked at me, his lips parting slightly, like he hadn’t expected that response. “Yeah,” he said after a moment, his voice quieter now. “It was.”

I leaned back in my chair, my gaze steady on his. “I’m not going to say I’m sorry or that time heals all wounds because I know that’s horseshit. The grief doesn’t get better. You just learn how to carry it.”

Holden nodded, exhaling slowly. “Exactly.”

We sat in silence for a moment, not uncomfortable, but weighted. The raw honesty of the moment lingered between us, and for the first time, it felt like Holden wasn’t holding himself at arm’s length.

“It was...a lot. Still is, sometimes. And Hendrix—he didn’t know James, obviously. He’s been through his own loss, but it was different, and honestly, I wasn’t willing to try and be open with him. So we kind of just...coexisted. Separate, but close enough to feel like maybe we shouldn’t be.”

His words hung in the air, heavy with something I couldn’t quite place. “Close enough to feel like maybe you shouldn’t be?” I echoed.

Holden's lips twitched into a faint, wry smile, but he didn't look at me. "Like I said, it's complicated."

He didn't elaborate, and I didn't press him. Whatever had passed between him and Hendrix, whatever still lingered, was clearly something he wasn't ready to share. But the weight of it stayed, settling over the table and wrapping itself around the space between us.

And now, somehow, The Silver Vine was part of it too.

HOLDEN

The air was thick, the kind of Southern spring night where everything felt slow and heavy, but somehow electric at the same time. The scent of magnolias mixed with the faint tang of asphalt still warm from the day's sun. It was the kind of night that made the world feel wide open, full of possibilities we weren't entirely ready for.

I adjusted the collar of my shirt, the crisp fabric cool against my neck. Hendrix walked a step ahead of me, his stride confident even though neither of us had any idea where we were going.

"You think this is the right spot?" I asked, glancing around at the shadowy side streets branching off Calhoun.

Hendrix shrugged, his dark Brooks Brothers jacket shifting slightly with the motion. "Hopefully it's somewhere around here. Isn't the whole point that it's supposed to be impossible to find?"

I sighed, scanning the dimly lit alley ahead of us. "Yeah, but you'd think someone would've slapped a neon sign on it by now. Even Gatsby had his limits."

Hendrix grinned, tossing me a quick glance over his shoulder.

He looked good, I had to admit—more polished than usual, though still with that effortless edge he couldn't seem to shake. His blazer hung open over a pale blue shirt,

his sleeves rolled up just enough to show off his forearms, and his dark Ralph Lauren jeans were just tight enough to make me wonder how he'd ever called himself a rebel in high school.

Not that I was one to talk. My own jacket was darker, more fitted, paired with a white button-down I'd left undone at the throat and cuffed chinos that tailored to my frame. Conrad always said I looked like a preppy vampire when I dressed up, which I assumed was his way of saying I cleaned up well.

We turned another corner, the sounds of the main street fading behind us. The alley was narrow and dim, the kind of place you'd pass a hundred times without giving it a second glance. Ahead of us, a couple emerged from the shadows—a man in a sleek gray suit and a woman in a slinky black dress that sparkled faintly in the light from a distant streetlamp. They didn't look like they belonged in a back alley, but they moved with purpose, heading straight for an unmarked door.

Hendrix nudged me with his elbow. "Think that's it? It just looks like a back kitchen entrance, but why would they be going in a back kitchen all dressed up?"

"Only one way to find out," I muttered.

We watched from the shadows and then followed a few minutes later. We opened the same metal door the couple had passed through, only to be met with a staircase headed down a flight. At the bottom of the stairwell, there was a heavy old wooden door with a slatted window at eye level that was pulled closed.

"Let's hope they're in the mood for unexpected company," I said dryly.

When we reached the door, Hendrix knocked three times. The slat slid open, and a pair of sharp eyes met us. "Password?" the man behind the door asked, his voice low and gravelly.

I froze, my mind going blank. Hendrix glanced at me, then back at the man. “Uh...”

For a moment, I thought we were screwed. Then I remembered something Moon had said about the place—something about classic cocktails. “Old Fashioned,” I said, my voice steadier than I expected.

“That’ll do,” the doorman said with a gruff.

The slat closed, and I held my breath. Then, with a soft creak, the door opened, and we stepped inside, the air cooling instantly as the heavy wooden door swung shut behind us. We walked into the bar, scanning a panorama of a space that could’ve been pulled straight out of a 1920s fever dream.

The bar was opulent, the kind of place where Charleston’s old money came to remind themselves they were better than everyone else. Polished wood, gleaming brass, low amber lighting that cast everything in a warm, seductive glow. The air smelled like expensive whiskey and secrets, and the quiet hum of conversation tumbled with the tinkling of live jazz coming from a corner stage.

Hendrix let out a low whistle. “Well, damn.”

“Yeah,” I said, glancing around. “Not exactly college-kid territory.”

We made our way to the bar, sliding onto two leather stools. The menu was printed on thick, textured paper, listing cocktails I’d only ever heard of in movies. I ordered a Sazerac, feeling vaguely pretentious, while Hendrix went for a Manhattan.

For a while, we just sat there, sipping our drinks and taking in the scene. It was surreal, to say the least.

“This is wild,” Hendrix said finally, his voice low. “I mean, we actually found it.”

“Yeah,” I said, my gaze drifting over the room. “Though I’m not sure what we’re supposed to do now that we’re here.”

Hendrix glanced at me, his expression uncharacteristically serious. “You know, we haven’t done something like this—just the two of us—in...ever?”

I frowned, setting my glass down. “What do you mean?”

“I mean, you never really wanted to,” he said, his tone light but not entirely joking. “Conrad was always around, or we just did our own thing. It’s like...I don’t know. You tolerate me, but you don’t actually want to be close.”

I stiffened slightly. “That’s not true.”

“Isn’t it?” he asked, his gaze steady on mine.

For a moment, I didn’t answer. Then I sighed, looking away. “It’s not about not wanting to be close. It’s about not wanting to be too close.”

Hendrix tilted his head, frowning slightly. “What does that mean?”

I hesitated, my mind flickering to a memory I’d tried to bury. “Oh come on.”

But he just stared at me blankly,

“Do you remember, after our parents got married...that time you walked into my room?”

Hendrix froze, his expression shifting as the memory hit him. “Oh,” he said softly.

“Yeah,” I said, feeling my face heat. “I was...you know. And you just...stood there.”

“I didn’t mean to,” Hendrix said quickly. “I just...I froze. I didn’t know what to do.”

“Neither did I,” I admitted, my voice barely above a whisper. “It was—awkward.”

Hendrix let out a soft laugh, the kind that felt like it was covering something more. He ran a hand through his hair, messing it up in a way that seemed unconscious. “Awkward’s an understatement. You were—” He paused, his eyes flicking to mine before quickly looking away. “You were in the middle of it. Like, really into it.”

My face went hot, and I dropped my gaze to my drink, gripping the glass tighter than necessary. “Jesus, Hendrix. Thanks for the reminder. Like you never—,” I motioned with my hand.

He ignored me, his voice blunt and unapologetic. “I could see your hand, your face—hell, I could hear you. I froze because...I don’t know, I guess I’d never walked in on anyone doing that before. And I didn’t expect you to look—” He stopped again, his jaw tightening. “Like that.”

“Like what?” I asked, my heart pounding in my chest. I wasn’t sure why I was asking. Maybe I wanted to punish myself for letting this conversation go this far. Or maybe I just wanted to hear him say it.

Hendrix glanced at me, his eyes narrowing slightly, and for a moment, I wondered if he’d stay silent. But then he shrugged, as if the answer came easy, costing him nothing. “Like you were lost in it. Like nothing else mattered except what you were feeling right then.”

“Fuck, that was embarrassing. Still is. I’m sure I’m fucking red in the face right now. Thanks for the detailed account.” I shook my head with a scoff.

Then, more softly, “I didn’t even know you were there until it was too late.”

Hendrix nodded, his expression softening slightly. “I was embarrassed, too. For staying. For looking.”

That got my attention. I turned back to him, searching his face. “For looking?”

He nodded again, his lips curving into something that wasn’t quite a smile. “Yeah. I mean, I should’ve walked out immediately, but I didn’t. I just stood there, like an idiot. Watching. Like I couldn’t tear my eyes away.”

A strange heat spread through me at his words, and I swallowed hard, my voice quieter now. “Did you—I mean, did you want to look?”

Hendrix hesitated, his fingers toying with the edge of his glass. Then, with a small, crooked smile, “Well, I didn’t make myself run out right away...”

My stomach flipped, and I felt my face flush even hotter. I didn’t know how to respond, so I asked the question that had been gnawing at the edge of my thoughts for years. “Did you ever...think about it after that?”

Hendrix leaned back, his dark curls brushed back from his face, his gaze steady on mine. “You mean, did I ever think about my stepbrother jerking off and whether I should’ve stayed longer?”

My mouth went dry, and I could barely force the word out. “Yeah.”

He smirked, his voice low and teasing now. “Maybe once or twice. You were putting on quite the show.”

I blinked, completely thrown off by how casually he said it. “You’re really just going to say that?”

“What? Are you telling me you didn’t wonder the same thing?” he challenged, leaning forward now, his elbows on the table. “Did you ever think about me after that, Holden? Wonder if I stayed outside your door, listening?”

My heart was racing now, my palms damp against the smooth wood of the table. “That’s not the point,” I said quickly, trying to regain control of the conversation.

“Isn’t it?” Hendrix asked, his voice lower now, almost curious. “Because I’ve thought about it, you know. Wondered if you ever...” He trailed off, letting the words hang between us, daring me to fill the silence.

My chest tightened, but I released the death grip on my glass, setting it on the bar. “It’s not like we grew up together and it was some kind of...forbidden family thing. We were just two strangers shoved into the same house at sixteen.”

Hendrix’s lips twitched into a faint smirk, but his eyes stayed sharp, watching me. “So is it the stepbrother thing, or is it the guy thing?”

I froze for a moment, unsure how to answer. Hendrix didn’t give me a chance.

“Because I’ll be real with you,” he continued, his tone shifting to something more blunt. “I’ve fooled around with guys before. That’s not a big deal to me. But you? It’d be a big deal. You are different.”

“Different how?” I asked, my heart pounding, though I already knew the answer.

He hesitated, dragging a hand through his hair and looking away. “Because it’s you, Holden. My housemate. My friend. We share a family even if we don’t feel like brothers to each other. And I’ve never been able to figure you out. Whether you’d freak out because of the guy thing, or the family thing, or both.”

I swallowed hard, my pulse thundering in my ears. “I wouldn’t...freak out,” I said finally, my voice barely above a whisper.

Hendrix glanced at me, his brows lifting slightly, like he wasn’t sure if he believed me. “Wouldn’t you?”

I opened my mouth to respond, but nothing came out. Instead, I just shook my head and looked down at my drink.

“Maybe not,” Hendrix said, leaning back in his chair with a faint smile that didn’t quite reach his eyes. “But the lines are still there, whether we put them there or not.”

“Lines are just excuses people use to avoid doing what they want,” I muttered, the words slipping out before I could stop them.

Hendrix’s gaze sharpened, but he didn’t say anything. Instead, he let the silence settle between us, thick and charged. I wasn’t sure if I was relieved or disappointed when he finally leaned forward and nodded toward the rest of the bar.

“We should look around,” he said, his voice back to its usual easy drawl. “See what kind of trouble this place is hiding.”

I nodded, grateful for the shift. The tension still lingered, but it was easier to ignore when I focused on the unfamiliar buzz of the room. Together, we slid off our stools, leaving the conversation behind us as we made our way deeper into The Silver Vine .

The energy in the old-fashioned bar was intoxicating, the air steeped with low laughter and the quiet clink of crystal glassware. Hendrix and I moved through the room together, our steps slow as we took it all in. The crowd was dazzling—elegant dresses and sharp suits, polished smiles hiding something simmering just beneath the surface.

We didn't talk much as we roamed, the weight of unspoken words still thick between us. It wasn't until I spotted the couple from earlier—the man in the gray suit and the woman in the black dress—that the quiet cracked.

“There they are,” I said under my breath, nudging Hendrix with my elbow.

He followed my gaze as the couple slipped down a hallway at the far end of the bar, disappearing behind a heavy velvet curtain.

Hendrix grinned. “Think they're sneaking off to get frisky in the coatroom? Very classy.”

“Maybe,” I said, but there was something about the way they'd moved—purposeful, deliberate—that tugged at me. “Should we...”

“Follow them?” Hendrix finished for me, his grin widening. “Oh, absolutely. Let's see what these classy criminals are up to.”

We moved quickly, slipping past the curtain into the hallway. The couple was already at the far end, stepping into a door marked with a simple coat hanger icon.

“Guess it is a coat room,” Hendrix murmured.

The attendant at the coat check counter raised an eyebrow as we approached, looking us up and down with the kind of slow appraisal that felt more like an assessment than a greeting. “Number?” she asked.

Hendrix and I exchanged a glance, and I saw the realization click in his eyes at the same time it hit me.

“The card,” I said under my breath.

Hendrix nodded and leaned forward, giving her the five-digit number we'd memorized.

The woman's expression didn't change, but something in her eyes sharpened, like she'd just confirmed we belonged—or that we didn't. Without another word, she reached under the counter and pressed a hidden button. Somewhere behind her, a door clicked open.

“Welcome,” she purred—but it didn't feel like an invitation; it felt like a warning.

We stepped through the door into another world entirely.

The air inside was thick, sultry, and heady with the mingling scents of perfume, leather, and warm bodies. It wrapped around me, pulling tight against my skin as if daring me to breathe it in. The low thrum of bass reverberated through the room, vibrating in my chest, mingling with soft moans, breathless laughter, and the occasional clink of glasses.

We stepped further in, and the space opened into a decadent tableau of hedonism. Velvet drapes hung heavy from the walls, their deep inky folds catching the golden glow of chandeliers dripping with crystal. The lighting was low, seductive, softly pooling over intimate corners while leaving other areas bathed in shadow.

A naked dancer spun inside a gilded cage, her painted body an art form in itself. Every movement was fluid, deliberate, her skin shimmering under the light. The crowd around her watched with hungry eyes, their gazes a mix of awe and desire.

Further in, plush settees and low crushed velvet chaise lounges were scattered across the room, occupied by couples, trios, and groups in varying states of undress. Champagne flutes glittered in manicured hands, lips brushing rims as indulgent smiles played across faces. Some lounged lazily, watching the scene unfold, while

others were more entangled—legs draped over thighs, mouths exploring necks, fingers caressing bare skin.

Hendrix let out a low whistle beside me. “What in the actual fuck is this place? Insanity.”

I swallowed hard, my gaze darting around as heat prickled along the back of my neck. “That’s one word for it.”

A laugh spilled from his lips, and I could feel the tension vibrating in him—not discomfort, but fascination. He was soaking it in, the same way I was, our senses overwhelmed by the lushness of it all.

A man appeared suddenly in front of us, tall and lean with sharp features that gave him an air of intensity. His jet-black hair, slightly tousled, framed a face that was angular and striking. He had a faint shadow of stubble along his jawline, and his tailored clothing—a crisp white shirt rolled at the sleeves and dark slacks—hinted at effortless refinement. He stepped closer, his gaze sliding over me in a way that was both bold and practiced, gleaming with interest.

Before I could react, Hendrix’s hand closed around mine, pulling me firmly toward him. “Sorry,” he said smoothly, his voice low and warm. “He’s with me.”

The man raised an eyebrow, his lips curling into a ghost of a smile. “Lucky you.”

Hendrix ignored him, leaning in closer until his breath brushed against my ear. “Let’s figure this out together,” he murmured, his voice quiet enough to be just for me.

His lips were so close that the heat of them sent a shiver down my spine, and for a moment, the rest of the room faded away.

He tugged me toward a small booth near the edge of the room, its velvet cushions dark and inviting. We slid in side by side, and though there was room for space between us, neither of us used it. Hendrix's thigh pressed against mine, solid and warm, and I could feel the faint tremor in his hand as it brushed against mine on the cushion.

The sights and sounds around us demanded attention. A figure dressed in nothing more than shimmering silver paint danced on a low platform, her movements hypnotic and languid, drawing a small crowd that leaned in, entranced. Across the room, a woman reclined on a settee, her head thrown back in a breathless laugh as two men attended to her, their hands and mouths exploring every inch of her skin.

There were private alcoves, draped with gauzy curtains that offered just enough concealment to tease the imagination. Shadows moved behind them—bodies shifting, pressing together, exploring one another with abandon. The sounds that drifted from those spaces made my pulse race, my skin warming despite the chill of the glass in my hand.

Hendrix shifted beside me, his voice low. "This is wild," he said, his words nearly lost beneath the pulse of the music.

"Yeah," I managed, my throat dry. "I don't even know where to look."

He chuckled softly, the sound vibrating between us. "Everywhere's the wrong answer, huh? Or right...depending on how you feel about it."

After a moment, he nudged me with his shoulder. "Come on. Let's see what else this place is hiding."

We took the first of three narrow hallways, all dark and lined with lush wallpaper, black with silver vines dripping in tangles. In this first hallway, there were doors to

rooms on the left, its walls lined with small windows dressed with sheer curtains. Here in the hall, the air was quieter, more intimate, but the tension was palpable.

We slipped further into the hallway, the dim lights casting long shadows that flickered and moved like they were alive. Each window we passed revealed a new, visceral tableau that stole the air from my lungs and replaced it with something darker, heavier.

The first room held a woman bound in shimmering silver ropes that seemed to drip like liquid across her pale skin. Her wrists and ankles were tied to a low platform, her thighs spread wide as a man knelt between them, his head buried between her legs. Her back arched, her breasts full and tipped with dark, taut nipples, her moans rising and falling with each flick of his tongue. Another man leaned over her, tracing her collarbone with his lips, his cock rigid and bouncing slightly as he moved.

It felt wrong to keep watching, but I couldn't look away. The voyeuristic thrill was a siren call, pulling me further down the hallway, my pulse quickening with each glimpse.

Hendrix chuckled low beside me. "Damn, anything goes here, huh?"

I swallowed hard, barely managing a nod as we moved on. The next window framed three bodies tangled together, their flesh a shifting mass of motion. A woman knelt between two men, her hands stroking one while her lips slid over the length of the other. His cock gleamed with her saliva as her head moved, slow and deliberate, taking him deeper with each pass. The second man let out a guttural groan, gripping her chin to tilt her face up so he could kiss her, tasting her, tasting him.

"Jesus," I muttered under my breath, but Hendrix just grinned.

"You've never seen so many dicks in your life," he teased, nudging me with his

shoulder.

I glanced at him, heat rising in my face despite the thick air. “You’re not wrong. Other than the occasional locker room mishap...and definitely not hard as fuck.”

Hendrix laughed, the sound rich and warm. “Hard as fuck or hard and fucking?...Stick with me, virgin eyes. I’ve seen a few.”

My gaze flicked to the next window, but I couldn’t help the question slipping out. “You serious? I mean I’ve seen your antics at parties, kissing the homies and all, but I didn’t know you went there behind closed doors.”

He shrugged, his grin widening. “College gets weird sometimes. People get drunk, clothes come off, and, well...” He trailed off, letting the implication hang in the air.

The next window stopped me in my tracks. A circle of bodies moved together in an unrelenting tide of sensation, every limb and curve entwined like a living tapestry of desire. A man with broad shoulders and a defined chest lay on his back, his cock disappearing between the thighs of a woman riding him with abandon, her head thrown back as her hands gripped his chest. Behind her, another man stood, his cock driving into her ass, their movements synchronized like a single fluid rhythm. Around them, others touched, kissed, fucked, their moans a cacophony of indulgence.

“An orgy,” Hendrix said casually, like he was commenting on the weather. “You ever thought about it?” he pressed, his tone light but edged with curiosity.

I hesitated, my mouth dry. “Not really.”

“Not really, or not at all?” he asked, a smirk tugging at his lips.

I glared at him. “What about you?”

He shrugged, his gaze drifting back to the window. “Once. Drunken college thing. Not exactly as glamorous as this, though.” He gestured toward the scene. “This? This is...something else.”

The next room was no less explicit, but its intimacy was different. A woman lay on her side, her leg draped over a man’s shoulder as he kissed his way down her inner thigh. Her chest rose and fell in quick gasps, her nipples hard and glistening. A second man stood behind the woman on the chaise, his cock sliding into her from behind as she moaned, her body trembling with every slow thrust.

I couldn’t stop watching, my breath hitching as the sounds and movements seeped into my mind, pushing every coherent thought to the edges. Hendrix’s hand brushed mine, grounding me for a moment before he spoke again.

“You ever thought about trying that?” he asked, nodding toward the scene.

“Trying what?” I asked, my voice rough.

“Sharing,” he said, his tone teasing but his eyes sharp. “One girl, two guys.”

I shook my head, my throat tight. “I wouldn’t even know where to start.”

He grinned. “It’s all about finding the right rhythm. And trust.” His eyes lingered on me for a beat too long before turning to approach the next window.

There was an older man with sharp, all angular features and salt-and-pepper hair, his posture confident and commanding. A woman, partially blocked behind the man, knelt down in front of him with her hand wrapped around the back of his thigh. To her side, another man knelt beside her—the two of them working together to pleasure the man standing, as he thrust back and forth, clenching his ass with each pump.

When he shifted back, his head lolling in ecstasy, Hendrix and I both tensed at the exact moment, his hand frozen on my back. The angle shifted, giving us a glimpse of the couple—the bob of her familiar chestnut hair, the streaks of gray in his thick brown waves as their heads moved together.

It was unmistakable.

Fanny and Blanton. Together. Here. In a sex club. Sharing the man between them, their mouths working him together as he thrust his cock into their eager faces.

Fanny leaned into Blanton, her lips brushing his ear as her hand rested on his thigh. The older man smirked, swirling the amber liquid in his glass with an air of calculated amusement, his eyes flicking between them like he owned them. His presence filled the space, as though every move made in that room was orchestrated for his pleasure.

With a subtle flick of his wrist, he ran his fingers through Fanny's hair, the motion deceptively gentle but firm enough to angle her head just where he wanted it. His touch lingered, deliberate and commanding, as if shaping her mouth to suit his needs. She seemed to melt into his gesture, her posture shifting slightly closer to him, a puppet pulled by invisible strings.

Blanton's hand slipped over Fanny's, his movements almost reflexive, as though drawn by the older man's magnetic control. When he turned to laugh at something I couldn't hear, it wasn't just a laugh—it was an offering, an attempt to appease. The older man's gaze darkened and his lips curled, as he leaned back, radiating the kind of power that made others shrink without realizing it.

His free hand moved to Blanton's shoulder, the grip firm but casual, a mockery of camaraderie that felt more like possession. Even through the glass, I could sense the weight of it—the way Blanton stiffened ever so slightly under the touch, his laughter

faltering for just a moment before continuing, louder this time, as though to drown out his unease.

Hendrix's hand closed around my wrist suddenly, pulling me back. "We need to go," he whispered, his voice tight and low, his grip a lifeline against the overwhelming weight of what we were seeing.

I nodded, my chest heaving as we turned and hurried down another hallway, the scenes around us blurring into shadow. The air grew quieter, softer, but the weight of what we'd seen clung to me, thick and suffocating.

We passed doors marked with satin bow ties, the implication clear, until we found one unmarked. Hendrix pushed it open, and we slipped inside, closing it firmly behind us.

The quiet hit me like a shock, the absence of sound almost louder than the chaos we'd left behind. I leaned back against the door, my chest rising and falling as I struggled to catch my breath.

Hendrix stood in the center of the room, his expression unreadable. "What the hell did we just see?" he asked, his voice barely above a whisper.

I didn't have an answer.

HOLDEN

Hendrix paced in the middle of the room, his fingers tangling in his dark curls, pulling them loose and disheveled. His steps were erratic, his breathing uneven. “I mean—what the fuck? Of all the things I thought we might see tonight...that? Not even close.”

I groaned, tipping my head back against the door, my palms pressing into my eyes like I could erase the images burned into my brain. “I’m pretty sure my eyes are permanently scarred. Like, what the hell were they even...?” I trailed off, shuddering. Saying it out loud would just make it worse.

“Your mom and my dad,” Hendrix said, his voice rising with disbelief as he flung his hands out. “In a sex club. Together. Blowing some random dude! Who even are they?”

“They’re insane, apparently,” I muttered, my chest tightening with a strange mix of disgust at having seen it and secondhand embarrassment. “And Blanton—with another guy. I mean, is he into dudes? Or is this just...I don’t know, a thing they do?”

Hendrix stopped pacing and stared at me, his brows furrowed like he was trying to work through a math problem that refused to add up. “I don’t know. I mean, we’ve seen my dad flirt. He’s smooth as hell, but it’s always been with women, right?”

“Yeah,” I said, my voice sharp as I sat forward. “Always women. That’s why this

doesn't make sense. Mom's there. They're married. But now...what does this even mean?"

"It means they've got a hell of a lot going on we didn't know about," Hendrix said, his tone grim. He sank into a chair across from me, leaning forward, his elbows on his knees. "And maybe...I don't know, maybe it's not our business to understand it."

I huffed, shaking my head. "Yeah, except now I can't unsee it. They were so...enthusiastic. And fucking hell! My mom! She's always so classy and put-together, and now all I can picture is her on her knees like—" I broke off, groaning as I buried my face in my hands.

"Classy people can be freaks too, apparently," Hendrix said dryly, though the edge of unease was still in his voice. He was quiet for a moment before adding, "You think my dad's always been into guys, or is this new?"

I looked up at him, frowning. "How the hell am I supposed to know? He's never exactly been an open book. I mean, he's always been confident. Smooth. Maybe too smooth. But this?" I shrugged my shoulders.

Hendrix rubbed the back of his neck, letting out a breath. "And Fanny...she looked into it. Comfortable, even. Like they've done this a hundred times before."

"Which means this isn't new," I said, the realization making my stomach churn. "They've probably been doing this for years."

"Years," Hendrix repeated, his voice flat as he stared at the floor. Then, after a beat, he let out a short laugh, shaking his head. "What the hell, man? I mean, good for them, I guess? They're clearly on the same page. That's more than a lot of people can say."

I stared at him, incredulous. “You’re accepting this way too fast.”

“What am I supposed to do?” he shot back, throwing up his hands. “It’s not like we can march in there and demand answers. ‘Hey Dad, Fanny, care to explain why you’re double-teaming some guy at a sex club?’” He snorted. “Yeah, that’ll go over real well.”

The room fell into silence for a moment, the weight of it pressing down on us. Hendrix finally broke it with a sigh, his voice softer now. “At least they were together. That’s the part I keep coming back to. They’re not sneaking around. They’re just...doing their thing. Together.”

“I mean, yeah, it’s weird as hell, but it’s not like Blanton’s sneaking around. They’re...exploring. As a couple.”

“That’s one way to put it,” I said, a sharp laugh escaping before I could stop it. “Guess we can’t exactly call them conventional.”

“Conventional’s overrated,” Hendrix said, his voice quieter now. “Hell, look at this place. Conventional’s not even in the same zip code. And we might not be so conventional either,” he said pointedly.

I let out a small laugh, the last of my discomfort starting to ebb. “Fair point. But I’m still gonna need a drink—or five—to process this.”

I glanced around the room, really taking it in for the first time. The lighting was low and soft, casting shadows over plush furniture and mirrored walls. A chaise lounge curved like something out of an old Hollywood film, its deep emerald upholstery rich and inviting. There was a faint scent of leather and something floral, like roses, lingering in the air. The entire space felt alive with possibility, every detail designed to disarm and seduce. The bed in the center was massive, a luxurious canvas of black

satin and crushed velvet. Every inch of it promised decadence.

Hendrix moved toward a small bar cart tucked in the corner, his steps deliberate, as if pouring a drink would anchor him. He lifted the glass decanter with ease, the amber liquid catching the light as he poured into two crystal highball glasses.

He crossed the room and leaned back on the edge of the bed, the mattress slightly shifting under his weight. He held up one of the glasses, motioning for me to join him. “Come on,” he said, his voice low but steady. “You need this as much as I do.”

My pulse raced as I watched him sitting there, his broad shoulders relaxed against the plush bedding, the faint clink of the glass as he swirled the whiskey. It felt surreal—us here, in a sex club, where no one would give a fuck about what we chose to do. Even in the privacy of our room, the knowledge of what was happening all around us made the air feel charged, as though anything was possible.

I pushed off the door, crossing the room slowly. The hum of adrenaline thrummed in my veins, mixing with something heavier, something unspoken that lingered between us. Hendrix tilted his head slightly, watching me as I took the glass from his hand. He was quiet, his gaze distant, like he was trying to think himself out of the moment.

I wasn’t sure what pushed me—maybe the low burn of whiskey on my tongue or the way his shoulders seemed so impossibly broad and tense—but I spoke before I could stop myself.

“Hendrix,” I said, my voice barely above a whisper.

His head lifted, his eyes locking onto mine, and I felt my pulse skip.

“I...I can’t stop thinking about what you said earlier,” I admitted, my voice raw and unsteady. “About lines. About us.”

His brow furrowed, his lips parting like he wasn't sure how he should answer. "Yeah?"

My thighs brushed his knees, standing slightly between his legs as he perched on the edge of the bed. His gaze dropped for just a second before snapping back to mine.

"What if I don't care about lines?" I asked.

The words hung there, heavy and unspoken for too long. His hand flexed against his thighs, his knuckles going white for a moment before he finally spoke.

"You sure about that?" His voice was low, careful, but there was a fire behind it, a heat that made my chest tighten.

Instead of answering, I leaned down, placing my hands on either side of him, caging him in. "I don't want to think. I just...I need you to tell me what to do."

Hendrix blinked, his breath catching audibly. "Holden?—"

"I mean it," I said, cutting him off. "I don't know what I'm doing, but I want...I want to try. With you."

For a moment, he just stared at me, the tension between us coiling tighter and tighter until I thought I might snap. Then, slowly, he reached up, his hand brushing the side of my neck, his fingers warm and steady.

"You're full of surprises tonight," he murmured, his thumb tracing a slow line along my jaw.

I swallowed hard, my heart hammering in my chest. "Is that bad?"

“No,” he said softly, his voice almost a growl. “It’s shocking. I’ve never seen you just loosen up and be free.”

I let out a shaky breath, my lips parting just slightly as his thumb brushed the corner of my mouth. He leaned forward, closing the distance between us until his breath was hot against my skin. “You’re gonna have to meet me halfway, Holden,” he whispered. “You can’t just ask and not take.”

It was all the push I needed. I closed the gap, Hendrix’s breath warm against my lips, until I leaned in, and pressed my lips to his. His mouth met mine softly at first, his lips tentative, gentle as if he wanted to savor the moment before diving in. The faint scrape of his stubble brushed my skin, the contrast sending a thrill down my spine. His jawline, sharp and strong, moved under my palm as I cupped his face, feeling the power and tension there, the strength of his neck taut beneath my fingers.

When his tongue flicked against the seam of my lips, I let him in, my mouth opening to his in a rush of heat. His tongue stroked mine in a slow, sensual rhythm that stole my breath. Then it changed, growing bolder, more commanding, his tongue curling and dueling against mine in a battle I wasn’t ready to lose. He sucked my tongue into his mouth, the heat and pressure drawing a gasp from my throat and a sudden, uncontrollable hardening low in my stomach.

“Fuck,” I breathed, the word slipping out as his hands slid to my waist, his grip firm, possessive. My fingers threaded into his hair, tugging his long messy curls just enough to make him groan against my mouth, the sound low and rough, sparking another jolt of arousal through me.

I bit down gently on his lower lip, tugging it between my teeth, then sucked to soothe the sting. His chest pressed to mine, solid and warm, the heat between us building as his lips slanted over mine, his stubble brushing and scratching in a way that made me want more of him.

His thumb stroked the line of my jaw, his gaze searching mine before flicking down to my mouth. “Where the hell did you learn to kiss like that?”

I smirked, my lips brushing his as I answered, “Not with you.”

The faintest laugh escaped him, rough and edged with heat. “Yeah, I got that.”

Before he could say more, I leaned back in, capturing his mouth with mine again. This time, I pushed harder, taking the lead. My tongue swept against his, deepening the kiss as my hips shifted instinctively, seeking the heat and friction that made my pulse race. Hendrix met me move for move, his hands gripping tighter, his mouth demanding and consuming, but I gave as good as I got.

His breath hitched as I nipped at his lip again, and his response was immediate—a low growl that rumbled against my chest as he pulled me closer, his strength undeniable but tempered with a care that sent a shiver through me. His tongue sought mine again, stroking, teasing, sucking, until I couldn’t think of anything but him—his mouth, his hands, the way his body felt so solid and hard against mine.

My fingers traced the strong line of his jaw, his neck, feeling the flex of muscle beneath his skin as he kissed me like he couldn’t get enough. And I wanted to give him more, everything, because this—fuck, this...was like nothing I’d ever known.

“Damn, I didn’t think you had this in you.”

“Neither did I,” I admitted, my voice tight as my head tipped back, exposing my neck to him. His mouth found the sensitive skin just below my ear, and I shivered, the sensation sending jolts of electricity down my spine.

“What do I do next?” I asked, my voice barely audible.

Hendrix let out a breathless laugh, his lips brushing my neck as he answered. “Touch me.”

His hands slid under my shirt, his palms rough and warm against my skin. “Let me show you,” he murmured, his voice dark and promising.

I followed his instructions, my movements tentative at first, pressing my palms against his chest. His hands roamed, exploring the muscles of my back, the curve of my ass, the strength in my thighs as I moved against him.

Hendrix’s hands tightened on me, his grip firm and possessive, like he was staking a claim. “You’re driving me fucking crazy,” he muttered against my neck, his lips brushing the sensitive skin with each word.

I shuddered, my body responding in ways I didn’t fully understand but couldn’t fight. I pulled him up against me, so we were standing pressed together at the foot of the bed. My hips moved on instinct, grinding against him, and the sharp, aching pressure made me gasp.

I could feel all of him, the hard coil of his cock pressing against mine through our pants. The friction was maddening, every shift of his hips pushing us tighter together, the unrelenting heat pooling low in my stomach. Hendrix let out a low groan, his fingers digging into my waist as he ground back against me, the hard length of him sliding against mine, sending sparks through every nerve in my body.

“Like fuck, I can feel everything,” I ground out, my breath hitching as the solid length of him pressed into me. “You’re so fucking huge—I can feel how thick and hard you are, even through our pants.” My voice caught as his cock dragged along mine, the sheer size of him making every movement sharper, heavier, more overwhelming. “It’s—” I broke off with a guttural groan, the stiff pressure of him grinding against me making my pulse race. Every slide sent jolts through me, the

friction not just maddening but consuming, like my entire body was tuned to this one sensation. “It’s so fucking good,” I muttered, my hips rocking forward, chasing more of the aching drag.

“That’s all you, Holden. You’re making me this fucking hard. I’m fucking leaking already.”

His words made my cock jerk, the pressure between us so sharp it bordered on unbearable. I rocked against him again, unable to stop myself, the friction sending a shudder through both of us as we moved together in a messy, desperate rhythm.

“You like that?” he asked, his voice rough and low, like gravel against silk.

“Yeah,” I admitted, my breath hitching. “Don’t stop.”

“Let me make it better,” he said, his hands sliding under my shirt, pulling it up and over my head in one smooth motion.

He stepped back and stared at me, his eyes mapping the planes of my chest, my abs, and then his gaze dropped lower.

He stepped back in and his lips hovered above mine, his voice a low murmur. “You’re so fucking hot, Holden,” he said, his stormy blue eyes dark with heat.

I swallowed hard, the words hitting me like a jolt. “Says the guy with half of Charleston chasing after him,” I managed, trying to match his confidence.

Hendrix smirked, his hand sliding down my chest, tracing the ridges of my abs. “But the only one with my attention right now is you.” His fingers brushed my bulge, his touch light but confident, and I sucked in a breath. I took hold of the front of his shirt, unbuttoning him slowly as he toyed with the tip of my cock through my pants. Once I

got his shirt unbuttoned, he shrugged it off, and grinned, pausing to strip off his pants and black boxer briefs in one fluid motion.

When they hit the floor, my breath caught. I froze for a second, my eyes drinking him in. His chest was broad and defined, his shoulders strong, his skin golden under the dim light. My gaze traced the tattoo curling across his pec, the intricate inking of an acoustic guitar whose strings faded into ocean waves. I couldn't help but reach out, my fingers brushing over the curve of his chest, then moving to the faint trail of hair leading down his stomach.

Hendrix was all long lines and sharp angles, his cock standing out proudly against the cut of his abs. It was long— a little longer than mine—with a slight downward curve that made my mouth go dry. His tattoos rippled subtly as he shifted, the designs pulling the eye lower, framing his V muscles like an invitation.

“Fuck, you're hard to look at,” I groaned, the words tumbling out unbidden, raw and honest.

“You like?” he teased, stepping closer, his hand brushing over his length. “I'd say you're staring, but I can't blame you because I wanna stare at you too.”

“You're so fucking hung.”

Hendrix grinned, a flash of white teeth, and his stormy eyes glinted with something wicked and pleased before climbing back onto the bed, his body pressing into mine, heat meeting heat as his lips found my throat. “Well, now I gotta see.”

He stripped me with a practiced ease, his hands sure as he worked each piece of clothing away. His gaze roamed over me, unhurried and intent, as though he were committing every detail to memory. My body felt exposed, but not in the vulnerable way I might have expected—it felt powerful, under the heat of his attention. My chest

rose and fell with uneven breaths, and his eyes lingered on the sharp definition of my abs, the dip of my hip bones, and the long, lean lines of my thighs. His fingers brushed the ink etched into my ribs, tracing the quote there with a reverence that made my skin prickle. “You’re fucking cut,” he muttered, almost to himself, his hand skimming over my sides to trail down, his fingers teasing my patch of hair.

Then his hand wrapped around me, his palm warm and firm, stroking with a deliberate slowness that made my stomach tighten. I sucked in a sharp breath, my hips jerking involuntarily as his thumb dragged over the sensitive ridge just beneath the head of my cock.

“Damn, you’re responsive. And this crown is massive. It makes me wanna play with your tip until you’re begging,” he murmured, his thumb brushing over the sensitive head of my cock, swollen pink and flared at the slit.

His words sent a bolt of heat through me, and my whole body tensed under his touch, every nerve alive and screaming. I swallowed hard, my lips parting as my breath hitched, but I couldn’t find words—not with the way Hendrix looked at me, like I was something he’d never seen before but had always wanted.

“You don’t even know what you do to me, Holden.”

I swallowed hard, my chest still heaving, my body still trembling from his mouth, his hands, his everything. But his words—fuck, his words hit like a match to gasoline. I licked my lips, my voice unsteady but bold. “Tell me.”

His laugh was low and sharp, more growl than sound. “You want me to tell you? You want me to spell out every fucking filthy thing I’ve thought about doing to you?”

“Yes,” I whispered, leaning in closer, my lips brushing his. “I want to hear it all.”

Hendrix's eyes darkened, his gaze flicking down to my mouth before snapping back to my eyes. "I want to pin you down, feel you squirm under me while I fuck your mouth with my tongue, taste every goddamn sound you make. I want to push you to the edge until you're begging me for more."

My breath hitched, my body responding to his words as if they were touches, and he noticed. His grin was sharp and wicked, and his hand slid down, fingers grazing the sharp cut of my hips. "I want you under me, over me, however I can have you," he continued, his voice a low, dangerous purr. "I want to hear you lose control, Holden. I want to hear my name come out of your mouth like it's the only thing you can say."

"Fuck," I muttered, my hands curling into the sheets, desperate to ground myself against the rising heat threatening to drown me.

"What about you?" Hendrix said, his tone daring as his fingers brushed my tip. "What do you want?"

I hesitated for half a second before letting go, the words spilling out of me like they'd been trapped for years. "I want to touch you," I said, my voice raw. "I want to see you come undone because of me." My hand slid up his chest, the hard ridges of his muscles flexing beneath my touch. "I want to feel all of you, Hendrix. Every fucking inch."

I grinned, the boldness building in my chest as I pushed him back onto the bed and climbed over him. "You want to hear it? Fine. I want to taste you," I said, my voice low but firm. "I want to lick every inch of you, feel you in my mouth, hear you groan because you can't fucking handle it."

Hendrix's breath hitched, his hands gripping my thighs hard enough to bruise. "You talk a big game, Holden," he said, his voice tight. "Let's see if your mouth is as good as your promises."

But he reached for me first, his hands firm as he pushed me off of him and onto my back. His confidence was electric, a mix of control and need that sent a thrill through me. His palms slid down my thighs, spreading them wide before he knelt between them.

When his mouth finally found my cock, his lips wrapping around the head, I nearly lost it. The heat of him was overwhelming, wet and slick, his tongue working the sensitive ridge with maddening precision before taking me deeper.

“Fuck, Hendrix,” I gasped, my fingers tangling in his hair, tugging slightly as a sharp jolt of pleasure coursed through me. “You’re—shit, you’re good at this.”

He pulled back just enough to shoot me a wicked grin, the slick sheen of his lips making my chest tighten. “I know,” he said, his voice glittered with mirth, before his mouth descended again. This time, his hand joined in, stroking the base of my cock in perfect rhythm with his tongue, and I couldn’t think, couldn’t breathe.

He hummed around me, the vibration sending shocks of pleasure racing through my body. His hands gripped my hips, holding me steady as he worked me with an unrelenting rhythm, his mouth wet and hot, his tongue teasing every sensitive spot.

When his fingers pressed against the seam beneath my balls, a low, uncontrollable sound escaped me. “Shit,” I choked out, my breath catching. “Oh—fuck.”

“Is that what you needed?” he murmured, pulling back just enough to grin up at me. “Because I’m just getting started.”

The combination of his mouth and his hands was intoxicating, but I wasn’t about to let him have all the control. With a sharp inhale, I shifted, pressing at his shoulder to nudge him onto his side. He followed my lead, raising an eyebrow, curiosity and heat mingling in his gaze.

“What’re you up to?” he asked, his voice rough, his breath warm against my thigh.

“Making it fair,” I said, the words bold even as my heart hammered. I twisted my body, mirroring his position in reverse so that I was facing his cock. With his head now near my hips and my feet pressed against the headboard for balance, our bodies aligned in a sideways tangle, my cheek brushing his thigh as I leaned down.

I didn’t wait for him to start again. Instead, I leaned in, my lips brushing the head of his cock before taking him into my mouth. His groan was low and guttural, the vibration of it reverberating through me, sending a spark of heat straight to my stomach.

His cock was thick and unfamiliar in my mouth, the stretch uncomfortable at first, but I pulled back, adjusting to his size. I started slow, tentative, letting my tongue trace the prominent vein along his shaft. He twitched under my touch, and I took him deeper, swirling my tongue around the head, tasting the faint saltiness that lingered there.

Hendrix moaned, his hips jerking slightly. “Shit, Holden—you’re a fucking fast learner.”

I grinned around him, emboldened by his reaction. Matching the rhythm he set on me, I experimented, my lips sliding lower, my hand twisting at his base as I sucked harder. His groans became curses, rough and low, and the sounds spurred me on, pushing me to see how far I could take him.

Hendrix let out a groan as I pressed my tongue into his slit, pushing deeper, tasting him more fully. “Fuck, Holden,” he growled. “That’s—ughh, you’re gonna do me in.”

“Not yet,” I warned, my hand sliding lower to cup his balls. They were heavy and

warm in my palm, and I lifted them gently, my tongue tracing the seam beneath. His body jerked, a sharp gasp escaping his lips, and I grinned against his skin.

“You’re fucking relentless.”

I didn’t stop, my tongue moving further, exploring the seam and teasing the sensitive skin. His body trembled beneath me, his thighs tensing as he let out a string of curses that only made me want to push him further.

“Fuck, Holden,” he groaned, his hands gripping my shoulders. “You’re gonna make me?—”

“Do it,” I said, my voice firm before I took him deep again.

His release was sudden and intense, his body arching off the bed as he came, hot and thick against my tongue. I swallowed him down, savoring the taste, the weight of him still heavy on my lips as he stilled, his thighs trembling.

But before I could feel too smug, Hendrix’s hands were on me again, firm and possessive, guiding me as his mouth wrapped around my cock, hot and unrelenting. He didn’t hesitate, taking me deeper, his lips sealing tight as he sucked hard, pulling me straight to the back of his throat. I groaned, my head tipping back as the wet heat engulfed me, his tongue swirling along the sensitive underside before he took me down further, his throat pulsing around the tip of my cock.

The pressure was unbearable, his throat constricting as he swallowed me whole, the tightness making my body tremble. My breaths turned into ragged gasps, and his name tumbled from my lips like a prayer as the sensation built to a sharp edge. When he took me even deeper, the slick pull of his mouth relentless, I couldn’t hold back.

“Fuck, God, Hendrix, I’m gonna...I can’t—” My words broke off in a strangled cry

as my body gave in, my cum pulsing into his mouth in long, shuddering streams, each contraction wringing out everything I had.

He didn't let up, his tongue and lips working me over with an unrelenting rhythm that left me trembling. Even when I thought I had nothing left to give, he stayed with me, swallowing every last drop until I was dry and spent. My fingers slid into his hair, tugging gently, a silent plea for mercy. His tongue swept over my inflamed crown once more, a slow, deliberate lick that made me twitch and gasp. When he finally pulled back, his lips were slick and curved into a wicked grin.

I didn't respond, too dazed to form words, but he leaned over me, his hand sliding up my chest to cup the side of my neck. His lips brushed mine, soft at first, then bolder, and I tasted myself on him, salty and heady and impossibly intimate.

I kissed him back, letting my tongue slide against his, tasting both of us as our tongues mingled. The kiss wasn't just heat—it was connection, raw and consuming, like we were staking a claim on each other in the aftermath of everything we'd shared.

We finally collapsed side by side on the bed, breathless and flushed, the taste of each other still lingering on our tongues. The silence between us was heavy with everything we'd just done, but Hendrix broke it first, his voice low and rough.

"Jesus, Holden," Hendrix groaned, his hand sliding lazily over my thigh, his voice still thick with satisfaction. "You really haven't done that before?"

I shook my head, a faint grin tugging at my lips. "No," I admitted, my voice hoarse but steady. "I just...did what I like. Figured if it drives me crazy, it'd probably work for you too."

Hendrix let out a low chuckle, his fingers brushing lightly along my skin. "Well, I

guess sucking dick is a hidden talent of yours. Who woulda thought?"

I turned my head to look at him, still catching my breath, my chest rising and falling unevenly. "Yeah?" My voice was hoarse, but the words came anyway. "I'm glad it was alright. You're huge, man. I know I didn't swallow you down all the way like you did me. I've never had anyone do that. You didn't just suck me off—you fucking devoured me."

Hendrix's grin spread slowly, his blue eyes burning with satisfaction. "Good," he said, his voice dropping lower. "That's exactly what I wanted—to have you lose control, to feel you come apart in my mouth." His hand slid higher up my thigh, his fingers brushing lazily over my skin. "But don't think for a second you didn't wreck me too. The way you sucked my tip—and when you licked my balls, holding them in your mouth while you stroked me? Fuck, Holden, that finished me. I came so hard I swear I saw stars."

I swallowed hard, my body responding to his words even as I tried to steady myself. "I've always wondered...what about the taste?" I asked hesitantly, my voice quieter but thick with curiosity. "What did I taste like?"

Hendrix smirked, his lips curving into something suggestive. "A little sweet," he said, his voice low. "Probably all the pineapple you eat. It was clean, smooth. I coulda kept sucking on you after you came."

I let out a shaky laugh, my cheeks burning. "You're ridiculous."

His smirk didn't fade, his hand trailing higher as he leaned in. "And me? What did I taste like?"

I exhaled slowly, the memory still fresh and vivid in my mind. "A little creamy," I said, my voice dipping. "With a light saltiness. Didn't really have much taste which I

assume is good.”

“Good to know,” he said, pretending to pout. “But damn, I was hoping for something more...decadent. Like buttercream frosting. Guess I’ll never make the dessert menu.”

I laughed, shaking my head as I swatted his chest. “Oh fuck off, you dumbass,” I shot back though I couldn’t stop grinning.

His laughter joined mine, the tension between us easing into something lighter. He reached out, his fingers brushing against mine. “What a fucking night,” he said, his voice tinged with disbelief. “Did you ever think we’d end up here?”

“Not exactly,” I chuckled as I leaned back against the pillows. “We walked into a fever dream, stumbled headfirst into a nightmare, and then somehow ended up living out a fantasy.”

Hendrix let out a soft laugh, his hand brushing against mine. “Yeah,” he murmured, his cool gaze locking with mine. “Hell of a plot twist.

MOON

I arrived at the guys' house early, not wanting to sit alone in my apartment before book club. Holden and I were going to head over to Press together later, ready to discuss the ending of *Gatsby* with the others. I had no doubt Holden and I would find ourselves in a heated debate, a heat that the rest of the group probably shouldn't witness. Maybe we'd get out our own intellectual tug-of-war on the way over. Would he see *Gatsby's* death as tragic, the ruin of a man whose dream burned too bright? Or would he agree with me—that *Gatsby's* death was Fitzgerald's kindness, sparing him the slow, suffocating realization that Daisy was never going to leave the gilded cage of her society.

I couldn't deny that I also wanted an excuse to see Hendrix and Conrad again. Hendrix, with his easy swagger and magnetic grin, the way his laughter filled a room, leaving no space for hesitation or doubt. And Conrad—quiet, sexy Conrad—whose every glance felt measured, as if he saw the parts of myself I wasn't even sure I knew. I could already imagine Hendrix making fun of me, throwing some offhand comment about how I couldn't stay away, while Conrad would offer that slow, subtle smile that always made my pulse skip a little too hard. Together, they were like the push and pull of a tide—one moment lifting me up, the next drawing me in, closer than I ever thought I'd let myself be.

The sound of laughter and rapid button mashing reached me as I walked into the living room. Hendrix and Conrad were sprawled on the couch, locked in some intense video game battle, their competitive energy crackling between them. Across the

room, Holden sat in the armchair, earbuds in, a book open in his lap. He looked focused but not entirely unaware, his gaze flicking up briefly when I entered.

“Hey, boys,” I said, drawing out the greeting with a playful lilt. They glanced at me in unison, and I grinned, enjoying how their attention always felt like a spotlight. “What’s the game?”

“Kicking Conrad’s ass is my favorite game,” Hendrix said, with a shit-eating grin as he leaned forward, his thumbs working the controller with precision.

“My ass is your favorite, huh?” Conrad shot back, his voice light but edged with devilish humor.

I lingered for a moment, unsure who to approach first. They each pulled at me in different ways—Hendrix with his easy confidence, Conrad with his quiet roguishness, and Holden with that brooding charm he wore so effortlessly.

Deciding to spread some love, I started with Conrad, leaning over the back of the couch to press a soft kiss to his cheek. His lips quirked in a faint smile, but his eyes never left the screen.

“Win this round and I’ll give you a real one,” I whispered to Conrad before moving to Hendrix. He tilted his head up, expectant, and I obliged, planting a quick kiss on his lips. He grinned against my mouth, his hand briefly brushing my hip before returning to his game.

Finally, I crossed to Holden, who had pulled out one earbud and was watching me with a raised brow. “And what about you, Heathcliff?” I teased, leaning down to kiss his mouth. He stiffened slightly at first, his gaze flicking to the others, but he didn’t pull away.

When I straightened, I expected him to retreat into himself, maybe pick up his book or let the moment pass. Instead, he surprised me. His hand came up, catching my wrist as I moved to step back. His grip was firm but not forceful, his touch grounding as he pulled me down on his lap.

“All good?” I asked, as I looked back over to Hendrix and Conrad, my voice soft and a little uncertain.

Hendrix chuckled from the couch, his attention still half on the game. “We’re cool, Moon. You’ve got the power here. However you want to do this—it’s your call.”

Conrad nodded, his voice quieter but steady. “Yeah, no weirdness here. Do your thing.”

Holden’s lips curved into the faintest smile, a shadow of something darker behind his eyes. “Not enough,” he said, his voice low enough that only I could hear, his mouth meeting mine in a kiss that was anything but polite.

I felt the room tilt, the warmth of him washing over me as his lips pressed harder, his hand sliding to the back of my neck. This wasn’t the restrained Holden I’d kissed before—this was a Holden who didn’t care that the others were watching. His kiss was all heat and demand, lips bruising against mine as his hand fisted in my hair, tilting my head back so he could take more. His teeth scraped my bottom lip before his tongue slid in, claiming, relentless, making it clear I was his to taste, his to ruin.

Hendrix’s low whistle cut through the moment, followed by a laugh. “Well goddamn, Holden.”

“Guess that answers that,” Conrad said, his tone light but edged with something unreadable.

Holden finally broke the kiss, his breathing uneven as his forehead rested against mine for half a second before he straightened. His cheeks were flushed, but his eyes held mine, steady and sure. “Enough for you?”

Letting my fingers brush the edge of his jaw, I bit my lip with a sultry stare. “For now—but that doesn’t mean I won’t want more.”

“By all means,” Hendrix interjected, his grin sharp and amused. “Don’t stop on our account.”

Holden gave him a sidelong glance, then reached for his book—not as a retreat this time, but as if to ground himself, his fingers skimming the edge of the pages.

I moved to sit on the arm of the couch, letting my hand rest lightly on Hendrix’s shoulder. “So Holden told me you two had a grand adventure the other night. Something about hunting down The Silver Vine?”

Hendrix shifted forward suddenly, abandoning the controller on the coffee table as his focus snapped to me. “He told you, huh?” Hendrix asked, looking across the room at Holden.

Something passed between them, but I didn’t know what. Holden quickly inserted himself, “Moon, that tip you gave us about Calhoun Street was clutch. We wouldn’t have found it without that.”

I blinked in surprise. “Wait—you actually found it?”

He nodded, a grin spreading across his face. “Hell yeah, we did. And it’s...well, let’s just say it’s not what I thought it would be.”

I leaned in, curiosity bubbling up. “So? What was it like?”

Hendrix shot a look at Holden. “You want to tell her, or should I?”

Holden gave a small shrug, his expression guarded. “Go ahead. You’re better at the theatrics.”

“Damn right,” Hendrix said, his grin widening. He turned back to me, his voice dropping into a conspiratorial tone. “Moon, this place is insane. Hidden speakeasy, crazy exclusive vibes, and that’s just the front.”

Hendrix launched into the story, describing the hunt for the speakeasy entrance in vivid detail—Calhoun Street, the narrow alley, the couple who led them to the back kitchen entrance. His words painted a picture of exclusivity and mystery, and I felt a twinge of jealous excitement.

Conrad leaned forward, his elbows on his knees. “So, it’s like super fancy? What did it look like inside?”

“Posh as hell,” Hendrix said, his grin widening. “Velvet, chandeliers, old school cocktails. And that’s just the front. Then, there’s this...other part.”

I tilted my head. “Other part?”

Holden set his book aside, leaning forward slightly. “The sex club through the coat room,” he let out with a dry laugh.

My lips parted in surprise, and Hendrix’s grin turned wicked. “Yep. Hidden in the back, down a hall. And once you’re in—well, let’s just say it’s not for the faint of heart.”

I leaned forward, my pulse quickening. “People were just doing it? Out in the open?”

“Performing, experimenting, teasing, fucking—you name it,” Hendrix said. “It was crazy.”

Holden’s voice was steadier, but his words were blunt. “It was like walking into another world. Performers in cages, couples and groups in every configuration you can imagine. It was wild...raw.”

“We haven’t even told you the real kicker,” Hendrix added, his tone flat. “We ventured down this hallway made for people to watch. And then we saw our parents.”

That brought me up short. “Wait. Shut the fuck up.”

“You saw Fanny and Blanton?” Conrad cut in, staring at Hendrix like he couldn’t decide whether to laugh or demand an explanation, his usual calm cracking under the weight of disbelief.

Holden nodded, his expression tightening. “With another guy.”

“Holy shit.” I sat back, processing. “That must’ve been insane.”

“It is seared-into-my-brain insane,” Holden said, running a hand through his hair. “But, I mean...at least they weren’t cheating. They were together, experimenting. It’s weird, but I guess that’s...something.”

I reached over, brushing my hand against his knee. “Weird, yeah. But also kind of awesome. They’re out there living freely, right? I mean, being with two guys is hot. I know from experience.” I shot a look at Hendrix, then Conrad, who had gone quiet again.

Holden’s jaw tightened, and I couldn’t tell if he was uncomfortable or just deep in thought. “It’s not just that,” he said finally. “The guy they were with. There was

something...weird about him.”

“Weird how?” Conrad asked, his focus sharpening.

Holden hesitated, his gaze flicking to Hendrix for backup. “I don’t know. He was older. Salt and pepper hair, sharp features. Tall and slim. He seemed important. Powerful. I couldn’t place him though.”

Conrad frowned, his fingers drumming on his thigh. “He sounds familiar. Maybe I’ve seen him in passing at the gallery.”

My eyes widened. “You think you could ID him?”

“Yeah,” Conrad said, leaning forward slightly. “If it’s the guy I’m thinking of, he dropped something off for Blanton while I was working. I can dig around and see if there’s paperwork with his name.”

I nodded in contemplation. “Do you guys want to know more? Like who he is?” I asked. “I’m sure it’s awkward to unearth stuff about your parents’ sex lives.”

Holden exhaled sharply, dragging a hand down his face. “Yeah, I want to know who the hell this guy is.” His voice was low, tense, like he was still wrapping his head around it. “It’s not just weird that they were with him—it’s the way they were with him. I’ve never seen them like that before. It felt...” He trailed off, jaw tightening, his fingers curling into his palms.

“Like he had control over them,” Hendrix finished, his voice unusually serious.

Holden nodded. “Yeah. Like they were answering to him.”

Hendrix scoffed, shaking his head. “Fuck that. I don’t care if I have to see some shit I

don't want to see—I need to know who this guy is. If he's got that kind of influence over them, it matters.” He leaned forward, resting his forearms on his knees, his usual bravado stripped down to something sharper. “Because if he's dangerous? That's not just their problem. That's our problem.”

Holden's gaze flicked to his. “Exactly.”

I let their words settle, the weight of them pressing into the space between us. This wasn't just about catching their parents in some unconventional sexcapades—it was about who they were in it with.

“Then we find out,” Holden said, finality in his voice. “We figure out who the hell he is.”

Hendrix huffed a humorless laugh. “Glad we're in agreement. ID'ing the mystery man our parents are blowing is priority number one.”

Conrad was the first to break the silence. His fingers tapped against his knee, his brows drawn in thought. “If he's that powerful, I bet he'll attend the charity gala.”

I glanced at him. “What gala?”

“Blanton is hosting an annual charity gala to support the local arts in Charleston. It's one of the biggest events of the year where old-money Charleston dons its finest pearls and politeness while pretending they aren't drowning in scandal.”

Hendrix snapped his fingers. “Oh, shit—you're right. We have to go to that anyway. We can easily scout for the mystery man.”

I blinked. “We?”

“Yeah,” he drawled. “You’re coming. You’re involved in the theatre arts. Why wouldn’t you attend?”

I stared at him for a beat, then tilted my head to look at Holden and Conrad as well. “Attending as somebody’s date?”

Conrad shrugged. “It would make sense.”

Hendrix leaned back against the couch, grinning. “Gotta blend in with the high society crowd, right? And what better way than on the arm of one of Charleston’s most eligible bachelors?”

I snorted. “You mean one of you?”

Hendrix spread his hands. “I don’t see any other volunteers.”

I rolled my eyes. “And what do you want me to do at the gala? I haven’t seen the guy, and I’m betting there will be plenty of older, distinguished salt-and-pepper-haired men in attendance.”

Holden’s gaze met mine, steady and assessing. “Charleston’s elite spill tea like a debutante with loose lips at a garden party after her third mint julep. And you have a way of getting people to say things they wouldn’t normally say.”

Hendrix grinned. “You flash that sweet little smile and charm them with stories about the magic and mess of life in the spotlight. They’ll be eating up your act as shamelessly as they’ll scarf down the caviar on toast—before they even realize they’ve spilled something useful.”

I arched a brow. “You saying I should weaponize my charm?”

“Exactly,” Holden said, his lips twitching slightly. “No one gossips like Charleston’s old money, and the right people will be there. If you float through the room, talking to the right donors, you’ll hear things we won’t.”

Hendrix leaned in, his voice full of amusement. “Meanwhile, we’ll be keeping an eye on the crowd, seeing if our mystery man shows up.”

I exhaled, pretending to think it over. “So, I’m the distraction. The seduction. The social maneuverer.”

“And the eavesdropper,” Conrad added dryly. “Don’t forget that.”

I smirked. “Sounds like I have the most fun job of all.”

Hendrix nudged Holden, his grin widening. “So who’s taking Moon as their date? Because I call dibs.”

Holden shot him a look, unimpressed. Conrad just shook his head, his exasperation barely contained.

“You three can fight it out,” I said, stretching lazily. “Or maybe I’ll just keep my options open.”

Conrad rolled his eyes and got back to business. “Okay, so I’ll dig around at the gallery in the meantime, see if there’s anything attached to him—purchases, deliveries, anything that connects him to Blanton. And then we wait for the gala.”

Holden exhaled sharply, leaning forward as if the weight of the night was still pressing on him. “In the meantime, we could try going back to The Silver Vine . If he’s a regular, maybe we’ll see him again.”

“Not a bad idea,” I said. “You two already know the place. You’ve got the experience.”

Hendrix’s grin turned sly, his blue eyes glinting as he leaned toward me. “Holden and I got some experience, yeah,” he said, his voice low and suggestive. “But I’m pretty sure it’d be a whole new experience with you and Conrad. The four of us, tucked into one of those booths, watching...” His words trailed off, his gaze dropping briefly before he adjusted himself in his sweats with a soft laugh. “Shit, now you’ve got me thinking about it.”

A shiver ran through me, and I tilted my head, meeting his challenge with a sly smile. “Sounds like you’re trying to tempt me.”

Hendrix leaned back, his arm draped over the couch. “I think you’re already tempted, you little minx. Admit it—you want to go.”

I rolled my eyes, but my pulse quickened at the thought of walking into that dark, opulent world with all three of them. “And what about you, Conrad?” I asked, turning to him, letting my knee brush his. “Are you in?”

Conrad leaned back in his chair, one arm draped over the armrest, his gaze steady and unhurried as it lingered on me. “Are you asking to include me,” he said finally, his voice low and smooth, “or because you want me there?”

The weight of his words settled over me, pulling a shiver down my spine. I tilted my head, holding his gaze with a sultry lilt. “Oh, I definitely want you,” I said, matching his tone.

His smile deepened, his ocean eyes sparking with quiet intensity. He leaned forward just enough for his voice to drop, intimate and provocative. “Good,” he murmured. “Because if we’re going, we’re not just watching.”

“And what about you?” I turned to Holden, my voice softening. “Think you can handle going back there—with all of us?”

Holden’s eyes locked onto mine, his brow furrowing slightly as he leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees. His voice was calm, measured, but there was a glint of something darker in his gaze. “We’d find trouble,” he said simply, his tone low but steady.

I felt my lips curve into a sensuous smile. “Maybe we’ll make some trouble too.”

The room grew quieter, the tension wrapping around us like a thread pulling tighter with each glance, each word. My gaze swept over them, taking in the sharpness of Holden’s intensity, the quiet heat in Conrad’s eyes, and the wild gleam in Hendrix’s grin. Whatever trouble we’d find—or make—together, it wouldn’t leave any of us untouched.

CONRAD

Blanton's gallery was the kind of place that whispered wealth and taste instead of shouting it. Located on King Street, amid Charleston's most exclusive boutiques and cafés, the gallery occupied a beautifully restored 19th-century Georgian-style building. Its white brick facade was framed by Charleston green shutters and large arched windows that invited curious glances inside. Double doors, left open in the spring to encourage shoppers to wander in, were flanked by perfectly shaped topiaries in elegant terracotta pots.

Inside, the gallery exuded Southern refinement—polished heart pine floors stretched across the expansive space, their warm tones complementing the soft ivory walls. Vaulted ceilings with exposed wooden beams gave the room a sense of airy grandeur, while sunlight poured through tall paned windows, casting a warm glow over the artwork. Antique vases filled with spring flowers—clusters of hydrangeas and cascading wisteria—graced small tables throughout the gallery.

I let my gaze sweep over the room. Blanton had an eye for variety—coastal landscapes hung next to bold abstracts, each piece carrying the distinct flavor of the local artists he championed. My own black and white photography had made its way onto these walls more than once, tucked into a small corner Blanton had graciously reserved for “emerging talent.” Fanny's abstracts caught my eye instead—bold splashes of pink and gold that seemed to demand attention, almost daring the viewer to interpret them. Across the room, a row of James' paintings hung quietly, their lighter palettes and intricate details a stark contrast to the wilder vibrancy of Fanny's

pieces.

I found myself drawn to James' work, as always. His coastal landscapes unfolded like a slow tide, the kind of beauty that felt effortless. They looked simple at first—sundrenched beaches, sprawling marshlands, quiet gardens—but the more you stared, the more you noticed. A faint shadow in the corner. A set of initials carved into a gate. A face, half-hidden in the vines.

It was hard not to think of him here, his presence lingering in the strokes of paint and the subtle details that were the signature flourish of his art. I wondered if Blanton or Fanny ever thought about those details, or if they just saw what the typical viewer did—a talented artist with a keen eye for Charleston's historic charm and natural beauty.

I moved through the gallery slowly, taking it all in. There was a rhythm to the space, a deliberate arrangement that led visitors from one piece to the next. Every corner of the gallery was pristine, from the soft light that illuminated each painting to the tastefully arranged upholstered benches inviting visitors to linger.

I slipped into the back, calling out for Blanton as my footsteps echoed faintly on the hardwood. The gallery had always felt bigger when it was empty, its stillness stretching the space. The familiar creak of the floorboards beneath my shoes reminded me how many hours I'd spent here, weaving between canvases and frames, learning the unspoken language of art.

Blanton didn't answer, but that wasn't unusual. He was likely out working with a client. It gave me a reason to linger in his office, though, which suited my purposes just fine.

I made my way toward his office, my hand brushing lightly against the edges of a few frames as I passed. This place wasn't just a gallery to me—it was a part of my story.

I'd started working here when I was just a teenager, a couple of hours after school turning into weekends, summers, and eventually a permanent part-time gig. Blanton had always encouraged my art, nudging me toward opportunities I hadn't even known existed. He said he saw potential in my photography, the way I captured the quiet moments that other people overlooked.

It wasn't just about taking pictures, he'd told me once. It was about seeing—about listening to the land and the architecture as they whispered their stories, revealing the secrets they'd been holding for generations to those perceptive enough to listen.

Over the years, I'd done a little bit of everything here—filing invoices, helping with installations, manning the desk during exhibitions. I'd even played courier a few times, delivering paintings to clients or artists who needed a last-minute favor. The gallery had been more than a job. It had been a lifeline during some of the tougher years, a place where I felt like I belonged, even when everything else in my life felt too messy to deal with.

As I stepped into the office, the scent of cedar and leather hit me—the familiar mix of Blanton's cologne and the aged patina of the chairs that flanked his desk. The room was neat, as always. Papers were stacked in precise piles, the polished wood of the desk gleaming under the soft overhead light. A few wrapped paintings leaned against the far wall, likely waiting to be installed or shipped off to a client.

I hesitated for a moment, my fingers brushing the edge of the desk. This wasn't just about curiosity anymore. I wanted to find some clue to help identify the man Holden and Hendrix had seen at The Silver Vine, the one with Blanton and Fanny. There had to be something here that connected them. A name, a receipt, an email. Something.

The laptop on the desk was closed, its screen dark and reflective. A stack of envelopes sat beside it, the top one addressed to Blanton in elegant, looping handwriting. I briefly skimmed the envelopes, but the names and addresses meant

nothing to me.

I started with the drawers, pulling each one open carefully. They were exactly as I expected—pens, office supplies, some neatly labeled folders. Nothing that seemed like a clue. Like a secret. My fingers brushed the edge of something thicker, and I pulled it out: a ledger of sales.

Curiosity flared as I flipped it open, skimming the pages. It listed every piece sold through the gallery in the past year, each line cataloging the artist, the title, the date of sale, and the buyer. Blanton was meticulous, as usual. But what caught my eye wasn't the organization—it was the tiny stamp that appeared next to certain entries. A crow perched on a key.

The stamp was subtle, almost like a little copyright marking. But once I saw it, I couldn't stop noticing it. It wasn't next to every piece, only select ones. My stomach churned as I stared at the symbol, a faint prickle of recognition tugging at the edges of my memory. I'd seen it before, but I couldn't place where.

I flipped a few more pages, snapping pictures with my phone of the ones marked with the crow and key. I didn't know if this was important yet, but something about it felt significant, like a thread waiting to be pulled.

After tucking the ledger back into the drawer, I straightened up and scanned the room.

I turned my attention to the shelves along the wall. They were lined with books, journals, and binders, each labeled uniformly. Blanton was a collector of knowledge—art history, business strategies, even old catalogs from past exhibitions. If there was a clue to be found, it would be here. I just had to figure out where.

Each shelf was packed tight with books, organized by size, color, and subject. The

symmetry was perfectly tidy, almost intimidating—except for one shelf near the middle, where a single book was askew. It jutted out just slightly, breaking the otherwise flawless line.

I moved to it, reaching for the book. It was a thick hardcover with glossy pages, heavier than I expected, and when I pulled it free, I noticed something behind it: a small panel, slightly recessed into the wood. My head tilted with curiosity as I leaned closer, my fingers brushing the edge of the panel. There was a button, barely visible, tucked into the corner.

What the hell is this?

I stared at it, my heart pounding in my chest. It could be anything—a hidden safe, a switch to a false wall, maybe even just a long-forgotten wiring panel. But Blanton wasn't the type to leave something like this lying around without a purpose.

I reached for the button, my hand hovering over it as the urge to press it warred with the voice in my head telling me to stop. I didn't know what I'd find, but a part of me wasn't sure I wanted to find it alone.

The muffled sound of footsteps outside the office jolted me out of my thoughts. My stomach dropped as I quickly slid the book back into place, erasing any sign I'd been snooping. I barely had time to straighten before the door creaked open, and Blanton stepped inside.

He paused, his sharp gaze sweeping the room, landing on me in an instant. "Conrad," he said, his tone calm but expectant. "Hey. What's up?"

I forced a casual shrug, my heart pounding in my chest. "Just catching up on some filing," I said, gesturing vaguely to the stack of folders on the edge of the desk. "Figured I'd get it out of the way while it's quiet."

Blanton's expression didn't shift, but his eyes lingered on me for a moment, like he was calculating something. Then he nodded, seemingly satisfied. "Good. Keep it up."

He crossed to the far wall, his movements smooth and measured, and I watched as he took files from his desk and then picked up two of the wrapped canvases leaning against the side wall. "I needed to grab a pair of paintings for a client, and I want to have the paperwork for them as well," he said over his shoulder. "I'm heading back out, so text me if you need anything."

I murmured an acknowledgment as he left the office, the door clicking shut behind him. Only when I was sure he was gone did I let out the breath I'd been holding, my shoulders slumping slightly. My heart was still racing, the image of the button behind the bookshelf burning in my mind.

Too close.

I grabbed the nearest file folder off the desk and made a show of tidying the papers, giving myself a moment to collect my thoughts. The crow symbol in the ledger, the hidden button—both felt like pieces of something bigger. I didn't know what yet, but I was sure of one thing: I was going to have to investigate further.

Tucking the folder under my arm, I stepped out of the office, my steps measured as I crossed the gallery floor. Blanton was already gone, the door swinging shut behind him. Whatever he was up to, it could wait. For now, I had the ledger photos, a mystery, and a hell of a lot to think about.

But next time, I wouldn't be coming alone.

As I walked out of the gallery, the ledger pages still fresh in my mind, I pulled out my phone and started a group text. My thumbs moved quickly over the screen, keeping my steps brisk and purposeful as I headed toward home.

Conrad

Y'ALL

I found something in blanton's office. a ledger with art sales. some pieces marked with a weird symbol. took pics.

ALSO...found a hidden button behind a bookshelf. didn't have time to check it out.
need backup

Hendrix

a hidden button! wtf is this, a spy movie? sure you didn't imagine it

dead ass i'll show you when we can all go back

Holden

Heading to class. Be home later tonight. Don't do anything stupid until we're all there.

what do you take me for? hendrix is the reckless one

Hendrix

damn right

Moon

I'll hang with you Conrad

I'll keep ya out of trouble

don't act like you need to babysit me moon

Moon

someone's gotta keep you in line

is that what you call it? keeping me in line

Moon

I'll even tie you up if necessary lol

Hendrix

can you two skip the foreplay in the group chat

some of us are trying to get actual shit done

Moon

you're just jealous you won't be here to join the fun

Hendrix

TRUE

don't worry baby girl I'll give you some fun later after conrad fumbles around

pretty sure moon likes how I fumble around

Hendrix

lol

you gonna charm blanton into spilling his secrets too?

maybe ya never know

Hendrix

sorry bro i dont think your rizz is at that level even with ur birds pics and all

and yet my success rate is better than yours bro

Hendrix

ooh mr nature photography what's your secret

timing

patience

knowing when to make the first move

and when to let someone come to you

Hendrix

boring

i'm more of a hands on guy

Moon

can confirm

Holden

I already regret opening this group chat.

that's your problem hendrix, always rushing to the finish line

Hendrix

better than sitting back and staring until someone trips and falls into your lap

worked on you didn't it

Hendrix

oh fuck off

Moon

whoa whoa whoa

did you two—wait no this is even better than i thought

Conrad tell me everything

short story. he couldn't keep his eyes off me one night at a party. got too drunk.
practically begged

Hendrix

pretty sure you leaned in and kissed me first bro

didn't hear you complaining

Hendrix

my mouth was occupied

Moon

this is the best thing I've ever heard. please keep going

Holden

Jesus Christ. I should've muted this chat.

chill professor

you're getting some insider secrets here

Hendrix

yeah holden what's your take? you're quiet over there

Holden

My take? You're both full of shit and can't handle being outdone.

Hendrix

outdone??

puhlease i'd run circles around conrad any day

you'd try but lets be honest...you wouldn't last

i remember that from last time lol

Hendrix

the fucking milk ok bro you got me

go ahead make fun of a stupid drunken moment when we were teenagers smh

but if we're going back to the silver vine we'll see who can last now

oh i'm down

Moon

i'm coming with you guys this time. someone's gotta keep you in line. or maybe i'll tie you both up and see who begs first

Hendrix

that's bold talk moon

i like it

begging's not my style but you're welcome to try

Moon

oh i will

Holden

Muting. Right now.

Moon

see you later Heathcliff

Moon's next message popped up just for me, and a smile tugged at my lips as I read it.

wanna come over??

i wanna come all over

jesus lol ok i'll drop you a pin

head over whenever

get ready, trouble

I'm gonna shoot ya

I couldn't help that her invitation had me grinning like an idiot. This afternoon just got a hell of a lot more interesting.

Her apartment sat just a couple blocks from Rainbow Row, tucked into one of those

restored historic row houses that Charleston was famous for. Moon's was painted a soft peach with crisp white trim, its iron balcony wrapped in ivy and dotted with potted plants—ferns, flowers, and a few that looked like they might've been herbs. The black lantern hanging by the door flickered faintly, even in the late afternoon light, adding a flicker of warmth to the quaint facade. An open window let soft music drift out onto the narrow street.

I climbed the narrow steps to the front door, my camera bag slung over one shoulder. My pulse thrummed beneath it all, though, louder and sharper than usual. This was Moon's home—her space, her world.

Before I could knock, the door swung open.

"There you are." Moon's voice greeted me. She leaned against the doorframe, her silhouette relaxed and casual. She was wearing high-waisted jeans that clung to her hips, faded, perfectly broken in—and her bare feet peeked out from under the frayed hem. A cropped vintage tee bared a sliver of her toned stomach. Her silver earrings caught the light as she tilted her head, the little crescent moon charm swaying like it was winking at me and a chunky silver spoon ring glinted on her finger as she hooked her hand around the door. Her hair was a mess of dark curls, piled into something that might've been a bun before a few strands rebelled.

"Hmm," she purred, stepping back to let me in. "Bold move keeping a lady waiting, Conrad."

"I'll make it up to you," I leaned in to press a slow, suggestive kiss against the curve of her neck.

She turned, leaving the door open as I followed her inside. The scent of the place hit me first—fresh flowers and old wood, mingling with something warm and faintly spicy, like cinnamon or clove. The living room stretched out before me, wide and

airy, with original brick walls framing tall windows that spilled golden light across worn hardwood floors. The velvet couch, a deep, inky blue, was scattered with pillows in jewel tones. The coffee table was cluttered with art books, a stack of vinyl records, and a few candles burned down to stubs. A record player sat in one corner, spinning something mellow and jazzy. The walls were lined with a mix of vintage art prints and photos—some black-and-white, others faded with age. It was cozy and mismatched in the best way.

“Nice place,” I said, glancing around.

“Thanks,” she said, flashing a grin as she disappeared toward the kitchen. “It’s home. For now, anyway.”

As I moved further inside, I spotted one of her roommates, perched on the arm of a chair with her phone in hand. She glanced up, her sharp, dark eyes sizing me up with a mix of curiosity and amusement.

“So you’re Conrad,” she said, setting her phone down.

“Guilty, but I’m mostly harmless.” I gave her a cheeky grin.

“Moon’s been talking about you.”

“Callie, don’t be weird,” Moon chastised, her voice laced with laughter.

“Me? Never. Have fun,” Callie said, heading back toward the living room. “Just don’t break anything. Especially Moon.”

Moon laughed, grabbing my hand and tugging me toward the kitchen. “Ignore her. She’s always like that.”

I chuckled, following Moon into the kitchen, which was just as eclectic as the living room—marble countertops, a collection of mismatched mugs, and an open chalkboard wall covered in scrawled reminders, doodles, and quotes. Small jars of tea and spices lined a wooden shelf, and a vase of fresh wildflowers sat by the sink.

“It smells like you’ve been baking,” I said, catching a faint hint of something sweet.

“Cookies. Callie’s stress-baking again,” she said, handing me a bottle of water from the fridge.

“What’s she stressed about?”

Moon rolled her eyes. “Probably her upcoming dance showcase. She gets like this every time. You should’ve seen the pie marathon last semester.”

I snorted, cracking a smile. “Wouldn’t mind a Moon pie right about now.”

She glanced over her shoulder, smirking. “I wouldn’t have pegged you for a sweet tooth, Conrad.”

I followed her as she led me down the narrow hallway toward her bedroom. I let my voice drop, my eyes catching hers. “You know I’ve always got room for dessert.”

Her bedroom was the last door down a narrow hall. Her bedroom felt like a retreat—feminine and layered, like her. The walls were painted a soft heather gray, muted and calming, while accents of pale purple and deep blue added a richness to the space. The bed was pushed against the far wall, a wrought-iron frame draped in layers of soft linens—lavender, cream, charcoal—and fairy lights twisted with dried flowers cast a golden glow above it. On her wall, a mix of vintage art, black-and-white photos, and a few theater playbills were arranged in a casual collage.

“I wasn’t sure what to expect,” I admitted, setting my camera bag on the corner of her desk. “But this fits.”

“Is that a good thing?” she asked, raising a brow as she perched on the edge of the bed, the light catching the silver rings stacked on her fingers.

“Of course. It’s you.”

“You look like you’re cataloging me,” Moon said, flopping onto the bed with a grin.

“Just observing,” I said. “It’s what I do.”

I turned to the desk—a sturdy antique with scuffs on the legs—and spotted a handful of costume sketches scattered between open books and palettes of makeup. A bulletin board hung above it, pinned with tickets from shows, little notes, and doodles. To one side, a small stack of vintage fashion magazines caught my eye, next to a pair of well-worn dance shoes.

“You weren’t kidding,” I said, moving further into the room. “This is like a blueprint of your brain.”

My eyes drifted to a row of framed photos on a shelf—Moon on stage, her curls pulled back, caught mid-performance. “These are amazing.”

“High school productions,” she said, leaning against the desk. “Back when I thought I was going to be the next Broadway star.”

“And now?”

“Now I just want to create something that makes people feel,” she said softly, her voice losing some of its usual sass. “It’s what brought me here, you know. Charleston

has one of the best programs in the South.”

“I didn’t know that.” I picked up one of the sketches, turning it gently. “Where’d you move from?”

“Asheville.”

I raised a brow, curious. “That hippie town up in the mountains?”

She laughed, the sound soft and unguarded. “Yeah, that’s the one. It’s...different from here. Art everywhere, but a little wilder. Less polished. My dad taught literature at the university there, and my mom’s an artist—she paints and makes jewelry.”

I glanced toward her vanity, where a small jewelry box sat open, overflowing with rings and dangling earrings.

“Her work?” I asked, gesturing.

“Some of it,” Moon said, sitting up and crossing her legs. “I don’t get to see her as much as I’d like. She and my dad travel a lot—research trips, residencies, that kind of thing. They’re great, but...they’ve got their own lives.”

Her voice darkened at the end, and I caught the flicker of something more—something lonely. I didn’t press, instead glancing toward her open closet, where vintage jeans and flowy dresses hung beside more structured pieces.

I nodded, my gaze drifting to her closet, the doors slightly ajar. Inside, I could see rows of vintage dresses, sweaters, and jackets, all in rich colors and textures. “Mind if I...?” I gestured toward it.

She laughed. “Go ahead. I’m not hiding any skeletons. Probably.”

As I flipped through the hangers, I noticed a few pieces that stood out—like a fringed leather jacket and a shimmering sequined dress. “Where do you even find this stuff?”

“Thrift stores. Estate sales. My mom.” She crossed the room, reaching for one of the silver rings on her desk.

“I love your style. Such a nice change from Lilly Pulitzer and pearls,” I said, walking over and thumbing through the clothes.

She laughed with a grin. “I’ll take that.”

“My dad’s old tees,” she said, hopping off the bed and coming to stand beside me. “I’ve altered or cropped most of them. The rest are from thrift stores. Asheville has some great ones.”

“You could compete with Hendrix on vintage band tees,” I said. “His mom. His taste in music and all his vinyl are from her.”

I turned back to her, letting my gaze settle on the room again—on the little details that felt so distinctly her. The dance shoes tucked under her bed, the worn copy of *A Streetcar Named Desire* on her nightstand, the way the sunlight hit the silver rings scattered across her vanity.

“This place is you,” I said quietly, meeting her eyes.

She tilted her head, studying me with that same unflinching curiosity she always had. “What’s yours like?”

“Much more minimalist,” I admitted. “Calm colors. Photos of marshes, mostly. Some climbing gear in the corner. It’s nothing fancy.”

She grinned. “Sounds like you. But I bet I could find a secret or two in there.”

I shrugged, the corner of my mouth curling up. “Guess you’ll have to visit and see.”

Moon didn’t say anything for a moment, her gaze lingering on me. Then she tugged at the strap of my camera bag. “So, photographer,” she teased. “Are you just here to snoop, or are you actually going to take some pictures?”

That was the thing about Moon—she knew how to break the moment just enough to keep it from feeling too heavy.

I unzipped the bag, pulling my camera free. “Oh, I’m taking pictures. And you’re posing.”

She grinned, backing up toward the french doors that led out to her balcony. “Let’s see what you’ve got, Mr. Nature Photography.”

The balcony cast her in a perfect light. The sun was low but still rich and golden, streaming through the trees. I lifted the camera, focusing on her as she leaned into the sunlight, all wild curls and silver gleam—a mix of soft and sharp that was impossible not to capture.

“Lean back against the railing,” I said, my voice lower than I intended, more like a command than a request. I raised the camera, peering through the viewfinder as she shot me a look, feisty but compliant.

“Like this?” She tipped her chin up and resting her elbows behind her, the motion pulling her vintage tee just tight enough to expose the curves underneath. The high waist of her faded jeans cinched her in perfectly, revealing toned muscles as she stretched.

“Exactly like that,” I murmured, snapping the shot.

I took my time. Moon wasn’t just a passive subject; she was alive, her personality infusing every glance she threw over her shoulder, every slight curve of her lips. She played to the camera but kept enough of herself back that it felt real, like I was capturing moments meant only for me.

“Good,” I praised, moving closer to adjust a strand of her hair. I tucked it behind her ear, my fingers grazing the silver cluster of earrings that climbed her lobe. “Turn just a bit more...yeah, perfect.”

She smiled faintly, her heather-gray eyes catching the light. “You’re very bossy with that camera, you know.”

I grinned. “I know what I want.”

She let out a soft hum of amusement, her gaze flicking to the camera in my hands. “What if I take something off? Think you can handle that?”

I let out a low breath, licking my lips. “I think I can manage.”

She didn’t hesitate. She peeled off her tee, tossing it lazily onto the bed through the open balcony door. Beneath it, she wore a black lace bralette, delicate and see-through in a way that made it impossible not to stare.

"I was going to keep it professional, but damn this feels like foreplay."

“Too much?” She bit the corner of her lip as she turned slightly, letting one strap slip halfway down her shoulder.

“Not enough,” I shot back, my voice rough.

Her laughter was low, sultry. “Bossy and greedy. Dangerous combination.”

“I think you might like a little danger.”

She moved through a few more poses at my instruction—turning so the curve of her back was to me, glancing over her shoulder, stretching her arms up so the bralette hugged her body tighter. I adjusted her when needed, brushing her hair away from her face or tilting her chin to catch the light. Each small touch burned, leaving a trail of heat I tried to ignore.

“You know,” she said as I paused to adjust the focus, “we should send a few of these to Holden and Hendrix. I bet they’d love a little tease.”

I groaned, half-laughing as I lowered the camera. “You really love torturing them, don’t you?”

“It’s not torture if they enjoy it.” She dragged a hand lazily up her thigh, her fingers skimming just beneath the lace, like she was debating how much she wanted to give away. Her lips parted, but she didn’t say anything further—she just watched me, waiting, knowing I was already lost in the game she was playing.

“Let’s make them work for it.” I raised the camera again. “They don’t get to see everything.”

“Everything, huh?” Her voice dropped, daring me. Slowly, she reached behind her, unclasping the bralette. She slid it down her arms and let it drop, baring herself to me.

My pulse kicked hard, but I didn’t move, didn’t speak. I only watched her through the lens, capturing her as she was—flawless, unashamed, completely herself.

“Hands up,” I said softly. “In your hair.”

She obeyed, fingers tangling in her curls as she arched her back slightly, the curve of her breasts catching the light. I framed the shot carefully, making sure the photo felt artful, deliberate—not just raw lust, but something intimate.

“You’re good at this,” she said, her voice softer now.

“You make it easy.”

“Then make it harder,” she said, her eyes locking with mine.

I set the camera aside, the weight of her words settling into me. “You want it hard, huh?”

She nodded, stepping closer. Her fingers tugged at the hem of my shirt. “Get naked with me.”

Her voice lingered in the air, teasing, daring. My shirt hit the floor, and her gaze didn’t shy away—not that I expected it to. Moon took her time drinking me in, and I let her look. There was no need to hide anything.

Her fingers brushed my shoulders first, tracing the curves of muscle, the sun-kissed freckles scattered faintly over my skin.

I tilted my head, smirking. “You’re acting like I’m a museum exhibit.”

Her laugh was soft, low. “Maybe you are.”

She traced a line down my left shoulder blade, her fingertips skimming the ink there—the camera etched in black lines. “Fitting,” she murmured, her touch featherlight. “Your body is art.”

“You’re one to talk,” I said, my voice dropping as I watched her, heat building low in my gut. She was so sensual in her movements, so captivated in touching me, that I felt more seen in that moment than I maybe ever had been before.

Moon worked her way down my chest, tracing over the ridges of my abs, pressing her palm flat just above my V muscles. “You really don’t do things halfway, do you?”

“No point in it,” I replied, my voice a low rasp. Her hand lingered near the button of my pants, temptingly close to where I was already hard, already aching for her.

The way Moon looked at me—like I was a puzzle she couldn’t wait to solve—made the heat between us feel sharper, heavier. Her fingertips traced the tattoo on my forearm, following the sweeping curves of a massive oak tree with sprawling branches, her thumb brushing the coordinates inked just beneath it.

“This has a story,” she said softly, her voice laced with curiosity.

“It’s the Angel Oak, out on Johns Island. I used to climb it when I was a kid. Spent whole afternoons out there, seeing how far I could go.”

Her brow furrowed slightly as her thumb lingered over the ink. “Never heard of it.”

“Biggest tree you’ve ever seen.” I leaned in as my lips ghosted over her temple. “The branches go on forever. It feels like you’re standing under something ancient.”

She tilted her head up to meet my gaze, her gray eyes soft but sparking with intrigue. “It sounds enchanting.”

“It is,” I admitted, watching the way her lips curved faintly.

Her hands drifted lower, skimming my sides, her nails dragging lightly over my skin.

“Do you want to keep playing tour guide,” she questioned, her eyes glittering, “or can I see all of you?”

A sharp inhale was all I managed at first. “You’re making it really hard to focus here,” my voice rasped as I shoved my jeans aside. “But if you want all of me, Moon...you’ve got it.”

The weight of her gaze dropped, and a slow, wicked smile curled her lips. “God, Conrad.” Her voice was husky now, and her fingers brushed lightly along the barbell piercing at the head of my cock. The silver glinted in the dim light, already slick from my arousal.

“You’ve seen it before.” My words came out cool though the flush creeping up my neck betrayed me.

“Seeing it is one thing,” she replied, “but having time to appreciate it is something else.”

She knelt in front of me on the bed, her thighs framing me, her body close enough that I could feel the heat rolling off her skin. She ran the length of my cock with the edge of her knuckle before pressing her thumb lightly against the head, circling the piercing.

“Fuck—you’re going to make me leak or combust or both.” My jaw clenched as I pulsed beneath her hand.

Her gaze flicked up to mine, bright with mischief. “Just figuring out what makes you tick.” She leaned closer, pressing a kiss to the inside of my thigh, her curls tickling against my skin. Her hand never left me, her touch firm and confident as she explored—tracing the veins along my shaft, squeezing gently near the base, brushing her fingertips against the sensitive skin where my cock met my balls.

A low rumble escaped me as a wave of heat surged through my body, my eyes squeezing shut against the intensity. “You’re full of surprises.”

She hummed against my skin, the sound vibrating into me. “I told you I’ve been dreaming about this.” Her lips brushed the piercing again, her tongue flicking over the cool metal, and my hips jerked involuntarily.

“Jesus, Moon,” I growled, the sound low and raw.

She grinned, pulling back just enough to admire her work, her fingers curling around me again. “I like how this feels,” she admitted, running her thumb up the underside of my cock, pressing just under the head where the piercing sat. “Soft skin, hard silver. It’s perfect.”

I couldn’t hold back anymore. My hands found her waist, pulling her up until she was straddling me. Her thighs pressed against my sides, and I could feel her slick heat through the thin lace of her panties as she settled against my lap.

Her lips were soft and insistent, her body pressing into mine, and I let myself lose track of everything but her—her taste, her touch, the way her fingers traced circles into the patch of hair before sliding back down to where I was already impossibly hard.

Her hand curled around me again, stroking slowly as she shifted, grinding her hips against my lap. The feeling of her heat—of her wetness seeping through the lace—was enough to make me throb against her palm.

“Don’t stop,” I murmured against her lips, my voice thick with need. “I want to map you, too. Every fucking inch of you.”

I let my hand trail down her body as I kissed her—over the swell of her breast, the

softness of her ribs, the curve of her waist—until I reached the slick heat between her thighs. I teased her first, just the lightest touch, my fingers brushing her outer lips, spreading her slickness.

She squirmed above me, her hips pressing toward my hand. “Conrad...”

I gripped her waist, my fingers pressing into her skin as I lifted her effortlessly. “Let’s get these out of the way,” I murmured, sliding her panties down her thighs, savoring the way she shivered under my touch.

“Tell me what you like,” I murmured against her jawline, letting one finger dip lower to caress her entrance. “I want to know everything.”

Her breath hitched, but she didn’t hold back. “Slower,” she whispered, her hips rolling in time with my touch. “But firmer. I like when...when you press.”

I followed her lead, my hand moving in slow circles, my touch firm enough to make her whimper. Her folds were slick and soft, her clit swelling against my fingertips as I worked her. I slid one finger inside her, her body clenching tight and hot around me, and my cock throbbed at the sensation.

“That’s so sexy. You’re coating me.” I slid another finger in, curling them slightly until I found that spot that made her writhe.

Her back arched, her hands clutching my shoulders. “Right there,” she begged. “Don’t stop.”

“Not planning on it,” I promised, watching her face as I moved. I wanted to see every flicker of pleasure, every change in her breathing. My fingers worked her slow and steady, each stroke designed to drive her closer. “You’re gorgeous when you’re lost in pleasure, you know that?”

She groaned, tossing her head back, but her hands suddenly shot out, reaching for the camera. I froze, brow furrowing, but she grinned wickedly as she lifted it and focused the lens down between us.

“What’re you doing?” I asked, my voice rough as I eased my fingers out of her.

Her only answer was a playful hum as she shifted back a little further. Her hand wrapped around me, and she gave my cock a slow, teasing stroke, thumb grazing the silver barbell at the head. I sucked in a breath as she brought the camera up and angled it.

“Hold still,” she whispered, her gaze locking with mine as she positioned the tip of my cock against her pussy, the piercing pressing up against her slick lips. She kept it just at her entrance, not pushing me in, the pressure maddening but the sight even worse—my cock framed perfectly where her body opened up, the gleam of silver glistening with her wetness.

She snapped the shot. The camera clicked, but all I could hear was my own pulse thudding in my ears.

“Fucking hell, Moon,” I growled, my hands gripping her thighs. “Not sure if that’s porn or art. But it’s fucking hot either way.”

She smirked as she set the camera down, her fingers tracing the line of my shaft. “Just wanted proof of how good we look together.”

“Then come here and feel it,” I said, my voice low and dangerous, tugging her forward.

She climbed over me, straddling my hips, her knees framing my waist as she reached between us to guide me. Slowly, achingly slowly, she sank down, her body opening

up to take me inch by inch.

I groaned as I felt her stretch around me. “Fuck,” I hissed through gritted teeth. “You feel so goddamn tight and warm.”

Moon let out a low, breathy moan, her hands bracing against my chest as she bottomed out, her hips flush against mine. “You’re so thick.” Her voice was soft and filled with awe. She shifted, rolling her hips in a slow, sensual sway that made my cock throb inside her. “God, Conrad...I can feel everything. ”

I gripped her waist, holding her steady as she moved, her rhythm hypnotic—slowly rolling her hips against my cock, her body undulating in a way that had me gripping her tighter, every movement sending a rush of heat through me, every stroke dragging the piercing against her in a way that made her whimper.

“Your slow grind is the best torture,” I groaned, my voice hoarse as I pressed my thumb to her clit, circling the swollen nub in time with her movements.

Moon gasped, her body jolting at the added pressure. “Don’t stop,” she begged, her fingers digging into my chest, nails leaving faint trails in their wake.

“I won’t,” I promised, keeping my touch steady, my other hand sliding up to cup her breast, pinching her hardened nipple. Her pace faltered, her thighs trembling as she began moving faster, the pleasure catching up to her.

I felt her body start to clench around me, and I groaned, the sensation pushing me closer to the edge. But then—fuck—her hand slipped behind me, her fingers trailing lower until they found my balls, tugging gently.

“Holy shit,” I choked out, my hips jerking up involuntarily as the shock of it sent a jolt of pleasure straight to my spine. “Moon.”

“So that’s what you needed?” she teased breathlessly, her fingers rolling the weight of me, looking down at me as she rode me harder, her slick heat pulsing around my cock.

I couldn’t answer. I couldn’t fucking think. Every nerve in my body was on fire, the combined pressure of her hips grinding down, my thumb working her clit, and her hand squeezing me just pulled me straight to the brink.

But then her movements faltered, her rhythm breaking as the control she held so tightly began to unravel. Her confident smirk melted into parted lips, her breaths coming quicker, more ragged. Her hand tightened on me, as her hips rolled erratically, chasing her own release. A moan slipped out, unrestrained, and her head tipped back, curls wild around her flushed face. “Oh, God,” she pleaded, her composure slipping with every second. “Conrad, I’m so close?—”

“Right there with you,” I gritted out, my words rough and urgent as I gripped her hips tight as I thrust up into her, hard and deep. Her body clenched around me like a vise, dragging me down with her, and I lost it—my orgasm crashing through me, every muscle locking up as I spilled into her, my cock throbbing in tight, hot pulses. Thick ropes of cum filled her, coating her, each surge marking her as mine, leaving me breathless and shaking in the aftermath.

Moon cried out, her body trembling as she rode it out, her palms pressed flat against my chest for balance. I held her through it, my hands sliding up her sides, grounding her as her moans softened into breathless gasps.

She collapsed forward, her body flush against mine, our breaths mingling as we came down together. I stayed inside her, unwilling to let the moment slip away, not ready to lose the connection that tethered us so completely. Her fingers traced lazy circles over my skin, and I held her tighter, wishing we could stay like this, wrapped in each other, just a little longer.

16

MOON

The soft glow of the bedside lamp bathed the room in a warm, golden light. Conrad was stretched out beside me, naked, the sheet slung low across his hips as he scrolled through his phone with one hand, his other resting lazily on my thigh. My own phone buzzed against the nightstand, but I wasn't focused on notifications—I was focused on a photo he'd taken of me earlier, back on the balcony.

It was stunning.

The black-and-white image captured everything: the soft curve of my back as I leaned against the railing, the intricate lace of my thong barely visible in the shadows, the teasing glimpse of my breast as I'd turned just enough to glance over my shoulder. My expression was sultry, my lips parted, and the faint lights behind me blurred into a romantic haze.

“Got anyone you're gonna show that to?” Conrad asked. “It's sexy as fuck. Everyone and no one should get to see it.”

“I mean...it'd be rude not to share your masterpiece.”

“Masterpiece, huh?”

I grinned, already typing.

Moon

Mr. Nature Photography doesn't just photograph birds.

I hit send before I could overthink it, the photo filling the group chat a second later. My pulse jumped, not with nerves but with anticipation. I already knew how they'd react.

The responses came almost instantly:

Hendrix

holy fucking shit i think i just came

Holden

Hottest bird I've ever seen.

Conrad barked out a laugh beside me, his grin wide as he glanced over my shoulder at the messages. "They're losing it right now. I know I would be...if you weren't already naked in bed next to me."

"Think I should send another?"

Conrad arched an eyebrow.

I grinned, ignoring him as I texted the group chat again.

Wanna see what happened next?

"Moon," Conrad groaned, grabbing his own phone again, his thumbs flying over the

screen as he typed. I could see the amusement sparking in his eyes as he hit send, and a second later, his message popped up in the chat.

Conrad

moon you better not send a dick pic to the boys I swear to god

Hendrix

i'd prefer show-and-tell in person tbh

Holden

When are we meeting up? We need to go over the ledger photos.

Conrad snorted beside me, his eyes flicking to my screen. "The professor's all business. As usual."

"Someone has to be," I said, grinning as I propped myself up on my elbows to type back.

your loss

that piercing is a thing of beauty

Another reply buzzed through almost immediately.

Hendrix

fuuuuck might get hard again

let's meet at midnight

conrad still has the photos right??

Conrad

of my dick or the ledger?

well, I guess it's a yes either way

Holden

Midnight. We gotta investigate the button in Blanton's office.

"Guess they're all in," I murmured, glancing at Conrad.

Conrad set his phone down, his grin widening. "Of course they are. Hendrix would break in on his own if we didn't show up."

The group chat lit up again, Hendrix's reply making me snort.

Hendrix

moon you think conrad will hang that nude is his exhibit

all of charleston would be walking around with boners

private viewings only, ya perv

"Jesus Christ," Conrad groaned, dropping his head back onto the pillow with a laugh.

"He's never gonna shut up about this."

“You’d miss it if he did,” I teased, nudging him with my elbow.

He looked over at me, his grin softening as his hand slid lazily to rest on my thigh. “Yeah,” he admitted, his voice low. “I would.”

The street was hushed, lined with upscale boutiques and cozy restaurants, all dark and silent now that the city's bustle had faded. The gallery stood among them with a quiet elegance. Tall windows framed by ornate moldings glinted faintly in the moonlight, offering glimpses of shadowed artworks within.

Hendrix and Holden were already waiting by the door, the faint glow of their phones lighting up their faces. As Conrad unlocked the door, I stayed close behind him, Hendrix and Holden following me as we made our way inside.

“Still using the same passcode?” Hendrix asked as the soft chime of the alarm filled the space.

Conrad moved toward the keypad without a word, his fingers deftly punching in numbers. The beeping cut off with a faint click, leaving the gallery in silence. “Yeah, bro. Your birthday.”

“Thought so.” Hendrix’s grin was audible in his voice. “Sentimental, isn’t he?”

We moved further inside, the air cooler and carrying the faint tang of varnish. The space felt cavernous in the dark, the polished floors stretching out into shadows broken only by slivers of moonlight. My eyes traced the outlines of paintings hung on the walls, their details lost in the dim light, and I felt a pang of regret.

“I wish I could see this during the day,” I murmured, more to myself than anyone else.

Hendrix fell into step beside me, his voice soft and teasing. “Next time, we’ll give you the full tour. Bright lights, overpriced champagne, the works.”

I huffed a quiet laugh, glancing up at him. “I’ll hold you to that.”

Blanton’s office was at the back of the gallery, and even in the low light, it exuded a kind of curated perfection. The mahogany desk in the center of the room gleamed faintly, its surface pristine except for a neat stack of papers and a sleek leather notebook. One wall was lined with shelves filled with books, while the opposite wall held two smaller paintings framing a larger piece of Charleston’s waterfront.

“It’s very...put together,” I commented with hesitation.

“Controlled,” Holden said from beside me, his tone flat but not unkind.

“Curated,” Conrad corrected, moving toward the desk. Here, he said, pulling the ledger from Blanton’s top drawer. “Since we’re here, you might as well see it in person.”

It was a faded, leather-bound book, its pages covered in neat rows of handwriting. There were lists of paintings, the artist, the buyer, the date, and other key details. Stamped beside certain entries was a small symbol: a crow perched on a key.

“What is that?” I asked, leaning closer.

“No idea,” Conrad said, shaking his head.

“It has to mean something,” I said, glancing between them.

“Well, I don’t know what to do with the symbol, but I definitely want to see what my dad’s hiding with the button,” Hendrix said. “In all the times I’ve been in here, he’s

never shown me anything like that.”

Conrad pointed to a spot on the built-in bookshelf, his fingers brushing over the spines before he pulled out a heavy book on the end of the row. Behind it, hidden against the wood, was a small button barely visible in the low light.

“This is it. What’re we thinking? Safe? Panic room? Portal to another dimension?”

“If this opens up a wall of guns, I’m leaving. If it’s his sex dungeon, I’m leaving faster,” Holden scoffed.

“All we can go is roll the dice and found out,” Conrad said, unceremoniously pushing the button.

With a faint click, the shelf shifted on hidden hinges, swinging inward like a door to reveal the room behind it.

We froze.

“Holy shit,” Hendrix breathed, stepping closer.

The space beyond the door was dark, the faint glow from Conrad’s flashlight casting long shadows across the room. Dust motes hung in the air, shimmering faintly in the beam. It was an artist’s studio, untouched and forgotten, frozen in time.

I stepped in after Conrad, my breath catching as the room came into view. The walls were lined with canvases, some stacked neatly in rows, others leaning in uneven piles. A long table stretched across the center of the room, cluttered with brushes, dried tubes of paint, and sheets of paper dusty with age. Two easels stood side by side, each holding a canvas mid-progress, as if the artist had just stepped out for a moment and never returned.

“It’s his,” Conrad said softly, his voice filled with something reverent, almost fragile. “It’s James’ studio.”

Holden moved past me, his steps slow and hesitant, his hand brushing the edge of the table as if he couldn’t believe what he was seeing. His gaze landed on the nearest stack of paintings, his fingers hovering just above the surface of the canvas.

“He hid this,” Holden murmured, his voice tight. “All of this.”

“It’s incredible,” I said, trailing my fingers lightly over the edge of the table. Dust clung to my fingertips, the faint scent of oil paint lingering in the air.

We spread out, each of us drawn to different corners of the hidden room.

The paintings were unmistakably James’. The first ones I saw were landscapes, their colors lush and layered, capturing the marshes and waterways of the Lowcountry in vibrant oil pastels. The way he painted the reeds bending in the breeze, the shimmer of light on still water—it was alive, almost tangible.

Other paintings were more intricate—detailed facades of Charleston’s historic homes, their wrought-iron balconies and colorful shutters rendered with painstaking precision. One canvas depicted a cobblestone alley I thought I recognized, the light filtering through overhanging branches in a way that felt both familiar and dreamlike.

Holden stood in front of one of the easels, his shoulders tense, his hand gripping the edge of the frame. His face was shadowed, but I could see the weight of the moment pressing down on him, the quiet anguish in the way he looked at his brother’s unfinished work.

“Hey,” Conrad said softly, stepping up beside him. He placed a hand on Holden’s shoulder, his voice low. “You alright?”

Holden let out a shaky breath, his grip loosening. “It’s just...seeing all of this. Knowing he was here. It’s—” His voice broke off, and he shook his head.

Conrad squeezed his shoulder, grounding him. “We’ll figure this out.”

While they talked, Hendrix moved quietly through the room, his gaze sweeping over the table and shelves, scanning for anything that might hold a clue. He opened drawers, lifted papers, and flipped through notebooks with a calm focus that felt at odds with his usual demeanor.

Meanwhile, I studied the paintings, my fingers trailing lightly along the edges of the canvases. Each piece felt like a story—a piece of James’ world.

I paused in front of one of the easels, drawn to the painting it held. It was another gate, this one more intricate than the others I’d seen. The wrought-iron filigree twisted and curled in delicate, ornate patterns, ivy creeping through the gaps. The detail was incredible, the kind of thing you could look at for hours and still find something new.

And then I saw it.

“Guys,” I said, my voice catching.

They turned toward me as I leaned closer, my heart skipping as my eyes traced the pattern. There, hidden in the swirls of the filigree, was the same symbol from the ledger: a crow perched on a key.

“It’s here,” I said, pointing to it.

Conrad and Hendrix moved to my side, their gazes sharpening as they followed my finger.

“That’s it,” Conrad confirmed, his voice low.

Holden stepped closer, his expression hardening as he studied the painting. “James painted real places. This gate—it has to exist somewhere in Charleston.”

I nodded, my fingers brushing lightly over the edge of the canvas. “Then we find it. Whoever it belongs to might be the key to all of this. No pun intended.”

“You guys, James could have left other clues in the paintings,” Conrad exclaimed. “I need to photograph them all so we can review them carefully. Will you guys bring a few over at a time so we put them back each in the right spot?”

I carried the first batch over, sliding a smaller canvas onto the table for Conrad. Hendrix was flipping through a different stack, his movements easy until he stopped abruptly, his fingers tightening around the edge of a canvas.

“Wait a fucking second.”

His head tilted, brow furrowed, eyes scanning the painting with growing intensity. He didn’t say anything else, just stared like something in the image had grabbed him by the throat.

Conrad glanced up from his own search. “What?”

Hendrix ignored him. Instead, he turned, scanning the room until his eyes landed on Holden. “Come here.”

Holden, who had been quiet, caught in his own world of memories and paint, barely looked up. “What?”

“Come look at this.”

Something in Hendrix's tone must have cut through the haze because Holden exhaled sharply and crossed the room. Hendrix didn't move as Holden stepped beside him, his jaw tight, his arms crossed like he was already bracing himself.

Then his whole body went still.

"Holy shit. That's the alley behind The Silver Vine."

I moved closer, drawn in by their discovery. It was an alley, narrow and shadowed, the kind of place you'd walk past a hundred times without a second thought. James had captured it in painstaking detail—the uneven cobblestones, the soft glow of gas lamps, the creeping ivy that clung to the faded brick walls.

Hendrix dragged a hand through his hair. "Yeah, I thought so. I needed you to confirm it."

"Yeah," Holden said, his voice tight. "That's the side entrance. The kitchen door."

My gaze drifted to the far end of the alley, where James had painted a back entry door—plain and unassuming, tucked behind the faint outline of a wrought-iron gate. At first glance, it seemed like nothing, just another forgotten doorway in Charleston's maze of historic streets. But as I leaned closer, my stomach tightened.

"You guys. Look at James' markings. If you look closely at the door, you can see the mark."

The crow perched on a key, barely visible in the weathered door frame, almost as if it had been carved there and painted over.

And then there were the vines. Subtle and silver, they twisted through the cracks in the walls and around the base of the door. James had woven them in so delicately that

they could have been part of the natural decay, but now that I was looking for it, the meaning was impossible to miss. The longer I stared, the clearer it became—James hadn't just painted this for the sake of it.

He had left a message.

“The crow and key and the silver vines,” I breathed, “He knew what this place was. He knew a lot more than we do because we don't even know what the crow and key represents. We just know it's a speakeasy and a sex club and, for some odd reason, the marking in Blanton's ledger matches the marking on this door.”

Holden was still staring, his grip flexing at his sides. His voice was quieter when he spoke. Holden crossed his arms, his jaw tightening. “He wasn't just painting for the sake of it. These aren't just historic street scenes—he was trying to expose something.”

Hendrix let out a slow breath, shaking his head. “James, what the hell did you get yourself into?”

The weight of the discovery settled over us, thick as the dust in the air.

A hidden mark. A door none of us were meant to find. A trail James had left behind.

The room fell quiet again, the weight of the discovery settling over us. For a moment, none of us moved, the air heavy with dust and memory, and the faint, unspoken realization that James had left us more than just paintings—he'd left a web of secrets waiting to be uncovered.

HOLDEN

The air outside Blanton's gallery was sharp and heavy, clinging to my skin like the weight of everything we'd just seen. James's studio—his paintings, his secrets—felt like a door opening into a world I wasn't ready for but couldn't avoid. The crow symbol Moon had uncovered on the door of The Silver Vine had seemed to stare at me, mocking my lack of answers. My brother had been leaving messages, and even in death, he'd managed to stay ten steps ahead.

"I've got them all photographed. We'll study them back at the house," Conrad said, his voice tight with the tension that had gripped us all. No one argued.

The drive back was quiet but charged, the kind of silence that crackled with the weight of unsaid things. Moon sat beside me in the backseat, her hand brushing mine occasionally. Hendrix hummed under his breath, a nervous tick, while Conrad kept his eyes fixed on the road, his grip on the wheel tight.

When we got to the house, we piled into the living room, each of us finding a spot on the oversized L-shaped sectional that curved around the big coffee table. A soft glow from the table lamp in the corner bathed the room in warm light. Conrad got set up to cast the high-resolution photos of my brother's paintings to the large screen TV mounted over the mantle, so we could discuss each one together as a group.

Hendrix lounged in the middle of the sectional, his long legs stretched out and propped up on the coffee table. As we settled in, he grabbed his phone and put on

some chill house music, the soft ambient sound filling the room and making the atmosphere feel less solemn. I perched on the arm of the sofa at the other end, my hands resting on my knees as I tried to stay still. Moon slid close to me, leaning into my side, her notebook balanced on her lap, her pen poised to take notes. Her hand rested lightly on my thigh, her touch grounding, and at some point, she reached back for a knitted blanket and spread it across both our laps.

The first piece appeared on the screen, a stunning depiction of a Charleston garden—vivid greens, iron gates gleaming in the sunlight, and soft shadows that seemed almost alive. I swallowed hard, the image pulling me back to summers spent in James’s orbit, watching him pour his soul into every brushstroke.

Moon took the lead, perched on the edge of the couch with a notebook balanced on her knee. “The gate,” she said, pointing to the intricate wrought ironwork in the center of the painting. “Look at the scrollwork. He had a crow in the last one so we need to search this one carefully.”

Conrad zoomed in, the details sharpening. At first glance, it was beautiful—elegant swirls and curves—but the closer you looked, the more the pattern shifted. Hidden among the graceful lines was the crow perched on a key.

“There’s the symbol again,” Hendrix said, leaning forward, his fingers tapping the edge of the couch. “I wish we knew what the hell a crow and a key meant. And how it’s linked to my dad.”

Another painting filled the screen, this one of a private garden enclosed by ivy-covered walls. The leaves looked so real I could almost feel the rough texture beneath my fingers, but as Moon directed Conrad to zoom in, the beauty fractured. Hidden in the ivy were faint shapes: eyes peering out, their expressions sharp and watching.

“Creepy eyes,” Conrad observed, his jaw tightening. “Maybe James was saying

something about surveillance.”

Moon leaned forward, her pen poised over her notebook. “Wait—zoom in there,” she said, pointing to a darker patch of ivy near the center of the painting. Conrad adjusted the image on the screen, sharpening the details further.

Nestled among the painted leaves was something more: tiny script, nearly imperceptible, blending into the shadows of the artwork. The words were subtle, almost camouflaged, and my stomach twisted as Conrad read them aloud.

““Behind the wall, the watchers wait,”” he said, his voice low, each word heavy with implication.

A sharp chill ran through me. James had hidden these warnings so meticulously, buried in layers of detail only the most careful eye would catch. My chest tightened, a mix of anger and sadness rising like a tide. How long had my brother been carrying these secrets alone, embedding them in his work, hoping someone would finally uncover them? And who in the fuck were the watchers?

The next painting Conrad cast onto the screen was a picturesque view of a wrought-iron gate leading into a garden. The scene was quintessential Charleston: cobblestones underfoot, the shadows of moss-draped oak trees stretching across a lush, flower-filled space. The iron gate itself was intricate, with swirling patterns that felt alive, twisting and curling like vines.

“It’s beautiful,” Moon murmured, her pen poised above her notebook. “But look at the gate—there’s something about the symmetry of the design.”

Conrad zoomed in on the filigree, and we all leaned forward. “There,” Hendrix said, pointing. “That looks like something. It’s like a cross with two sailboats hanging from it or something.”

“Is that some religious symbol?” I asked. “I don’t get the sailboats. And why is the right sailboat pulled down and the left sailboat is up like a seesaw?”

“You guys! It isn’t a seesaw or a cross. I think it’s that thing symbol of law or justice,” Hendrix exclaimed. “The scales of justice. That’s a thing, right?”

Moon tilted her head, her brow furrowing. “Could be,” she said. “We’ll have to research that.” She sketched a rough version of the design in her notebook, underlining the phrase “scales of justice” with a question mark.

“Is the crow and key anywhere in here?” I asked, my voice quieter than I meant it to be.

The four of us scanned the painting like it was a treasure map. The silence stretched for several minutes before I said we should move on, no one spotting a crow in that one.

“Maybe not every painting has it,” Hendrix said, leaning back against the couch. “Or maybe we’re missing something.”

Conrad nodded and shifted to the next painting. This one depicted an ivy-covered brick wall, the edges of the canvas framed by bright pops of azalea bushes. The ivy was dense, so detailed it felt like you could touch the leaves and feel their veins under your fingertips.

“Do you see anything in the ivy?” Moon asked, her voice tinged with curiosity.

Conrad zoomed in, sharpening the leaves until the smallest details came into view. There were shadows within shadows, faint shapes that made Hendrix mutter, “That’s creepy,” under his breath.

“Could just be tricks of the paint,” Conrad said, though he sounded unconvinced. “But I think it’s deliberate. Look how the darker shades almost form a pattern here.”

Conrad switched to the next image, this one brighter: a street corner with Charleston’s historic charm on full display. Vibrant pastel buildings lined the cobblestones, their windows gleaming in the sunlight. In the foreground, a gas lamp stood tall, its light casting faint shadows on the street below.

“That’s Broad Street,” I said without hesitation. “Right by the old Exchange Building.”

Moon nodded, noting it down. “Since these are all real places, we can investigate them to figure out why he targeted them.”

“Or what he saw in them,” Conrad added. “Zoom in on the lamp,” Moon said suddenly.

Conrad adjusted the image, and the glass of the lamp seemed to shimmer as the details sharpened. Hidden faintly in the reflected light was something small and precise—script so tiny it felt impossible to notice without James guiding you there.

“‘Beneath the surface, shadows bleed,’” Moon read aloud, her voice quiet but steady. “What the hell does that mean?”

“It’s ominous,” Hendrix muttered, stretching his legs out further.

The next painting clicked into place, showing a grand archway framed by Spanish moss. The garden beyond was blurred with sunlight, the colors bleeding together in golden and green hues that felt dreamlike.

Moon tapped her pencil against her notebook. “That arch—there’s something familiar

about it. Conrad, zoom in on the scrollwork.”

As Conrad adjusted the image, intricate details emerged: delicate vines curling around the edges, tiny carvings of birds tucked within the stone, and what looked like faint impressions of chains in the moss.

“See this?” Conrad pointed to a small shape at the bottom of the arch. “That could be the crow and key, or maybe just part of the design.”

Moon jotted it down but didn’t look entirely convinced. “It’s not as obvious as the others,” she said. “But it might be there.”

The paintings shifted one after another: a marble fountain with rippling water painted so vividly it looked like it could move, a garden path flanked by iron lanterns glowing faintly, and a narrow alley lined with wooden doors, each one slightly ajar. In each piece, we hunted for the crow and key, sometimes finding it easily, sometimes struggling.

“Two paintings without any symbols,” I said, my chest tightening. “Maybe those don’t matter as much.”

“Or maybe we’re just missing it,” Moon said gently. “James hid these things so well, and we’re still figuring out what to even look for.”

When Conrad cast the final painting, the room fell into a hush. It showed a courtyard, lush with greenery and soft afternoon light. At its center was a small, round table with a single chair, painted in such stark detail that it seemed out of place in the otherwise dreamy setting. On the table sat a closed book, its edges sharp, its presence almost glaring.

“That’s odd,” Conrad said, breaking the silence. “The book feels purposeful but why

wouldn't he leave it blank?"

"Yeah, that's true." Moon agreed, pointing. "There's no title, no markings."

I swallowed hard, my voice rough when I finally spoke. "He wanted us to notice it, but we don't know how to read into it."

I stood abruptly, the need for air—for space—too strong to ignore. "I'll get drinks," I said, heading toward the kitchen. Hendrix followed, not because he wanted a drink, but because he wasn't about to let me unravel alone.

The kitchen felt like a different world, the hum of the fridge and the faint scent of coffee returning me to normalcy. I grabbed a glass, filling it from the tap, but Hendrix's presence behind me was impossible to ignore.

"You okay?" he asked, his voice softer than usual.

I turned to face him, the glass cool in my hand. "Yes and no."

His brows furrowed, and he stepped closer, his hands resting on the counter behind him. "Seeing James's work like that...it's a lot. You don't have to pretend it's not."

I let out a shaky breath, my fingers tightening around the glass. "I don't know what to make of it. He left all these clues and they've just been there this whole time...it makes me feel like I failed him."

Hendrix's hand found mine, large and strong, as he draped it over my own to offer comfort. "You didn't fail him, Holden. He was fighting something so much bigger than any of us could've imagined. Not to mention why the fuck he had a secret studio in the back of my dad's office. I didn't even know they knew each other."

He continued, “Plus, you couldn’t possibly have been expected to figure out his clues without having known the paintings in there existed. But my dad...that’s a different story.”

I met his gaze, the sincerity there hitting me like a gentle wave. Without thinking, I stepped closer, my hand still in his. “Yeah, I hear you,” I replied, grateful for his understanding even if I didn’t know what to think about it all.

He smiled faintly, his thumb brushing over my knuckles.

When we returned to the living room, Conrad and Moon were cuddled tight. Moon sat in his lap, her notebook now abandoned on the coffee table, leaning forward so their foreheads almost touched as they spoke in hushed tones. Her hand rested lightly on his arm, her touch absentminded but intimate. Conrad’s expression was softer than usual, unguarded in a way I rarely saw, and it sent a sharp pang through me—a flicker of jealousy I wasn’t entirely sure was about Moon.

Hendrix nudged me lightly with his elbow, pulling me out of my thoughts. “Come on,” he said with a small grin. “We’re all in this together.”

He tugged me toward the couch and pulled me down beside him, his hand lingering on my shoulder for a moment before he leaned back. I shifted to sit properly, trying to settle the uneven rhythm in my chest as Moon glanced up at us. She smiled, her lips curving softly, her gaze landing on me like I’d done something right just by being there. It eased the ache in my chest, though I couldn’t quite name the emotion.

Someone suggested shutting off our brains for a bit, the weight of James’s paintings and the day’s discoveries still heavy in the air. “How about Ocean’s Eleven ?” Hendrix offered, glancing around at us. “We’ve seen it a thousand times. No thinking required.”

Conrad gave a faint laugh, and Moon nodded without hesitation. “Perfect,” she said, leaning back against him.

No one debated it. Hendrix flicked off the lamps, leaving the glow of the TV as the only light in the room. The house felt almost still, the weight of our exhaustion settling over us like a blanket.

When Hendrix returned, he plopped down beside me again, pulling the blanket Moon had been using earlier across both of us. The warmth of him against my side was immediate, comforting. His leg pressed lightly against mine as he leaned back, his shoulder brushing mine when he adjusted the blanket over his lap.

Moon curled more deeply into Conrad’s lap, her arms tucked by her sides as his hand slid over her smooth belly in slow, absentminded strokes. Her curls spilled over his chest, catching the soft light from the screen, and her breathing began to slow, syncing with his. Conrad’s focus lingered on her for a moment before he turned his attention to the TV, his free hand resting loosely on her hip.

I let out a long breath I hadn’t realized I was holding. The exhaustion and everything we’d uncovered weighed on me, but the quiet intimacy of the room dulled the sharper edges of it. The flicker of the TV bathed the space in color, the familiar music and dialogue of the movie filling the silence with just enough noise to let us settle into it.

Hendrix leaned against me more fully, his arm brushing mine under the blanket. “We’re in this with you,” he said quietly, his voice soft but steady.

I nodded, not trusting myself to say anything. Moon shifted in Conrad’s lap, her hand slipping around his waist, and I couldn’t help the faint pang of envy that flared again. But as I looked around the room—Moon tucked against Conrad, Hendrix pressed close to me, the four of us tangled together in a way that felt too natural to question—I couldn’t deny the quiet sense of belonging that had taken root. It wasn’t

perfect, but for the first time in a long while, it felt like we were exactly where we needed to be.

18

MOON

The morning light spilled through the living room windows, soft and golden, casting long shadows across the coffee table and tangled blankets. I blinked slowly, the hazy warmth of sleep still clinging to me, and realized my head was resting on Conrad's chest. His breathing was steady, his arm loose around my waist, and my leg was draped over his, our bodies enfolded like we'd been made to fit together. The soft thump of his heartbeat under my ear was grounding, almost hypnotic.

I shifted slightly, the weight of the blanket sliding off my shoulders, and caught a glimpse of the others. Across from us on the sectional, Hendrix was curled up behind Holden, with an arm draped casually across Holden's chest. Holden's hand rested lightly over Hendrix's forearm, their bodies relaxed and at ease in the quiet intimacy of the morning.

For a moment, I didn't want to move, afraid to disturb the fragile stillness of the room. But as I turned my head, my eyes met Hendrix's, his blue gaze sharp despite the slow haze of waking up. He gave me a faint smile, soft and crooked, and carefully lifted his arm from Holden's chest. His movements were deliberate, quiet, as he untangled himself and slid out from behind him.

I followed his lead, gently peeling myself away from Conrad. He stirred briefly, his brow furrowing, but didn't wake. I tucked the blanket around him, letting my hand linger for a moment before I stood and padded after Hendrix, leaving the room behind.

The hallway felt cooler, the morning air fresh against my skin as Hendrix turned back to glance at me. “I’m gonna grab a shower,” he said, his voice low so as not to disturb the others.

I leaned against the wall, stretching slightly, the tension in my limbs easing with the movement. “Want company?” I asked, keeping my tone light but flirty.

He hesitated, just for a second, his eyes widening almost imperceptibly before he nodded. “Sure. If you’re up for it.”

“Of course,” I said with a small smile, falling into step behind him as we headed upstairs.

Hendrix led the way upstairs, his bare feet padding softly on the hardwood, the hem of his sweats hanging low on his hips. I trailed behind, my eyes catching on the way his back muscles shifted with each step, his tattoos dancing with the motion. I’d been in his room once before, but I hadn’t taken the time to really see it. That night had been a blur of hands and mouths, an electric tumble into bed. This time, I was slower, more aware of the space.

Hendrix’s room was like stepping into his personality—creative, laid-back, and a little chaotic. A vibrant painting hung over the bed, its rich blues and greens swirling in abstract waves. Guitars leaned against every corner, some polished and well-loved, others scratched and battered from years of use. The walls were a collage of concert posters and framed vinyl records, a testament to his life as a musician. His nightstand, predictably, was a bit cluttered, an empty mug, a pile of notebooks, and a mess of loose sheet music. It felt alive, like it had been shaped by the rhythms of his energy.

He stopped in front of the bathroom, holding the door open for me with a crooked grin. “After you.”

The bathroom was simple but warm, the tiles a soft slate gray, and the shower a spacious glass enclosure that could easily fit two. A line of products cluttered the shelf—practical, unassuming, but with the faint, earthy scent of cedarwood and sea salt.

I turned back to find Hendrix already pulling his shirt over his head. The sight hit me harder than I expected, even though I'd seen him like this before. His sun-brushed skin glowed in the soft light, faint freckles scattered across his shoulders and upper back like constellations. The muscled lines of his body were all rhythm and movement, flexing subtly as he tossed the shirt onto a chair.

My gaze traced the ink all over his back of intricate designs that seemed to ripple with him—the treble clef unraveled into crashing waves, jasmine flowers and ivy framed a vintage turntable, the delicate blooms softening the hard lines, the Charleston skyline blended into the pier at Folly Beach, its lines abstract but unmistakable.

As he turned around, he caught me looking and grinned, “You’re staring, Moon.”

“Can you blame me?” I said, letting my eyes linger on the swirl of ink wrapping down his chest and then lower to where the art dipped below his waistband. It was bold, intimate, impossible to ignore.

His laugh was low, almost shy, as he stepped out of his sweats, leaving him completely bare. Hendrix’s body was carved art. I couldn’t help but stare at the thick muscled V leading down his groin where the swirl of ink stopped. His cock hung long and already semi hard, framed by neatly kept dark hair.

“Ya gonna join me?” he coaxed as he stepped into the shower and turned on the water.

I started undressing, peeling off my shirt and sliding out of my leggings, the cool air brushing against my skin. Hendrix watched me through the steam beginning to rise from the shower, his deep blue eyes trailing over me with heat. I stepped into the shower, letting the hot water cascade over me as he turned to face me fully, the moment stretching between us.

“Why’d you look so surprised downstairs?” I asked, letting the spray soak my curls.

“What do you mean?” he said, his grin faltering slightly as he adjusted the water’s temperature.

“When I asked if you wanted company,” I said, stepping closer. “You looked...I don’t know. Caught off guard.”

Hendrix hesitated, his hand running through his hair as the water slicked it against his head. “I guess I didn’t think you were all that into me,” he admitted. “I mean, just by myself.”

I blinked, his words throwing me off balance. “Why would you think that?”

“You’re into Conrad. I saw you two earlier—it was obvious how into each other you are. And you and Holden have this whole emotional literary thing going on. I just figured I was the fun one. Part of the group, you know?” His smile was faint, but there was a vulnerability in his eyes that made my chest ache.

The water poured over us, the warmth soaking into my skin as Hendrix stood in front of me, his shoulders tense and his hands gripping the ledge of the shower shelf. The steam blurred the edges of the room, but not enough to hide the way his back flexed—thick muscle shifting under slick, golden skin, each ridge and groove tightening like a drawn bowstring. His broad shoulders lifted with a slow inhale, tension rippling down his spine, coiling deep in the cut of his lower back. He wasn’t

looking at me, his eyes fixed on some distant point, and I could feel the weight of unspoken words hanging between us.

“I’m into you, Hendrix,” I said softly, my fingers brushing along his forearm. “I’m sorry if I made you feel like...like you were just along for the ride.”

He let out a soft, harsh laugh, his gaze dropping to where my hand rested against his skin. “That’s exactly what I thought,” he admitted, his voice rough. “I’ve been trying to convince myself that you were way more into Conrad and Holden. That I was just...extra. Like I was there for convenience.”

My chest tightened, and I stepped closer, letting my other hand settle lightly on his hip. “You’ve been jealous?”

He exhaled sharply, his shoulders lifting slightly before dropping again. “Yeah. It’s stupid, I know. I just—I’ve been crushing on you since that night we performed together. I can’t stop thinking about it, about you. But then I see the way you look at them, and I feel like an idiot.”

“You’re not an idiot,” I said firmly, my hands sliding up his sides. “And for the record, I’ve been thinking about you since that night too.”

He turned his head to look at me, his blue eyes wide and a little disbelieving. “You have?”

“Yes,” I said, my voice steady. “You were amazing, Hendrix. The way you played—it was like you already knew exactly what I was going to do before I did it. Every time I shifted tone or changed melody, you were right there, adjusting like we’d been doing it for years.”

He let out a breath, his expression softening slightly. “That’s because I couldn’t stop

watching you. The way you lose yourself when you're performing—it's like you're in your own world, and the rest of us are just lucky to orbit around it."

My cheeks warmed at the sincerity in his voice, but I didn't look away. "You kept up with me perfectly. You didn't just follow—you elevated it. I felt like I could take risks because I knew you'd catch me."

His laugh was softer this time, almost shy. "I was trying to not make a fool of myself — or you — because I was fucking bewitched listening to you."

"I felt the same about our performance. You said right after that we made magic. And I felt it too. But beyond that, with the guys, you were never just there for the ride," I said, my voice firm. "I want to be here. With you."

His eyes searched mine for a long moment, the vulnerability there so raw it made my chest ache. Then he let out a shaky breath and leaned forward, pressing his forehead against mine. "You really mean that?"

"Every bit." My hand slid down, brushing against his hip, my touch lingering, like I was tracing the shape of something I already knew belonged to me. "I've wanted you, Hendrix. I've wanted this."

I leaned in, brushing my lips lightly against his jaw, feeling the faint stubble there catch on my skin. My hand moved lower, tracing the carved lines of his muscles, and his body shuddered under my touch. "You're sexy, charismatic, irresistible," I whispered, my fingers ghosting over the base of his cock. "I hope you know that."

"Keep telling me," he said, his voice raw. "And I might actually start to believe you."

Hendrix groaned as I stroked him, his cock heavy and solid in my hand. The weight of it was startling, the sheer length making me wonder how I'd manage to fit him

inside me.

My fingers glided down his shaft, tracing the thick ridge where his head flared, slick and swollen from the water and his arousal.

“When your fingers press just under the head like that—it’s like you’re tracing fire over me,” he said, his voice raw and strained. “I can feel every ridge pulling tight, like you’re dragging me right to the edge.”

I smirked faintly, letting my thumb brush just below his tip before sliding back down, squeezing gently as I reached the base. His hips jerked forward, his cock twitching in my hand. “I think you like being teased.”

“It’s more like the sweetest torture,” he panted, his hands gripping my hips as though he needed something to hold on to. His head tilted forward, his lips brushing against my temple.

Before I could respond, he kissed me, rough and demanding, his teeth scraping against my lower lip. His hands slid lower, gripping my ass as he lifted me effortlessly. My back pressed against the cool tile wall, and my legs wrapped around his waist instinctively, locking him in place.

I felt the tip of his cock press against me, nudging at my entrance, and I gasped, my hands gripping his shoulders. “You’re huge,” I whispered, my voice barely audible. “I don’t know how you think this is all going to fit.”

Hendrix groaned, his forehead pressing against mine. “You’re so wet, baby,” he said, his voice thick. “I’ll slide in slowly.”

He nudged forward slowly, my folds swallowing the head of his cock, as he pushed another inch or two inside me, and I felt my breath catch in my throat. “Fuck,” I

gasped, the pressure and fullness making my body tremble. “I feel full already,” I let out a throaty laugh. “And we’ve got a long way to go.”

He didn’t stop, his hips rocking gently as he pushed slowly forward until he was fully seated inside me. “Look at us,” he said, his voice low but firm.

I glanced down, and the sight sent a shiver through me. His cock was buried to the hilt, his hips flush against mine, and the stretch was overwhelming, almost too much. But when I shifted my hips, rolling them experimentally, the sharp ache turned into something else entirely.

“Fuck,” he groaned, his fingers digging into my thighs. “When you do that...it’s like you’re squeezing me, pulling me in even tighter.”

His hands moved between us, and his thumb found my clit, rubbing in slow, deliberate circles. The pressure built quickly, heat pooling low in my stomach as his cock pulsed inside me. He drew back slowly, the thick length of him dragging against my walls, leaving me gasping. Only the tip of him remained inside, and he held there for a moment, the stretch and teasing pressure making me squirm.

“Stay still,” he said, his voice a low growl. “I want you to feel every inch of me when I thrust back in.”

He slammed forward, filling me completely in one smooth motion, and I cried out, my nails digging into his shoulders. Now his rhythm was relentless—slow, deep strokes that left me clenching around him with every retreat and return. “Oh god,” he groaned, his forehead dropping to my shoulder. “The way your pussy grips me, it’s like you’re choking me every time I move.”

“Hendrix,” I sucked in a ragged breath, my voice faltering as his thrusts grew harder. “Fuck, I’m getting close. Rub me fast. You’re going to make me come.”

His thumb quickened on my clit as he angled his hips to hit deeper. “I want to feel you lose it on me.”

The tension inside me snapped, and I shattered, my walls clenching around him in pulsing waves that made my entire body tremble. “Hendrix!” I cried, my nails leaving faint crescents on his shoulders as I shuddered in his arms.

“Fuck, I can feel you,” he groaned, his thrusts stuttering. “You’re pulsing so hard it’s milking my cock. I can’t—fuck—I’m?—”

He thrust into me one last time, burying himself to the hilt as his cock jerked, spilling hot inside me. His head fell to my shoulder, his breath ragged and uneven as his body trembled against mine. “Moonshine,” he whispered, his lips ghosting over my collarbone. “If this is the first taste, I don’t think I’ll ever get enough.”

We stayed like that for a moment, the water cascading over us, his arms still holding me securely. Slowly, he set me down, his hands sliding to my waist to steady me as I leaned against him, my breath still uneven. My legs felt shaky, but the warmth of his body against mine kept me balanced.

Hendrix pressed a kiss to my wet hair, lingering before he pulled back slightly to meet my eyes. “We need to do it again,” he said, his voice low, but the edge of humor was unmistakable.

I raised an eyebrow, a wicked smile pulling at my lips. “You ready for another round so soon?” I stared pointedly at his softening dick.

He laughed, his grip on my waist tightening slightly. “Fair point,” he admitted, his grin easy and unguarded. “But I was talking about music. I want to play with you again. Let’s practice something together.”

I smiled, the warmth in his voice settling over me. “I’d love that. Just as soon as I get through my next show.”

“Show?” His brows lifted in curiosity. “What are you doing?”

“Cabaret.” I tilted my head toward the water to rinse my arms. “It’s a musical set in Berlin about people trying to survive and live freely as the world falls apart around them.”

“Cabaret,” he repeated, his lips quirking. “That sounds sexy.”

“Well,” I said with a laugh, “the Nazi World War Two part isn’t sexy, but the nightclub scenes definitely are.”

He grinned at that, his eyes lighting with curiosity. “What’s your role?”

“I’m one of the Kit Kat Girls,” I said, reaching for the soap again. “We’re part of the ensemble, so there’s a lot of singing and dancing. And the costumes? Let’s just say they’re mostly lingerie. Black garters, a little corset, stockings—the whole vibe is sultry and decadent.”

Hendrix’s gaze traveled over me like he was already picturing it. “Well fuck me,” he exhaled. “The boys and I are definitely coming to see this, Kit Kat.”

I glanced at him, a shy smile tugging at my lips. “My parents aren’t able to make it,” I said softly. “I have their tickets if...if you’d want them.”

His grin softened, his hand sliding up to brush a strand of hair from my cheek. “I’d like that a lot, Moon.”

“Okay,” I murmured, my cheeks warming under his gaze. “They’re yours.”

We stepped out of the shower, the cool air of Hendrix's room prickling against my skin as I wrapped the towel around me. Hendrix moved to the cluttered nightstand in his room, rifling through a drawer for something to wear. His towel hung low on his hips as he pulled out a tee shirt and sweats for both of us.

A knock at the door startled me, and Hendrix shot me a quick look before calling out, "Come in."

The door creaked open, and Holden poked his head inside, his cheeks faintly pink. "Hey, I didn't mean to interrupt," he said quickly, his eyes flicking between us, lingering on Hendrix's glistening body.

"You're not interrupting." Hendrix's voice was casual as he leaned against the dresser. "What's up?"

Holden stepped inside, closing the door behind him. He looked a little uncomfortable, his gaze darting toward me and then away, like he wasn't sure where to settle it. "I just...didn't feel like being downstairs alone," he admitted, his voice quieter than usual. "Conrad went for a run and?—"

"Then don't be," Hendrix said, turning back to his drawer and pulling out a pair of black boxers. Without hesitation, he dropped the towel, standing completely naked as he tugged them on. Holden's face flushed red, and I couldn't help but smile at his reaction.

"What?" Hendrix said, smirking as he caught Holden's gaze. "Not like you haven't seen my dick before."

Holden's laugh was soft, almost nervous. "Yeah, but I wasn't expecting it right now."

Hendrix rolled his eyes, pulling the waistband of his boxers into place. "You're the

one who walked in.”

I grinned, sitting down on the edge of the bed, still wrapped in my towel. “What exactly happened between you two at The Silver Vine ?” I asked, my voice curious but edged with heat. “I keep hearing hints that allude to it, but no one’s told me the full story.”

Hendrix shot Holden a look, and Holden shifted awkwardly, his hands sliding into his pockets. “You want to tell her?” Hendrix asked, his tone teasing.

Holden hesitated, his gaze flicking to me. “It’s not that interesting,” he said, his voice barely above a mumble.

“Let me be the judge of that.” I leaned back on my hands, my smile widening. “Come on, spill.”

Hendrix laughed, sitting beside me on the bed. “Fine. We 69ed,” he said bluntly, glancing at Holden. “In one of the private rooms. It was his idea, actually.”

Holden groaned, covering his face with his hands. “Don’t say it like that,” he muttered. “You make it sound...”

“Hot?” I interjected, my voice playful. “Because it is. You two went down on each other? That’s fucking sexy.”

Holden’s ears turned red, and he looked away, but there was a flicker of something in his expression—maybe pride. “It just...happened,” he said after a moment. “I don’t even know how to explain it. We were messing around, and then...yeah.”

I bit my lip, the image of them together filling my mind. “God, I wanna see that.” My voice was soft but edged with heat. They both turned to look at me, their expressions

shifting in unison.

“What?” Holden asked, his voice catching slightly.

“Will you do it again?” I slipped my towel open as I leaned back on the bed. My fingers trailed lightly over my stomach, edging lower, and both of their gazes followed the motion. “In front of me.”

Hendrix’s smirk widened, and he glanced at Holden. “What do you say, bro? Think you’re up for a repeat performance?”

Holden swallowed hard, his gaze darting between me and Hendrix. “You’re serious?” he asked, his voice low.

“I’m dead serious. I want to watch you. Both of you. I’m already wet again just thinking about it.”

Hendrix shifted onto the bed first, his body stretched out confidently, his tattoos flexing along his skin, his grin practically predatory as he turned to Holden. “Well? You heard her. Let’s give her a show.”

Holden hesitated for only a second before climbing onto the mattress, his movements slower, less sure, but his arousal unmistakable. He had a noticeable bulge in the front of his grey sweats that made me mentally drool.

“Get up here.” I reached out to trail my fingers along Holden’s arm. His skin was warm under my touch, his muscles taut as he settled beside Hendrix, the mattress dipping under his weight. “Start slow. I want to see you kiss him.”

Holden exhaled, his gaze locking with Hendrix’s. Slowly, he leaned in, his movements tentative at first, but Hendrix met him halfway, their lips brushing softly

before deepening. The sight of them kissing was mesmerizing—the way Holden’s hand slid to the back of Hendrix’s neck, grabbing his dark curls and pulling him closer.

“Good,” I said softly, my voice encouraging. I leaned closer, letting my fingers graze the edge of Holden’s shirt before slipping beneath it. “Touch him, Holden. Don’t hold back.”

Holden’s hand moved to Hendrix’s broad chest, thumbing his nipple which pebbled beneath the touch. Hendrix responded immediately, shifting closer, his hand slipping down to rest on Holden’s thigh. The kiss deepened, their mouths opening as their tongues began to explore, and I felt my own breath quicken at the sound of their muffled groans.

“You look so fucking good together,” I murmured, sliding my towel off completely. The cool air brushed against my skin, but the heat between us was more than enough to keep me warm. “Keep going. I want to see you lose yourselves.”

Hendrix broke the kiss first, his lips swollen and his grin wicked as he glanced over at me. “You’re enjoying this a little too much,” he joked, but his voice was rough, his arousal evident.

“You have no idea.” My fingers trailing over my stomach, edging lower as I watched them.

Holden leaned in further, his lips brushing against the curve of Hendrix’s neck. I saw him swipe his tongue up Hendrix’s neck, then biting the skin and sucking it enough to leave a mark. The angle exposed the strong line of Hendrix’s jaw, and the sound he made—a low, guttural moan—sent a shiver through me. Holden’s hand slid lower, resting on Hendrix’s hip, and I couldn’t help but reach out, letting my fingers trace the edge of Hendrix’s thigh.

“So what do you want next, Moon?” Holden asked, pulling off from Hendrix’s tender neck.

“I want you both naked.” I leaned in to press a kiss to Hendrix’s shoulder before trailing my fingers to the waistband of Holden’s sweats. “Let me help you both.”

I tugged lightly at Holden’s shirt, urging him to take it off. He obeyed, his movements growing more assured with every second. His chest was broad and sculpted, his skin flushed with arousal, and I couldn’t help but run my fingers along his abs as he leaned back into Hendrix.

Hendrix pulled Holden closer, their lips finding each other again, and I moved to sit behind them, my hands roaming freely. One hand slipped to Hendrix’s chest, thumbing his nipple, while the other slid to Holden’s side, tracing the edge of his tattoo. Their groans mingled with my soft laughter, the sound of their pleasure a melody I couldn’t get enough of.

“How about I take care of you first,” Hendrix posed to Holden. “Since someone thought I might need a bit of time before round two.” He laughed and rolled his eyes at me. “My dick seems pretty eager for Holden though, not gonna lie.”

Hendrix shifted toward the end of the bed while Holden leaned back between my legs.

“Mmm, this view is amazing. Best seat in the house,” I said, looking down Holden’s toned chest and abs, further down to his cock jutting up rigid and ready, and Hendrix hovering just above it.

Hendrix didn’t wait. He leaned in, wrapping his hand around Holden’s cock to steady it before dragging his tongue up the shaft, from the base to the head. Holden let out a sharp, stuttering gasp, his body tensing as Hendrix teased the tip, flicking his tongue

into the slit, collecting the bead of slickness there before swirling it around the ridge. “You’re so hard already,” Hendrix grveled, his voice rough before he took Holden’s cock into his mouth, sucking him wet and merciless and then sinking down in one smooth motion.

Holden groaned, his hips twitching as he tried to stay still. But Hendrix wasn’t gentle—his free hand slid down to cup Holden’s balls, rolling them experimentally before tightening his grip. Holden sucked in his breath, his back arching slightly into me, and his hand flew to the sheets, curling them into his fist.

“Fuck,” Holden panted, his voice breaking. “That feels—perfect.”

But Hendrix wasn’t done. He pulled back just enough to lick the head with the flat of his tongue again, his lips swollen and wet. The wet sounds of Hendrix licking and sucking Holden filled the room—messy, hungry, unrelenting. Hendrix’s hand slid to Holden’s balls again, his fingers toying with them as he hollowed his cheeks, taking Holden deeper. Holden’s cock twitched visibly, the veins along its length pulsing as Hendrix’s tongue dragged over the underside, lingering on the sensitive ridge just below the head.

Then he sucked harder, his lips sealing tightly as he let his tongue press firmly into Holden’s slit, teasing his crown. Holden’s reaction was immediate—a sharp gasp, his hips jerking forward as he swore under his breath.

“Jesus Christ,” Holden groaned, his voice ragged. “I’m not—fuck, I can’t?—”

But Hendrix wasn’t letting up. He kept working Holden’s cock, his free hand sliding lower, tracing the sensitive spot just behind Holden’s balls. Holden let out a choked sound, his legs trembling as Hendrix pushed him further.

“You’re so fucking good at this,” Holden panted. “You’re going to make me come.”

“I can feel you shaking.” My own breath hitched as I watched them. “And Hendrix—you look like you’re starving for it. Don’t stop.”

Hendrix growled low in his throat, his body stiffening as he sucked Holden harder, his hand stroking the base while his tongue flicked against the ridge. Holden gasped, his whole body going rigid as his cock pulsed violently.

“I’m gonna—fuck!” Holden cried out, his hips jerking uncontrollably as his orgasm hit. He spilled hot and thick into Hendrix’s mouth, and Hendrix groaned, swallowing him down, his throat working visibly as he took every drop.

When Hendrix collapsed onto the bed, both of them panting and flushed, I was so turned on I’m sure my pussy was drenched. “That was the hottest fucking thing I’ve ever seen,” I exhaled, shifting slightly, feeling the slick heat between my thighs.

“Glad you enjoyed it.” Hendrix flashed me a wolfish grin. “We’ve got a standing ticket with your name on it.”

“As soon as I’m back in the land of the living, I’m coming over to return the favor, bro,” Holden gasped. “You sucked my soul out.”

“Hell yeah, brother. But you should bliss out for a few. I’m going to run down and get us coffee and you can star in the next show.” Hendrix threw on his sweats and headed downstairs while I leaned back against the pillows, Holden in my arms, in awe that this was my life now.

HENDRIX

It was Saturday, and Holden, Conrad and I were sitting anxiously in the audience of CSAL's Performing Arts Theatre. I glanced over at Holden and Conrad, both shifting awkwardly in their seats as if they weren't sure how to sit through a college musical without looking out of place. We'd joked earlier about attending our girlfriend's play—emphasis on our—but now the gravity of the moment was starting to settle in. The theater buzzed with anticipation, a collective hum of voices that quieted only when the house lights dimmed. From the first low notes of the orchestra, the Kit Kat Club came to life, a vivid, sultry world unfolding on stage. A single spotlight illuminated the Master of Ceremonies, who strutted forward with a sly grin, his voice dripping with invitation.

"Willkommen, bienvenue, welcome!" he crooned, and the curtains parted to reveal the Kit Kat girls—and there she was.

Moon stepped into the light, her silhouette sharp against the dim, smoky backdrop. The deep purple satin of her corset gleamed, her black fishnet stockings clinging to her long, toned legs. Her dark curls framed her face, accentuating her heather-gray eyes rimmed in bold silver liner. She looked both otherworldly and unmistakably herself, a stunning contradiction of elegance and untamed heat that commanded every ounce of my attention.

The Master of Ceremonies wove between the girls, their voices harmonizing with his melody. Moon lingered on the stage left, her hips swaying in deliberate time with the

music as her gaze swept the audience. When her eyes caught the light, it felt as if she were daring everyone watching to keep up with her.

I gripped the armrest of my seat, too aware of the tightening in my chest—and lower. Her every motion was deliberate: the way she bent at the waist, arching her back just enough to send her dark curls tumbling over one shoulder, or the way she tilted her chin up, catching the spotlight on her cheekbone. She leaned into a chair, one leg hooked lazily over the backrest, as her lips curved into a seductive smile. My throat went dry.

“Jesus,” Conrad muttered beside me, low enough that only I could hear. Holden, on my other side, didn’t say a word, but I caught him shift in his seat. None of us had been prepared for this—for her on stage.

The first act passed in a blur of light, sound, and movement. Moon was in nearly every number, her presence threading through the Kit Kat Club’s hedonistic chaos. But it wasn’t until the second act that she truly took command of the stage.

The Master of Ceremonies strutted forward, flanked by two Kit Kat girls, Moon on his left. The set was decadent and low-lit, a velvet-covered chaise positioned at center stage. Moon perched on the arm of the chaise, her legs crossed elegantly, the shimmering fringe of her bodysuit catching the light with every subtle movement. Burgundy fabric clung to her curves, plunging low enough to make my fingers twitch with the urge to adjust my collar.

The music struck up, bold and cheeky, and the trio launched into “Two Ladies.” The scene was playful, suggestive, and just shy of scandalous, the kind of number that danced on the line between bawdy humor and outright seduction. Moon leaned into the Master of Ceremonies, her laughter rippling through the theater as her hands toyed with the lapels of his jacket. Her gaze was sharp, mischievous, and entirely too knowing.

As the song built, so did the choreography. Moon slid from the chaise, her movements fluid and precise, dropping into a deep squat, thighs open in her bodysuit and sheer stockings, that sent my pulse racing. She arched her back as she rose, her fingers trailing deliberately down her thighs before snapping her head back to meet the audience's gaze. My heart slammed against my ribs.

"Goddamn, she's sexy," Holden huffed, his voice strained. He didn't look at me, and I didn't bother hiding the grin tugging at my lips.

The routine grew more provocative with each verse. Moon joined the other girl in sandwiching the Master of Ceremonies, the two of them moving in synchronized, sensual sways that left little to the imagination. When the song reached its climax, the three collapsed onto the chaise in a dramatic tangle, Moon's arm draped over his shoulders as her other hand rested teasingly above his knee. The audience erupted into applause.

Moon stood and disappeared into the wings, her figure swallowed by the shadows, and I exhaled a breath I hadn't realized I'd been holding.

As the play approached the final scene, I excused myself for a quick trip to the restroom. I headed toward the back of the theatre, scanning the dimly lit space for the exit, when something—or someone—caught my eye.

At the edge of the VIP section stood a man I hadn't noticed before. His suit, sharp and perfectly tailored, screamed luxury, but it was the way he carried himself that gave me pause. His posture was too rigid, his gaze too calculating. He wasn't just watching the play; he was assessing something—or someone.

I ducked back into the shadows, my pulse quickening as I watched him slip through a staff-only door. Whoever he was, he didn't seem to belong here.

I moved quickly back to my seat, leaning in close to Holden. “I just saw someone,” I whispered, my voice urgent. “In the VIP section. He left through the staff entrance.”

Holden’s eyes narrowed, his body tensing. “You sure he wasn’t just a patron?”

“Not a chance,” I said. “He looked...wrong. Like he was here for something else. It was dark, but I think he looked like the mystery man we saw with our parents.”

Conrad leaned in, his brow furrowed. “What’s the move?”

I hesitated, glancing back toward the stage. The final curtain was moments away. “We wait until the play’s over. Then we follow him.”

Holden nodded, his jaw set. “Fine. But we stay for Moon’s curtain call. No way we’re missing that.”

Conrad sighed but didn’t argue. As the final notes of the orchestra swelled, the three of us settled back into our seats, our focus split between the woman on stage and the shadowy figure waiting somewhere in the dark.

The low hum of chatter echoed through the hallway as Moon stepped out of the dressing rooms, her curls tumbling loosely over her shoulders and her stage makeup still flawlessly intact. Her lips parted in a smile the moment she saw us, a flicker of shyness softening her usual confidence.

“I loved your bouquet,” she said, her voice warm as she approached. “Y’all didn’t have to do that. It’s stunning though—and the note was so sweet.”

The bouquet had been carefully chosen—velvety purple irises, clusters of lavender, deep blue delphiniums, and hydrangeas dusted in soft, silvery blue hues. All tied together with a midnight-blue ribbon to reflect our girl’s favorite color palette.

Conrad had written the note, though we'd all signed it, and it struck just the right balance between playful and heartfelt: To our favorite Moon, break a leg. Love, Holden, Hendrix, and Conrad.

I stepped forward, grinning as I leaned down to kiss her cheek. "We're glad you didn't actually break a leg out there. Your legs are too sexy to mess up."

"True," Conrad added, slipping in to kiss her other cheek. "Would've been a tragedy."

Holden hesitated for a beat before brushing his lips against her temple. "You were...mesmerizing."

"Alright," Moon said, laughing softly as she waved a hand between us. "You're all being weirdly charming tonight. What's the catch?"

"No catch," I said lightly, though the weight of the evening hadn't quite settled. "We just wanted to make sure you knew how amazing you were out there."

Her smile softened, and she slid her arms around my waist in a hug that left me warmer than before. Conrad followed, and Holden lingered just a second longer before stepping into the circle, our shared affection tangling together in a way that felt oddly natural despite the public setting.

When we pulled back, Moon tilted her head, her expression sharpening. "Okay, now that you've flattered me, what's on your minds? I can see you guys are antsy."

"There was a guy," I said, exchanging a glance with Holden. "In the VIP section during the play."

Moon's brows furrowed. "And?"

I continued describing him. “Tall, lean build. Salt-and-pepper hair. He had this...air about him. Ruthless, like he wasn’t just watching the play—he was watching something. Or someone. He slipped out near the end. Looked like he knew exactly where he was going.”

Moon blinked, her lips pressing together in thought. “And you think he might be... the guy?”

“Could be,” I said. “We’re not sure, but we wanted to see if we could find him.”

Her eyes flicked toward the dimly lit hallways behind her, and she smirked. “You want a tour of the private halls? Just say the word.”

“Lead the way,” Conrad said, grinning.

Moon guided us through the backstage labyrinth with practiced ease, her heels clicking softly against the tile as she gestured to various dressing rooms and storage spaces. The air was cooler here, quieter, the faint hum of distant conversation echoing through the hallways.

“This is the only door that leads out to the back alley,” Moon said, pausing near an unmarked exit. “If he went anywhere, it would’ve been here.”

We lingered for a moment, peering into dim corners and shadowed alcoves, but there was no sign of the man. After another ten minutes of searching, Moon sighed, brushing a curl from her face. “I think he’s long gone.”

“Guess that’s our answer,” I said, though the knot in my stomach didn’t loosen. “We’ll call it a night on the mystery front.”

Moon’s expression brightened as she turned back to us. “Good. Let’s go out. You’re

not done celebrating me yet.”

Holden chuckled, his tension easing just enough to let a smile slip through. “Any place in mind?”

“There’s that rooftop bar on King,” Conrad suggested. “Good cocktails, great view, and twinkle lights.”

Moon smirked, her eyes sparkling. “And three sexy as fuck men as my dates? I must be the luckiest girl in Charleston.”

Her laughter spilled into the night, light and unguarded, the kind that made me want to keep her talking, just to hear it again.

We hadn’t made it more than a block on foot when Conrad froze. “Hold up,” he said, his voice sharp.

Across the street, a shadow moved—quick, deliberate, discrete. A man slipped from the alley, his stride purposeful as he crossed under the flickering glow of a streetlamp.

“It’s him,” I whispered, the recognition striking.

Moon didn’t hesitate, her gaze narrowing. “Well? What are we waiting for?”

We moved as one, crossing the street at a brisk pace, our footsteps muffled against the cobblestones. The man didn’t look back, his movements precise as he turned into another alley. We followed at a careful distance, the quiet tension between us palpable with unsaid thoughts: What do we do if he notices us? Do we feign ignorance, pretend we just happened to be here, wandering the same dark streets? Or do we meet his gaze head-on and force the confrontation even though we have no clue who we’d be threatening?

The alley opened into a narrow stairwell leading down into one of Charleston's historic brick underground tunnels. The man disappeared into the shadows below without so much as a glance over his shoulder.

"Tell me this isn't a terrible idea," Conrad muttered, but he was already descending the steps.

"It's a terrible idea," Holden agreed, his voice tight. "But we're doing it anyway."

The air grew cooler as we descended, the faint smell of moss and old stone rising to meet us. The tunnel stretched ahead, its bricks glistening faintly in the dim light of scattered bulbs. We moved carefully, our footsteps echoing lightly against the uneven ground. We followed silently, single file, from a distance while the man walked what felt like four or five blocks, making a right turn when the tunnel came to a brick end.

Ahead, the man walked another block and pushed through a heavy wooden door. The sound of distant bass thumped into the tunnel before the door swung shut.

When we reached the door, my hand hesitated on the handle. I turned to the others, their faces pale in the faint light.

"This is it," I said, my voice low. "We're going in."

I pushed the door open, and we stepped into the lion's den.

As soon as we pushed through the door, the four of us huddled together, instinctively drawing close in the dimly lit space. The air was warmer here, heavy with the mingling scents of expensive perfume, leather, and something sweetly smoky. I glanced at Holden, and recognition passed between us like a jolt.

"The coat closet," he whispered, his voice tight. "We're back at The Silver Vine."

My stomach twisted, but there wasn't time to process it. Conrad and Moon were already stepping through the velvet curtain, their curiosity pulling them toward the source of the music and laughter spilling into the room. I exchanged one last look with Holden, and we followed.

It felt like stepping into a drug-induced dream, or maybe a temptation you weren't supposed to follow but couldn't resist. We were going down the rabbit hole into Wonderland. As we stepped through the door, and the shift in atmosphere hit me immediately. The main room was a theatre in and of itself—a space alive with heat, movement, and an undercurrent of raw desire.

Just as I remembered from before, the room was sprawling but intimate, broken into smaller sections by heavy, billowing curtains and low partitions that framed plush seating areas. The lighting was low, the glow of golden sconces and flickering candles casting everything in rich, warm shadows. The air was warm, perfumed with a mix of heady scents—something floral, something musky, something faintly sweet. My senses came alive, drinking in the flicker of movement, the soft rustle of fabric, the quiet hum of conversation punctuated by the occasional soft moan or breathless laugh.

Dancers moved fluidly through the space, their nude bodies adorned with glimmering accents—chains, jewels, delicate silk ribbons that caught the light. Their movements were deliberate, hypnotic, every step calculated to draw the eye and hold it. Their skin glistened faintly under the silver paint, muscles shifting with an elegance that seemed effortless.

Passion and desire weren't hidden here—they were on full, unapologetic display. A couple reclined on a low couch, their hands exploring one another without restraint, their lips meeting in languid, open kisses that left nothing to the imagination. Across the room, a woman knelt before her partner, her hands resting lightly on his thighs as she gazed up at him, her expression filled with heat and adoration.

Conrad stiffened in place, his gaze darting around the room. Moon, on the other hand, moved forward, her chin tilting up as she took in the scene with the same sharp curiosity she brought to every stage she commanded. Her gaze lingered on a low platform where a dancer, nude except for a sheen of silver body paint, twirled seductively inside a gilded cage. Around her, a group lounged on settees, their postures relaxed but charged, hands exploring bare skin with a casualness that sent a shiver through me.

“This place...” Conrad trailed off, his voice low and uncertain. “It’s wild.”

Moon tilted her head, her lips curving into a slow, amused smile. “It’s...primal, uninhibited, decadent,” she said finally, her voice tinged with awe. “I can’t stop looking everywhere.”

We moved deeper into the club, the scenes around us growing bolder. In one corner, a couple reclined on a chaise fully nude, the woman straddling his face while another woman knelt between them, sucking his dick. At a nearby table, a man took a sip of champagne while a woman straddled his lap; then, he leaned over and licked between her bare breasts as she leaned back in pleasure.

Holden groaned beside me, his voice pitched low enough for only us to hear. “You think he’s meeting our parents here? Because if I catch another eyeful of that...”

I winced. “Hard pass.”

I found a round booth tucked near the edge of the room, its plush upholstery dark and inviting. “Let’s sit,” I said, gesturing for the others to join me. We slid into the booth, the dim light casting our faces in soft shadows as we huddled together. A server appeared almost immediately, his sleek uniform tailored and unassuming as he took our drink orders—bourbon for me and Holden, a white Russian for Moon, and a whiskey sour for Conrad.

As we waited and watched, my gaze drifted across the room—and froze.

My dad. Blanton.

He sat at a table near the far end of the room, his posture relaxed but alert, his hand casually resting on the back of a chair beside him. He wasn't alone; a group of sharply dressed men and women surrounded him, their laughter punctuating the low murmur of conversation. There was no sign of Fanny, but my stomach tightened anyway.

“Shit.” I leaned closer to the others to alert them. “My dad’s here.”

Moon straightened, her gray eyes narrowing. “Where?”

I gestured subtly, and her gaze followed mine. “Across the room,” I said. “Far end, next to the guy in the gray suit.”

Holden stiffened beside me, his hand curling into a loose fist. “Is it him?” he asked, his voice low.

I followed his gaze, searching the faces around Blanton’s table. The salt-and-pepper hair, the sharp angles of his face—it was him. The man we’d followed here. My pulse quickened.

“Yeah,” I said. “It’s him.”

For a moment, we sat in tense silence, the weight of Blanton’s presence pressing down on us. Conrad was the first to speak. “What do we do? Confront him?”

“Not here,” I said quickly. “Not in this place.”

Moon tilted her head, considering. “But you want him to know you saw him, right? So he can’t pretend he wasn’t here?”

Holden nodded sharply. “Exactly. And I want to see if my mom is with him—or if they’re with someone else...”

“We go as a group,” I said, my voice firm. “No splitting up.”

Moon raised an eyebrow, her lips curving into a faint smile. “Protective, are we?”

Conrad cleared his throat, leaning casually against the edge of the booth. “Are you sure you want Blanton and Fanny seeing us all...together? You know, with me and Moon? Maybe just one of you wants to take her over there.”

Holden scoffed, his green eyes flashing. “Fuck it. We’re in a sex club. Nobody here gives a fuck if there are three guys and a girl walking around together.”

Conrad hesitated, but Holden didn’t stop. “We all go,” he said, his tone final. “If we’re doing this, we’re doing it as a group.”

Moon’s smile widened, a flicker of mischief in her expression as she pushed off the edge of the booth. “Guess that settles it. Lead the way, boys.”

We rose from the booth as one, moving through the room with a purpose that felt both intentional and improvisational. The space around Blanton’s table seemed to shimmer with tension as we approached, the golden light catching on polished surfaces and glittering jewelry.

I kept my gaze steady, refusing to look away as we passed him. Blanton’s eyes flicked up, his expression unreadable, but the faint tightening of his jaw told me he’d seen us. His gaze lingered on me before shifting to Holden, then to Moon and

Conrad.

We didn't stop, didn't speak, but the message was clear.

We know you're here.

When we reached the far side of the room, Moon let out a slow breath, her shoulders relaxing just slightly. "Well," she said, her voice light but laced with tension. "That was...something."

"Something we'll deal with later," I said, my jaw still tight. "Not here."

Holden nodded, his gaze still fixed on Blanton's table. "But we will deal with it."

We were in deeper now than we'd ever intended to go—and there was no turning back.

The others followed my lead as I took us down one of the long hallways meant for watching. It was darker here, the lighting softer, more focused. Through the arches and open curtains, scenes unfolded: couples and threesomes, their movements brazen and completely unashamed.

"This is a tour," I said over my shoulder, my voice low but edged with banter. "Because Holden likes to watch."

Holden rolled his eyes, but he didn't argue. His steps were steady behind me, even as his gaze flicked toward one of the open rooms, his jaw tightening just slightly.

I wasn't oblivious to the tension thrumming through the group. The adventure of the whole night had left all of us wired, but this—this was something else entirely.

We slowed as we passed one window, where three men were tangled in a stunning display of raw heat. One man was bent forward, gripping the edge of the bed as another drove into him from behind, his hands gripping the other's hips tightly. The man being fucked groaned around the cock in his mouth, his lips stretched as the third man gripped his hair, thrusting into his mouth with measured, relentless intensity. Their bodies moved in perfect sync, each sound and motion feeding the electric pulse in the air.

Conrad walked just behind me, leaned close to Moon, his hand brushing against her hip as they moved together. His voice was low, almost teasing, but thick with something else. "Watching all this," he gestured, "does it get you hot?"

"How could it not?" she murmured. "All that pleasure on display...it makes you wonder what it feels like to be on the other side of the glass."

Moon's lips quirked into a knowing smile, her eyes sliding to the obvious strain in his pants. "I don't need to ask you, Conrad. It's written all over you."

When I glanced back, I caught the faint shift of her hand, toying with the hard line of his bulge. His lips quirked, but he didn't stop her, his eyes fixed on her like he was already planning what would happen next.

I swallowed hard, the heat in my stomach twisting lower as I adjusted my own stride. My body was already reacting, and I knew I wasn't the only one.

"This way," I said, leading them toward the hall with the private rooms. We weren't in a place to be on display tonight. This was something new, and I wasn't about to put us in front of an audience.

The private hall was quieter, the sound of the main room muffled. The soft glow of wall sconces lit the space, and I stopped in front of a door without a satin bow tie on

the knob, pushing it open to reveal a room that felt just as seductive as the rest of the club.

A humongous bed sat high, its dark sheets lush and inviting, surrounded by soft lighting and a mirrored wall that made the space feel even larger. A plush chaise was tucked against the side, along with a small table stocked with essentials—cuffs, silk ties, ropes, lube.

“Let’s get comfortable,” I said, leaning casually against the doorframe as they filed in.

Holden moved to the chaise, his steps slower now, his gaze scanning the room. He sat down, his arms resting on the armrests, his posture calm but coiled, like he was observing every detail.

Conrad and Moon entered together, her laughter soft as Conrad murmured something in her ear. He grinned, his hand catching her wrist as she moved toward the bed.

“I’m thinking we tie you up,” Conrad said, his tone light but full of heat. “Really test your patience tonight.”

Moon’s eyes sparkled with sass as she turned to face him. “You’re assuming I have any patience to begin with.”

I chuckled, stepping further into the room and closing the door behind me. “You wouldn’t need that much. Conrad doesn’t know how to pace himself.”

Conrad shot me a look, but his grin didn’t fade. Instead, his hand reached out, catching my shoulder and pulling me closer. His body pressed against mine, his hand skimming my chest before slipping lower to squeeze.

“Jealous?” Conrad asked, his voice low and teasing, his breath warm against my ear.

“Of you?” I shot back, leaning into him just enough to feel the heat between us. “Not a chance.”

His grin widened, and his other hand caught the back of my neck, pulling me closer until our foreheads almost touched. The tension was playful, but there was heat there too, the kind that made my pulse stutter for half a second before shifting to look for Moon.

From the corner of my eye, I caught Moon slipping toward the chaise where Holden sat. She moved quietly, like she didn’t want to pull attention, her hand brushing his knee as she leaned in close to talk to him. Holden didn’t flinch, didn’t pull away—he just tilted his head toward her, their words too quiet to catch.

It wasn’t long, just a moment, but the way Holden’s shoulders relaxed, the way Moon’s hand lingered lightly on his leg before she stood, said more than anything spoken would have.

I let it settle, watching as she turned and walked back toward us, her gaze locking with mine.

“Moon,” I said, my voice low but steady.

Her smile was small, knowing, as she closed the distance between us. I caught her waist when she reached the bed, pulling her close, my hands settling firmly on her hips.

“Ready to play nice?” I asked, my voice soft but charged.

The corner of her mouth lifted as her eyes flicked between me and Conrad. “Depends.

Can you two behave?"

"Not a chance," Conrad said, his voice rough, the heat in his gaze unmistakable as it lingered on her. "But you wouldn't want us to."

Conrad's hand lingered on Moon's waist, his fingers tracing slow, deliberate circles along the curve of her hip. The air in the room felt thick, buzzing with an unspoken tension that had been simmering between all of us for too long. She turned slightly, her curls spilling over one shoulder, catching the light like burnished bronze. The silver rings on her fingers glinted faintly as her hand grazed his chest, her touch light but full of intent.

I leaned back against the edge of the bed, my grin tugging wider. "You gonna undress her, or are you just planning on drawing circles all night?"

Conrad shot me a look, but he didn't rush. His hands slipped lower, catching the hem of her black leggings. "You're eager." His tone was edged with amusement. "Maybe you'll learn to wait your turn."

"Not likely," I fired back, shrugging off my shirt and tossing it aside. My dick was already hard, jutting out as I stripped off my pants, the cool air making the heat of my skin more pronounced. Moon's eyes flicked to me briefly, her lips curving into a knowing smile, but her attention snapped back to Conrad as he tugged her leggings down her legs, inch by inch.

Her body was stunning, all soft curves and subtle muscle, her skin glowing against the sheer lace of her black bra and matching panties. She stepped out of the leggings gracefully, as she reached for Conrad's belt.

Conrad's hands moved deftly, unhooking her bra and letting it fall away. Her breasts were full, her nipples peaked against the cool air, and he brushed his thumb over one

slowly, watching her reaction. Moon leaned into his touch, her lips parting slightly as her hands worked his belt open, tugging it free before she slid his pants down.

“Let’s see it,” I said, stepping closer. My grin widened as I gestured toward Conrad. “Get that pierced beast out already.”

Conrad snorted softly but obliged, pushing his boxers down to reveal himself. His cock was thick, curved slightly, the gleam of the silver barbell catching the low light. He shifted slightly, standing taller as Moon’s eyes flicked down, her smile growing as her fingers brushed lightly over the piercing.

Behind us, Holden drew in a sharp breath. It wasn’t loud, but it caught all of our attention. I turned, watching as he leaned back in the chaise, his green eyes dark and wide as they moved between Conrad and me. His chest rose and fell slowly, his shirt gone, his hand on his fly.

“Surprised?” I asked, raising an eyebrow. “You didn’t know our quiet nature boy has a thick pierced cock?”

Holden didn’t answer right away, his jaw tightening slightly. Finally, he exhaled, his voice low. “Why would I have known that?”

Moon turned then, her gaze locking onto his, and I could see the shift in her demeanor—a subtle pull of control as she stepped away from Conrad and reached for me. Her hand slid up my chest, her nails dragging lightly over my skin, before she caught my erection in her hand, stroking me slowly as her other hand reached for Conrad.

“Come here.” Her voice was warm but commanding. Conrad stepped closer, and her hand found him too, her fingers curling around the thick length of him, her thumb brushing deliberately over the piercing on his tip.

She didn't look at either of us. Her gaze stayed locked on Holden, her lips curving into a small, knowing smile as she worked both of us over. Her movements were slow at first, delicate, her fingers gliding over the slick heat of our skin, but there was a purpose in the way she moved, a deliberate show meant just as much for him as it was for us.

Holden's hand moved to his bulge, undoing the button and pushing his fly down enough to free himself. His cock was already hard, flushed as he gripped himself, his strokes slow but steady. His green eyes stayed locked on Moon, his expression tight but filled with heat as he watched her hands move over me and Conrad.

"You like watching," I said, my voice low and edged with heat. "But how long are you planning to sit on the sidelines?"

"As long as I want," Holden shot back, his voice steadier than I expected. His gaze didn't waver, his hand stroking himself in measured rhythm, his breath hitching faintly as Moon's movements quickened.

I hadn't really thought about it before—I had been with Moon and Conrad, and I had been with Moon and Holden. But Holden and Conrad, childhood best friends, had never done anything like this together before. I wondered if they'd be cool with it.

Conrad groaned softly, his hips shifting slightly as Moon's grip tightened on him, her fingers teasing over the barbell. "He can watch," Conrad breathed, his voice rough, edged with pleasure. His gaze flicked to Holden, unreadable but charged. "But I wonder how long he'll last before he stops pretending that's enough."

Moon laughed softly, her gaze still locked on Holden as she leaned in slightly, her breath warm against my chest. "He'll join us soon enough," she said, her tone full of promise. Her hand pumped me faster now, her other hand dragging down Conrad's length in perfect rhythm.

The air in the room felt impossibly heavy, every sound amplified—the soft, slick slide of skin, the low hum of breathless anticipation, the quiet but unmistakable charge of everything we were building toward. And none of us were holding back.

Holden crossed the room, the tension in his movements unmissable. His body was lean but strong, his green eyes dark with something deeper now. Moon sat on the edge of the bed, her curls spilling over her bare shoulders, her legs parted just enough to invite him closer. She reached for him, her hands curling around his neck as she pulled him down, her rings cool against his skin.

The kiss started slow, but the heat between them built quickly. Her legs wrapped around his waist, pulling him flush against her as her hands moved to his chest, her fingers tracing the hard lines of muscle. His hands found her thighs, squeezing as he leaned further into her, his body taut with need.

Conrad and I moved instinctively, climbing onto the bed on either side of her. My hand brushed Conrad's briefly as we settled in, but he didn't seem to notice. His attention was locked on Moon, as he leaned in to press his lips to her breast.

I mirrored him, taking the other, my tongue flicking over her nipple as she moaned softly against Holden's lips. Her back arched slightly, pressing herself into us, and I let my teeth graze the sensitive peak just enough to make her shiver.

"God," she breathed, her voice soft but thick with want. Her hand slid up to tangle in my hair, her nails scraping lightly against my scalp as I sucked harder, her hips shifting against Holden's.

He pulled back just enough to catch his breath, his lips swollen from the kiss. For a second, he looked like he wasn't sure where to go next, but Moon didn't give him a chance to hesitate. She leaned back onto the bed, her curls fanning out around her, her legs parting further as she tilted her hips toward him.

“Come here,” she murmured, her voice low and inviting.

Holden dropped to his knees between her thighs, his hands sliding up the smooth length of her legs until his thumbs brushed the soft skin on either side of her core. He leaned down, his breath warm against her as he kissed her inner thigh, moving slowly closer.

I shifted to her side, leaning down to kiss her neck, my teeth grazing the curve of her jaw as my hand trailed down to her breast. Conrad mirrored me, his lips pressing to her collarbone as his hand skimmed over her stomach.

Holden’s tongue flicked out to trace the edges of her pussy, teasing the sensitive folds before delving deeper, like he was savoring every bit of her. Moon gasped, her body squirming against his touch, but he didn’t rush. He pressed her thighs apart, keeping her open for him, his tongue dragging from her entrance to her clit and back again, teasing her with feather-light strokes.

I leaned back against the headboard, watching as his tongue worked her, slow and unrelenting, his lips brushing over her swollen folds like he was tasting something he’d been craving for days. Fuck, I remembered exactly what that tongue could do—how he’d licked and sucked me until I couldn’t breathe, couldn’t think. Watching him now, seeing how focused he was on her, I felt my cock throb with fresh heat.

Moon let out a soft cry as Holden shifted, circling her clit with his fingers while his tongue plunged inside her, stroking her in deep, rhythmic motions. Her hands tangled in his hair, pulling him closer as her thighs trembled, her body already arching off the bed. “Oh my god, Holden.” A choked moan fell from her lips. “Don’t stop.”

“Goddamn,” Conrad exclaimed beside me, his gaze flicking between Moon and Holden. “Does he always go this hard?”

I smirked, my hand brushing over Moon's knee as I kept watching. "Uh yeah...that tongue is dangerous."

Conrad's eyes widened slightly, his brow furrowing as he turned to me. "Wait. You two...?"

Before I could answer, Moon let out a sharp cry as Holden pulled his tongue out of her and sucked her clit into his mouth, his fingers still circling her with maddening precision. Her whole body jerked, her hands clutching the sheets as she screamed his name, the sound raw and desperate.

"You want a hand, Holden?" I asked, my voice light but laced with arousal as I shifted closer to Moon.

He didn't even look up, his focus completely on her. Instead, he slid two fingers into her, the wet sound of him plunging inside her making me leak as I stroked myself slowly. He sucked on her clit harder, his fingers thrusting in time with the strokes of his tongue, and Moon's cries turned into breathless moans.

"I think I'm—I think he's going to make me—" Moon's words broke off into a gasp, her body trembling violently beneath him. Her hands flew to her face, her voice high and shaking. "Oh my god. I think it's going to happen again."

Conrad and I exchanged a glance, both of us clearly unsure what she meant, but Holden seemed to know. He doubled down, his tongue working her clit in fast, relentless flicks while his fingers curled inside her, pressing against something that made her gasp even louder. Her thighs shook as her hips bucked wildly against his face, and then it happened.

A sharp cry tore from her throat, her body jerking hard as a rush of liquid spilled from her, soaking Holden's hand. He didn't stop, his tongue still lapping at her clit as her

release overwhelmed her, every muscle in her body tightening as her orgasm crashed over her.

“Holy shit,” I rasped, my voice thick with disbelief and awe as I watched her soak him, her body convulsing with raw, uncontrollable pleasure.

Conrad’s jaw dropped slightly, his gaze locked on Moon, who was still trembling, her chest heaving as she tried to catch her breath. “Jesus,” he said softly, shaking his head. “I’ve never seen that before.”

Holden finally pulled back, his face glistening as he looked up at her with a satisfied grin. “Anything’s possible if you know what you’re doing,” he said, his voice low and rough.

Moon let out a shaky laugh. “Holden, I’m not done yet,” she moaned, her voice breathy, her hands curling into the sheets. “I want you inside me.”

Holden stood up, his hands gripping her hips tightly as he guided himself forward. The head of his cock, flushed and glistening, pressed against her pussy, the slick heat of her making him groan softly. She gasped, her hips tilting up to meet him, her thighs trembling as he pushed in slowly, the thick crown of him stretching her inch by inch.

“Fuck,” Holden groaned, his jaw tightening as he eased deeper. Her body took him perfectly, and he stilled for a moment, his cock buried inside her, his breath coming fast and uneven.

Moon moaned beneath Holden, her hands gripping the sheets as she arched up into him. “Come on, Heathcliff,” she gasped, her voice trembling with need. “Fuck me hard.”

Holden's jaw tightened, and I watched as he pulled back slowly, dragging it out, the slick glide of his cock working a measured rhythm. He left just the tip inside her, teasing her, before slamming back in hard enough to make her cry out. Moon's hands shot out blindly, her nails digging into Conrad's arm where he knelt beside her, his calm presence steadying her even as his free hand cupped her breast, his thumb circling her nipple.

Conrad murmured something to her, too soft for me to catch, but my focus stayed on Holden. The way his shoulders flexed with every thrust, the sheen of sweat forming along the sharp planes of his back—it was hypnotic. Watching him like this, so lost in her, sent a jolt straight to my cock.

“Fuck this. I'm leaking all over myself just watching,” I said, as I pushed off the bed and made my way behind Holden. My grin widened as I raised a hand and slapped his ass, the sharp crack making him jerk. “

“What the fuck, bro,” Holden shot out with surprise. His thrusts faltered slightly, his green eyes flicking up to meet mine. I smirked, stepping behind him, and before he could say anything, I nestled my cock, slick and heavy, against his ass.

“Don't stop,” I said, my voice low and rough. “Keep going. I'm just joining the party.”

His face was flushed, his breaths uneven, but the way he shuddered told me he wasn't exactly complaining.

“Relax,” I said, grinning as I grabbed his hips, my cock already slick with pre-cum as I pressed it between his cheeks. “Don't worry, I'm not trying to fuck you. Just gonna grind a little—let you feel me.”

He hesitated for a split second before driving into Moon again, harder this time, the

sound of her cry sending another jolt of heat through me. I thrust against him, my cock sliding between his cheeks, the friction making him groan. “Fuuuck,” he let out, his voice breaking as I rocked my hips, pushing him deeper into her with every movement.

“That’s it.” I leaned closer, my lips brushing against his ear. “Feel that? I grind into you, you thrust into her.”

Holden let out a low curse, his rhythm faltering as I rubbed myself against him again, pushing him harder into Moon. Her cries grew louder, her hips meeting his thrusts as she arched into him. “Oh my god,” she gasped, her voice high and desperate. “Yes—just like that. Don’t fucking stop.”

I couldn’t help but grin, the heat and tension between us making my pulse race. “Look at her,” I said, my hands tightening on Holden’s hips as I drove forward again, my cock pressing against him. “She’s falling apart for you. And you’re fucking loving it.”

Holden groaned, his head tipping back as his thrusts grew faster, more erratic. “I can’t—” he started, his voice tight, but I cut him off with another roll of my hips, the weight of my cock pushing him deeper into her.

“You want more, baby girl?” Conrad asked as he shifted at the foot of the bed, his broad shoulders flexing as he leaned in. His tongue flicked out, catching Moon’s clit in a lazy, wet lick. Her entire body jerked in response, her moan breaking into something breathless and raw.

Holden froze for a moment, his green eyes snapping to Conrad, wide and full of something that wasn’t quite panic but wasn’t far from it.

“Conrad,” he started, his voice catching.

Conrad ignored him completely, his mouth pressing more firmly against Moon, his tongue circling her clit as if nothing else in the room mattered. She bucked against him, her body writhing as Holden started to move again, his thrusts sharper now, more desperate. I watched it all, my cock throbbing as I took in the way Holden's body tightened with each stroke, the way Moon's thighs trembled around him, her hips grinding up into his.

For a split second, I let my gaze drift lower, where Conrad's tongue moved so close to where Holden's cock was sliding in and out of her. The wet sounds of it, the way their bodies moved together, was enough to make my pulse stutter. Conrad could shift just a little, his mouth could slide lower, and his tongue would be teasing over Holden too. The image burned into my mind, raw and vivid, but I knew it wasn't time for that. Holden wasn't ready.

Instead, I focused on Moon, the way her head tilted back, her curls spilling over the pillows, her skin flushed and gleaming with sweat. Holden groaned, his movements faltering slightly as her walls tightened around him. His green eyes fluttered shut, his head tilting back as his grip on her hips tightened.

"Fuck, Moon," Holden ground out, his voice raw and desperate as his thrusts faltered. "You feel so fucking good—I can't—fuck, I'm gonna bust."

His hips jerked forward, burying himself deep inside her as his body tensed. I watched his cock pulse, the thick head still buried just inside Moon's folds. A guttural moan tore from his throat, as he spilled inside her, hot and thick. Her legs trembled against his hips, her breath catching as he stilled, shuddering through his climax. Moon gasped, her body arching into him as her nails clawed at the sheets, but her cries still carried an edge of need. She wasn't finished yet. He pulled out slowly, and a slick pool of his cum followed, spilling out of her and glistening against her flushed skin. Conrad groaned softly at the sight.

The sight of his cum spilling from her made my cock throb, but when he leaned back, his cheeks flushed as he avoided looking at either of us. His gaze dropped to Conrad, who was on his knees at the edge of the bed, his face slick from where he'd been devouring her clit. "Don't worry," I teased, slapping Holden lightly on the ass. "There are three of us to pleasure her."

I stepped back reluctantly, pulling my cock from between Holden's cheeks. The slick friction and heat of his ass had been driving me insane, but I let him go, and he now went to lie on Moon's side as Conrad had before. Holden muttered something under his breath, his face still red as he shifted to the side.

Conrad stood, brushing the back of his hand across his glistening lips with a smirk. "Time for a trade," Conrad said, his voice low as he moved to take Holden's place. "She's dripping with you, man."

"Fuck, Moon, you're so good and wet after Holden," Conrad said as he positioned himself between her legs. His cock was hard and ready as he pressed forward, the barbell glistening through his tip as he pushed into her with one smooth thrust. His girth stretched her again, and I caught the way her body arched beneath him, her moan spilling into the air as he filled her completely. Holden's cum slicked the way, and Conrad's hips rolled, driving deeper as he let out a low groan.

I got up on the bed and knelt beside Moon, my hand brushing over her cheek as I leaned down. "Think you can handle more?" I asked, my voice low but edged with heat.

Her lips curved into a small, eager smile, her breathless "Yes" barely more than a whisper. That was all the invitation I needed.

I rose to my knees, moving to angle myself at the side of her head as I guided my cock to her mouth. Her lips parted eagerly, and the warmth of her tongue sent a jolt of

pleasure through me as she took me in. I groaned softly, my hand tangling in her curls as I guided her, her mouth working me with a fervor that made my pulse hammer.

Conrad's rhythm grew steady, his thrusts deep and deliberate as his hands gripped her thighs, holding her open for him. Moon's moans vibrated against my cock, her sounds muffled but filled with raw need as she took both of us. Her body writhed beneath us, her hips grinding against Conrad as he drove into her.

Holden moved to Moon's side, his hand sliding between her legs to find her clit again. He pressed against the swollen bud, his movements slow but firm, drawing another sharp cry from her that reverberated through my body. I glanced down, catching the way his fingers moved, the focus in his expression as he watched her come undone again.

Conrad's hips snapped forward, his cock disappearing into her, wet and slick with both their releases. Moon's body arched sharply, her moans growing louder as the sensations overwhelmed her.

"Your mouth is nirvana," I murmured, my thumb brushing over her cheek as I pushed deeper into her mouth. She sucked me harder, her eyes fluttering open to meet mine, the heat in her gaze sending another surge of pleasure through me.

Conrad's groans deepened, his thrusts becoming erratic as he chased his release, his hands tightening on her hips. Holden's fingers worked her clit in perfect rhythm, his eyes finding mine briefly before returning to Moon, the shared heat between all of us pulling tighter, more intense.

Conrad's pace became frenzied, his thrusts sharp and deep as his hands tightened on Moon's thighs. The muscles in his back flexed with each snap of his hips, and the wet sounds of their bodies moving together filled the room. Moon's moans were high and breathless, her body trembling as she writhed beneath him.

Conrad's groans turned guttural, his head tilting back as his rhythm faltered. But then, on a particularly sharp thrust, his cock slipped free as he pulled back, slick and glistening, as his hips bucked forward. His tip pushed up into Holden's hand, the contact startling both of them.

"Shit." Conrad froze for half a second, his eyes looking up at Holden's. Holden's hand stilled, his green eyes wide with a mix of shock and something unreadable as his thumb rested against Conrad for a fraction of a second before pulling back.

Neither of them moved at first, the moment stretched and heavy, until Conrad broke the tension with a low groan. He pushed back down, sliding into Moon again with a single hard thrust, burying himself deep as his head fell forward.

"Fuck," he ground out, his hands gripping her thighs hard enough to leave faint marks. His entire body tensed, the muscles in his neck straining as he came with a massive, shuddering release. Moon's body arched beneath him, her cries echoing through the room as his cock pulsed inside her, spilling ropes deep inside her.

Her moaning sent a jolt through me, her lips still wrapped around my cock as her cries vibrated against my skin. My hand tangled in her curls, my breath shuddered as the heat spiraled tighter, sharp and overwhelming.

"Moon," I groaned, my hips pressing forward as her tongue pressed firmly against me. Her moans grew louder, her body trembling under Conrad's weight as her hips rolled instinctively. That was all it took. The tension coiled low in my stomach snapped, and I came hard, my cum spilling into her mouth in hot, pulsing bursts.

She didn't falter, her lips and tongue working me through every pulse, her gaze flicking up to meet mine as her hands gripped my thighs. The sight of her like that, so eager and perfect, left me trembling, my breath caught in my throat.

The room fell quiet except for the sound of our ragged breathing, the heat between us still thick and lingering. Holden's hand slid back to Moon's thigh, his fingers brushing over her skin gently as he leaned forward slightly, his face flushed and his expression unreadable.

"Jesus, that was a sin, a prayer, and a fucking revelation all at once." Conrad let out, finally leaning back slightly as his hands loosened their grip on Moon. His cock glistened, still thick and flushed as he pulled out slowly, his release pooling out of her.

Moon's body trembled, her head resting against the pillows. Her lips curved into a wide, satisfied smile, and I couldn't help but grin back, the heat still simmering low in my stomach, the sight of her wrecked and radiant arousing me all over again.

Holden was still beside Moon, his chest rising and falling as he caught his breath. I caught the flicker of tension in his face, his green eyes darting between us, and then to Moon, sprawled out beneath Conrad, her skin flushed and glowing. His gaze lingered on the slick mess where Conrad had been inside her, and I could see the way his jaw tightened, his restraint fraying at the edges.

HOLDEN

I leaned back against the headboard, my chest still rising and falling from earlier, trying to stay composed as I watched them. Moon was glowing, her skin flushed and her hair wild, and the sounds she had made were enough to send a fresh wave of heat through me. Not to mention watching Hendrix, his cock heavy and slick as she had sucked on him. The sight of them together, the wet sounds of her mouth and the way his hips rolled into her, made it impossible for me to stay unaffected.

My cock twitched against my thigh, hardening, and I bit my lip as I shifted, trying to ignore it. But the pressure kept building, the dull ache sharpening as the base thickened first, the skin tightening and smoothing as I swelled, the weight of it pulling against me. My breath hitched as the ache deepened, my length hardening inch by inch until the head began to swell, the skin there stretched taut and painfully sensitive.

No one had touched me, but I was rock hard again, my cock standing rigid against my stomach. My dick throbbed, wanting attention, and I clenched my fists against the sheets, willing myself to hold back. Moon's pussy had drowned me, but fuck if I wasn't up and swimming again.

"Got a boner again?" Hendrix teased, shifting closer.

Conrad turned his head slightly, his gaze flicking over me. His lips curled into a knowing smirk. "You need to come again, bro," he said, his voice calm but laced

with heat.

Moon looked up, her lips glistening as she eyed my erection. “I think he does,” she murmured, as she crawled toward me. Her hand trailed up my thigh, her nails grazing the sensitive skin, but she stopped just short of where I wanted her, teasing my V with her fingertips. “Let’s see how long you can last this time,” she said with a roguish glint.

I groaned, my hips jerking upward as her fingers brushed over my pubic hair, the light pressure making my cock jerk.

Hendrix chuckled, his fingers brushing lightly over my thigh as he glanced at Moon. “You’re playing a wicked game with him,” he said, his voice low and mischievous. “But you should make him beg properly.”

Moon’s gaze flicked to Hendrix, her smile devilish. “Then help me,” she said softly, her tone calm but leaving no room for question. “Touch him, but only where I say. For right now, I think you should play with his balls.”

Hendrix’s grin widened as he knelt at my other side, his fingers grazing the inside of my thigh before cupping my balls. He rolled them gently in his palm, his movements deliberate and controlled. “You’re trembling, Holden.” His tone was teasing but obedient to her command. “Tell us how it feels.”

“I’m sensitive as fuck and you teasing me feels good, but I need more,” my breath hitched, my voice unsteady. Moon moved with quiet authority, grabbing a sheer scarf from the nightstand. She held it up, letting the fabric flutter lightly between her fingers before trailing it over my chest, brushing so lightly it was almost maddening.

“Please,” I muttered, my hands fisting the sheets, my voice raw with desperation. “Do something. I can’t?—”

Her soft laugh sent another shiver through me as she lowered the scarf, letting it drift over the head of my cock. The sensation was maddening—a barely-there touch that sent a sharp jolt of pleasure through me, tightening the ache that already had me shaking. “Oh god,” I moaned, my hips thrusting into the air, desperate for more contact. “Please—don’t tease me.”

“Don’t move,” Moon said, her voice steady but gentle, her smile wicked as she flicked the scarf again. “Let me decide when you get more.”

Hendrix’s fingers tightened slightly on my balls, squeezing lightly before rolling them again, his other hand hovering just above my groin, waiting for her next instruction. Moon’s gaze dropped to him, and she gave the faintest nod. “Now lower,” she said. “Brush his seam.”

Hendrix obeyed, his thumb pressing against the sensitive skin below my balls, circling slowly as my thighs trembled. “They’re so full.” His voice dripped with satisfaction. “Feels like he’s ready to burst.”

The scarf swept over my tip again, soaking up the slick pre-cum as Moon dragged it lightly along the ridge, brushing the sensitive spot until I cried out. Hendrix pressed his thumb lower, circling the edge of my hole without slipping in, and the tension coiled impossibly tighter, every nerve screaming for release.

“Please,” I begged, my voice raw and shaking. “Please, I need—oh fuck?—”

Moon’s eyes stayed locked on me, her movements measured as the scarf flicked over my tip one more time, the sensation sharp and overwhelming. And then Hendrix’s fingers pressed against my asshole, rubbing slow, maddening circles that sent shocks of pleasure through me, the pressure pushing me right to the edge.

“Should I let you come, Holden?” she mused, her voice sultry and unhurried. “Or

should I keep you right here, trembling for me?”

A desperate whimper tore from my throat, my body arching into the friction, into the heat of Hendrix’s fingers pressing slow, maddening circles against my asshole. “Fuck—please, Moon. Let me come, I can’t—I need it, please.”

“Come then, give it to me—every last drop.”

My entire body arched off the bed, a guttural cry tearing from my throat as the dam broke. My cock jerked violently, spilling thick, hot ropes of cum into the sheer fabric. The heat splattered across my stomach, the sticky streaks soaking through the scarf as Moon held it steady, satisfaction written all over her face.

“Goddamn,” Hendrix exclaimed, his hand sliding away as I collapsed against the bed, trembling. “You came without us even working your dick.”

Moon grinned, holding up the scarf, now wet and glistening with my release. “Who knew you liked scarves so much,” she said softly, her voice laced with amusement. “You’re incredible, Holden. So responsive.”

I let out a shaky laugh, my chest still heaving as I tried to catch my breath. “That was...fuck, that was insane.”

“And you loved every second of it,” Conrad said smoothly, his tone dripping with approval. “I would too, having Moon play domme and edging me into oblivion. That was sexy as fuck.”

The warm weight of Moon’s gaze drew my attention, and when I managed to lift my head, I saw her watching me with a soft, satisfied smile, her fingers trailing lazily up her chest.

Conrad's hand slid lower on her hip, his grip firm but unhurried as he pressed a kiss to her neck. His lips brushed her ear, and she tilted her head back against his chest, her curls spilling over his shoulder like a cascade of chocolate. She melted into him, her body soft and pliant as his hand skimmed down her side to her thigh. I swallowed hard, my chest tightening at the sight. She looked perfect there, her body curved against his, her lips parting as his mouth moved along her neck.

My breath hitched as Hendrix shifted beside me, his body warm where it pressed against mine. His hand eased away from my thigh, his palm still hot from where he'd gripped me moments ago. He leaned in close, his lips brushing against my ear as he murmured, "You knew we'd take care of you."

I turned my head slightly, my green eyes meeting his for a moment. There was something knowing in his gaze, something that felt sharp but steady, grounding me even as the rest of me trembled. I held his gaze just long enough to feel the heat of it before my attention was pulled back to Moon.

The room buzzed with heat, the air heavy with everything we'd done, everything we'd said without words. I leaned back slightly, letting the moment settle over me like a weightless blanket, a haze of heat and contentment. The promise of more hung in the air, making my skin prickle, and I couldn't help but close my eyes for a moment, letting myself get lost in it.

The haze of last night lingered, a blur of heat and whispered confessions that left my mind spinning long after we'd finally collapsed into bed. Sleep had been fleeting—too many thoughts, too many sensations still buzzing under my skin—but morning had come anyway, dragging me into the harsh light of reality. The dull fatigue from staying up most of the night clung to me as my phone buzzed on the coffee table, pulling me out of my restless thoughts. I grabbed a mug of coffee from the kitchen and plopped down on the sofa next to Hendrix, who barely glanced up from the guitar he was lazily strumming.

Just as I was taking a sip of coffee, I saw a notification pop up on my screen. Hendrix's phone buzzed on the coffee table at the same time. I looked down at the text Blanton had sent to both of us.

Blanton

Looking forward to seeing you boys tonight for dinner. Is Conrad coming too? Lots to discuss.

I sighed, tossing my phone onto the couch as Hendrix leaned over to glance at the screen. "We're being summoned."

Hendrix glanced at the message, smirking. "Think this is about last night?"

"Safe bet." I typed back a quick response.

Conrad's tied up with a school project. Just us.

The reply came almost immediately:

See you at 6.

By the time we arrived, the late afternoon light bathed the house in a golden glow, the azaleas in the front garden still vibrant from the recent rains. Blanton and Fanny's Victorian home was as picturesque as ever, its wide, wraparound porch dotted with wicker chairs and hanging ferns that swayed in the breeze. A glass pitcher of iced tea sat on the small table by the door, condensation pooling at its base.

Inside, the rich scent of fried shrimp hit me immediately, mingling with the warmth of butter and spices. "You're just in time," my mom called from the kitchen, her tone light and welcoming. "Shrimp's coming off the stove. We've got hushpuppies,

coleslaw, and a big skillet of succotash, so I hope you brought your appetites.”

“Smells amazing,” Hendrix said, leaning against the counter to grab a piece of shrimp from the plate. Fanny swatted at his hand, but her smile softened the gesture.

Blanton appeared from the dining room, a shaker in one hand and a grin on his face. “You boys want a bourbon rickey?” he asked, pouring a stream of fizzy liquid into two glasses. He handed one to Fanny, who accepted it with a nod of approval. “It’s good—light and crisp.”

“Why not,” Hendrix said, shrugging. “Might as well start strong.”

I took the glass Blanton handed me, the mix of bourbon, lime, and soda water sharp and refreshing on my tongue. “Not bad,” I admitted. “Better than your usual ‘small-batch bourbon straight’ spiel.”

Blanton raised his glass in cheers. “Even I like to mix it up now and then.”

“Apparently,” Hendrix smirked, unable to contain himself. I looked away shaking my head, squeezing my laughter shut before making a scene.

Our dining room was warm and inviting as always, the mahogany table polished to perfection and set with my mom’s best china. A platter piled high with golden-fried shrimp took center stage, flanked by bowls of hushpuppies, coleslaw, and a vibrant succotash speckled with fresh corn and lima beans. The smell alone was enough to make my stomach growl.

Hendrix and I were quiet at first, focusing on the food, but it didn’t take long for Blanton to steer the conversation toward the inevitable. He leaned back in his chair, his bourbon rickey resting in one hand. “So,” he began, his tone casual but deliberate. “Let’s talk about last night.”

Hendrix set his fork down, meeting Blanton's gaze evenly. "Okay. So?"

"I'd start with what you were doing there," Blanton said, his voice light but pointed. "The Silver Vine isn't exactly a college hangout."

"We go to lots of different bars and clubs downtown. What were you doing there?" I shot back, my voice sharper than I intended.

My mom chuckled softly, breaking the tension. "Look, it's not some terrible secret, boys. Blanton and I go there sometimes. We've...cultivated certain freedoms in our marriage. What we do there is private, but we're not ashamed of it."

Hendrix raised an eyebrow. "And the guy you were with?"

Blanton's expression didn't falter, but his fingers tapped against his glass. "Lucien is a business associate. And a friend."

"Interesting friend." Hendrix's voice was laced with skepticism as he leaned back in his chair.

Blanton didn't take the bait. "What's your interest in him?"

"We've seen him before," I said, keeping my voice measured. "He's...hard to miss."

Blanton nodded slowly, his gaze sharpening. "Lucien can be intense. Our dealings with him are professional. And, occasionally, social."

The room fell silent for a moment, the air heavy with unspoken questions. Fanny finally broke it, her voice light but curious. "Now, what about you two? Is there someone in your life we should know about?"

Hendrix glanced at me, and I hesitated before answering. “Yeah,” I said. “There is. Her name’s Moon.”

“Moon,” she repeated, her smile widening as she leaned forward slightly, her curiosity evident. “That’s a lovely artistic name. Tell me about her.”

“Well, she’s from Asheville,” Hendrix said. “She came to Charleston for the theatre program at CSAL. She’s studying musical theatre.”

“She’s really good,” I added. “We just saw her in Cabaret. She’s an amazing singer and dancer.”

Fanny’s smile brightened. “Musical theatre? How exciting. I’d love to see her perform.”

“Yeah, I actually met her at an open mic night. Her friend bailed, and she needed guitar backup,” Hendrix shared. “And Holden—well, I guess he can tell you,” he trailed off.

“I met her first. In the poetry section at Press. We both attended the book club there.”

“You went to a book club, Holden?” Fanny asked with a surprised smile.

“Well, I went to meet Moon. And Moon went to book club. So, ya know...”

Blanton, who had been quietly sipping his bourbon rickey, glanced up. “I have some friends who are patrons of the theatre program at CSAL,” he said. “She could meet them at the gala. It might be good for her to make those connections.”

Hendrix nodded. “She’d probably like that.”

“So...are you guys all friends, or...what’s the deal?” Fanny asked, her expression open and curious.

I glanced at Hendrix, who gave me a faint nod. “She’s...with both of us,” Hendrix said carefully. “And with Conrad.”

Fanny’s eyes widened briefly, surprise flickering across her face before she composed herself. “All three of you?”

“Yeah,” I admitted, my face flushed, feeling the weight of her gaze. “We’re still figuring it out. It’s...complicated.”

Fanny’s smile returned, warmer now, her eyes alight with intrigue. “Well, any girl who can capture the interest of all three of my boys must be someone special. I’d love to meet her.”

“You will,” Hendrix said, his voice steady. “Eventually.”

“How about next Sunday?” she suggested. “Bring her to dinner. And to the gala at the gallery—it’s about time she met the family.”

I exchanged a glance with Hendrix, his brow furrowing just slightly. “We’ll ask her,” I said finally, knowing there was no easy way to refuse.

Blanton set his glass down with a faint smile. “And how do you boys feel about this...arrangement?”

“It’s new,” Hendrix said, his tone guarded but honest. “We care about her—and each other. We’re figuring it out.”

Fanny’s gaze softened, her smile warm. “Love doesn’t always fit neatly into boxes.

As long as you're all happy and kind to one another, that's what matters."

Blanton raised his glass, his expression measured. "To new additions," he said. "And navigating...complicated dynamics."

We clinked glasses, the ringing shrill in the quiet air, and as I sipped the last of my drink, I couldn't help but feel that this was just the beginning of the questions we'd have to answer.

I was still reeling from the revelations at dinner by the time I crashed on the couch, phone in hand. Hendrix was pacing around the room, tossing out bits of commentary as we tried to figure out how to explain the evening to Moon and Conrad.

We defaulted to the comfort of our chaotic group chat—because when your family dinner involved revealing the name of a shadowy man from a sex club and introducing your unconventional poly relationship to your parents, texting just seemed easier.

Holden

So...we told Fanny and Blanton about you, Moon.

Moon

told is a vague word

what exactly did you say?

Hendrix

that you're with us

and conrad

Moon

...and?

Fanny wants you at family dinner next Sunday. Also the gala at the gallery.

Moon

am I being summoned!?

we haven't even met yet

Hendrix

she called you "special"

she thinks it's time you met the family

Moon

it's giving godfather

Well I think she can't wait to have some female company. She's used to a total bro fest.

Conrad

and she fuckin loves it...but she'll love you too, moon

Hendrix plopped onto the couch beside me, smirking as he typed.

Hendrix

my dad was mostly cool about it

Moon

mostly?

He asked how we felt about the “arrangement”

his words, not mine

Moon

classic. what did you say?

Hendrix

that we’re figuring it out and we all care about each other

Moon

aww that’s so genuine and wholesome coming from you

so you didn’t say anything about us all fucking, right?

Jesus fuck no.

I don’t use the word ‘fucking’ with my mom.

Moon

yeah yeah well why be prude when we saw them at a sex club

Oof true, but no we didn't go into the nuts and bolts.

Conrad

nuts and bolts lol

Moon

I like your nuts and your bolts

Smh you're ridiculous.

Conrad

wait, back up

what about the guy?? the one at the club

did they say who he was

Yeah. Lucien.

Conrad

that's it? no last name?

Hendrix

nope just lucien

dad said he's a business associate and a friend

Moon

“friend” lol

Conrad

with benefits clearly

Moon

I mean, good for them, I guess?

but this guy seems sketchy af

Hendrix

my dad was very careful about how he talked about him

Moon

also what am I supposed to wear to family dinner!?!?

Hendrix

something classy casual

My mom loves a good Southern Belle moment.

Moon

yeah okay okay but how about the gala at the gallery

do I wear I cocktail dress?

A minute later, Moon's name popped up with an attachment.

Moon

what about this?

She'd sent a photo of herself in a slinky cocktail dress that looked like it had been poured onto her. The fabric was a deep, shimmery midnight blue, clinging to her curves and dipping low enough to see her breast bone with her round perky tits scooped to either side.

Hendrix

jesus

thanks for the boner

that'll work

Conrad

that dress is HOT

but naked is hotter

Before any of us could respond, another photo appeared in the chat—this one sent by Conrad. Moon, lying back on her bed, nothing on but a cascade of chocolate-brown curls spilling over her shoulders. The sunlight through the window softened the edges of her form, but it didn't hide a damn thing.

Moon

CONRAD

Delete that

Hendrix

thanks for the orgasm

We're not deleting that.

Moon

Well I expect some sexy pics back from y'all

Hendrix

let's be real no dick pic is gonna be as sexy as you all sprawled out with a thoroughly fucked flush

It took a few minutes for the chaos to settle before Conrad dragged the conversation back to Lucien.

Conrad

back to the point

what do we know about this lucien guy?

Nothing yet. But I think we need to dig into it.

Moon

agreed, we should start with James' art

we gotta figure out the meanings of those symbols and clues

Hendrix

we've got the photos conrad took at the studio, let's start piecing it together

Conrad

and if we don't find anything there?

Then we go deeper. Follow the clues. Whatever Lucien's into, it's connected to whatever James was leaving hints about.

Moon

maybe we should start tracking down the locations in the paintings

we know the alley by the silver vine but we should try to figure out the others

Conrad

yeah definitely

Hendrix

and i wanna figure out what the fuck that crow and key symbol is

Moon

for sure

time to play detective y'all

The conversation slowed as we mapped out a rough plan: dig deeper into James' art, research Lucien and the symbol, and—somehow—get through family dinner and a public gala without causing a scandal. The group chat fizzled into playful chaos again, but I couldn't help feeling the weight of what we were stepping into. Lucien, James' art, The Silver Vine —every piece was starting to feel like part of a larger, darker puzzle. And somehow, Moon had become the brightest point in all of it.

MOON

Dinner at Fanny and Blanton's had felt like stepping into another world. The soft hues of dusk settled over the porch as we gathered with cocktails and hors d'oeuvres—a chilled bourbon peach smash garnished with a sprig of mint and delicate pimento cheese tartlets topped with a hint of sweet pepper jelly. Dinner itself was an elegant southern spread: herb-crusted pork tenderloin, blackened shrimp over creamy grits, and roasted vegetables with a honey glaze. And the easy banter between Conrad, Hendrix, Holden, and their parents—it all carried a sense of familiarity and belonging that wasn't mine. But for a night, I let myself pretend it was.

Fanny had been exactly as I imagined: elegant, warm, and endlessly charming. Her chestnut bob framed her face, with streaks of silver lending her an air of timeless sophistication. She was dressed in a cream linen blouse and flowing pants that suited the Lowcountry heat, her pearl earrings catching the light every time she turned her head. "Moon," she said, pulling me into a hug before I could even process the moment. "You're even prettier than I imagined." Her gaze traveled over me, her smile soft but appraising. "I love your style—just the right amount of artsy and edgy. Your earrings and necklace; did you get them from a local artisan?"

I touched the large custom pendant around my neck. It had amethyst, rose quartz, tanzanite, and aquamarine, each stone embedded in raw silver, hanging from a delicate box chain that rested just below my collarbone. I had on my matching chunky silver earrings, each with a different stone.

“My mom’s an artist—she works with silver and stones. She made these for me.”

“I love that you carry her work with you. It suits you perfectly,” Fanny said, her tone light but full of sincerity.

Her kindness disarmed me. It was rare for me to feel nervous, but something about the evening—the pressure of meeting Blanton and Fanny, the weight of how much their approval mattered to the boys—had me unsteady. But Fanny’s warmth cut through my nerves, and soon I found myself seated at their dining room table, laughing at Hendrix’s dry quips and Holden’s quieter, thoughtful remarks.

At one point, after a round of banter about Blanton’s bourbon rickeys, Fanny leaned toward me, her voice soft enough to keep the conversation just between us. “So,” she said, her gaze curious, “how did you end up here? The boys said you’re from Asheville, right?”

I smiled, feeling the familiar tug of homesickness at her question. “I came for the theatre program at CSAL,” I said. “Musical theatre, specifically. But honestly? I just needed a change. I love Asheville, but Charleston...it’s given me space to grow.”

Fanny’s hand settled lightly on mine. “I can see that,” she said, her smile widening. “Hendrix mentioned you were wonderful in Cabaret . I love attending plays; it would be a treat to see you perform someday.”

Her words warmed something deep inside me. “I’d love that,” I said, my voice more vulnerable than I intended. “I don’t get to see my parents often, so having people around to support me—it means a lot.”

Fanny’s expression turned thoughtful. “It’s hard, being away from family,” she said. “But you seem to have found something special here. The boys clearly adore you.”

Her words carried weight, and I couldn't help but glance across the table at them. Hendrix, making Blanton laugh with one of his ridiculous observations. Holden, quieter, but his eyes always drifting back to Fanny, his softness unmistakable in her presence. And Conrad—steady, enigmatic, but grounded in knowing this was his family too, not by blood but by something deeper, something chosen.

“I feel lucky,” I admitted, my gaze flicking back to Fanny. “They’ve made Charleston feel like home in a short span of time.”

We talked through the evening—about the boys, art, and family. “What was Holden like growing up?” I asked at one point.

Fanny paused, her smile faltering slightly as she considered the question. “When he was little, he was all curiosity and joy,” she said. “Always asking questions, always reading. But after James passed, and his dad left...he became more solitary. The books stayed, but the joy didn't come as easily. He's carried a lot, but he's stronger than he gives himself credit for.”

Her honesty left me momentarily speechless. “Has he brought girls home before?” I asked, keeping my tone light.

She smiled again, though it didn't quite reach her eyes. “Just one, back in high school. But Hendrix...” She laughed, shaking her head. “Well, when I met him at sixteen, it was a revolving door of girls—and maybe a boy or two. None of them ever stuck around long though. It all seemed like casual fun.”

I chuckled, glancing at Hendrix, who raised a brow at me, clearly aware we were talking about him.

“And Conrad?” I asked, lowering my voice slightly.

Fanny's expression softened. "Conrad's harder to pin down," she said. "He keeps so much of himself private. But he's always been thoughtful—he sees things most people don't."

Later, as dinner wrapped up, Fanny caught my eye, her smile warm. "It's lovely having another girl around in the midst of all this testosterone," she said with a laugh. "You bring something special to them—I can see it."

Throughout the evening, I found myself stealing moments to take it all in: the way Hendrix's teasing seemed to light up the room, the way Blanton leaned into conversations with a steady, anchoring presence, the way Fanny's laughter smoothed over any tension. I wondered, briefly, what it would feel like to truly belong here, to be part of this family—not just as a visitor, but as something permanent.

Flushed from the drinks and spirited conversation, I felt both within and without—immersed in the beauty of the scene yet quietly observing it: the soft glow of candlelight playing off crystal glasses, the elegant floral arrangements adorning the table, and the warm laughter weaving through the air, wrapping me in the intimate charm of the evening.

Holden leaned over, his voice low, meant only for me. "Want to see the rest of the house?"

I glanced at him, a smile tugging at my lips. "Are you offering me the grand tour, Heathcliff?"

"Something like that," he said, standing and reaching for my hand.

Fanny caught the movement and arched a brow, her lips curving into a wry smile. "I'd say no funny business," she teased, "but I think we're past that pretense."

“Very funny,” Holden deadpanned, though the faint flush in his cheeks gave him away.

“Just don’t disappear too long,” Fanny added with a wink.

Holden’s hand tightened around mine as he led me inside and up the grand staircase. The hallway upstairs was wide and airy, the polished wood floors creaking softly beneath our steps. Family photos lined the walls, and the subtle scent of lavender drifted from a vase of dried flowers on a side table.

“This is my room,” Holden said, pushing open a door.

The space was neat and understated, much like him. The bed was made, the navy comforter pulled tight, and the walls were lined with built-in bookshelves, mostly empty now, save for a few stray paperbacks and trophies from high school swim team. A vintage On the Road poster hung on one wall, the bold typography and faded colors giving the room a quiet edge. An old leather satchel sat on the floor beside the desk, and a single mug with “CSAL Literary Society” stamped on the side rested near the window.

Holden glanced around, his lips twitching into a faint smile. “Not much left. Most of my stuff’s at Granny Goodloe’s.”

I nodded, taking in the sparse but comfortable space, imagining what it might have looked like before he left.

“Hendrix’s room is just across the hall,” he said softly.

I turned to him, a mischievous smile playing on my lips. “So...did you two ever sneak into each other’s rooms at night?”

Holden's eyes widened briefly before a laugh escaped him, low and genuine. "No," he said, shaking his head. "Not really other than one awkward run-in. But I thought about it," he admitted.

"Of course you did," I teased, stepping closer.

His expression softened as his gaze met mine, the laughter fading into something deeper. Without a word, his hand found my waist, pulling me closer, and his lips met mine. The kiss was slow and passionate, full of heat but layered with something quieter, more vulnerable. His other hand tangled in my hair, holding me to him as if letting go wasn't an option.

When he pulled back, his forehead rested against mine, his breath uneven. "This place," he murmured, his voice low but steady, "it feels more like home with you in it."

My heart ached at the raw honesty in his words. I cupped his cheek, my thumb brushing against the faint stubble along his jaw. "Holden..." I started, but the words caught in my throat, too tangled with emotion to escape. Instead, I kissed him again, slow and tender, hoping he'd feel everything I couldn't put into words.

After a moment, he pulled back, his hand sliding down my arm to twine our fingers together. "Come on," he said softly, his lips twitching into a faint smile. "Let's get back before Fanny sends a search party."

We descended the stairs hand in hand, rejoining the others for an after-dinner drink. But something had shifted—between us, within me. For the first time, I felt like I wasn't just visiting their world. I belonged.

Blanton's voice pulled me from my thoughts as we rejoined the group. "A great piece of art doesn't just make you feel something," he spoke with a thoughtful lilt. "It

changes the way you see yourself.”

I nodded, his words settling deep in my chest. “And sometimes,” I said, my voice soft but steady, “it reveals what’s been hidden all along—things you didn’t realize you were meant to see.”

The boys caught my eye at that, their gazes lingering just a moment too long, as if they understood exactly what I meant.

Even hours later, as I replayed the evening in my head, the warmth of Fanny’s smile and Blanton’s insight stayed with me. For a night, I’d felt like I belonged to something bigger than myself, something rare and beautiful. And I couldn’t help but wonder what it would feel like to have that always.

CONRAD

The gallery was alive with the kind of polished grandeur that only Charleston's elite could conjure on a humid Southern evening. It was a charity gala, a fundraiser to support the arts, with the proceeds going to local programs that painted the city's culture in its brightest colors. Black tie was the dress code, and the crowd more than delivered—sleek gowns that whispered over polished floors, crisp tuxedos with pocket squares as sharp as their owners' conversations, and glittering jewelry catching the soft glow of chandeliers that dripped like Spanish moss from the high ceilings. Outside, the crickets and cicadas hummed a steady serenade, but here, inside the gallery's cool elegance, it was all champagne laughter and carefully curated sophistication.

Holden, ever the cynic, leaned toward me as we watched the crowd swirl around us. "The Bores and the Bored," he muttered, his tone dry. "Out to see and be seen. Gossip, sip champagne, and pretend they care about the arts more than they do seeing their names published in the donation list."

Blanton's gallery had been transformed for the evening, every corner dripping with elegance. Elaborate spreads of canapés and hors d'oeuvres—mini crab cakes, bacon-wrapped figs, and blinis topped with crème fraîche and caviar—were arranged on long tables draped in white linens. Waiters in sharp uniforms floated through the space with trays of champagne, and two full bars stood at opposite ends of the room, surrounded by well-dressed patrons exchanging compliments and pleasantries that sounded a little too rehearsed.

I let my gaze drift to Moon, who stood near one of the bars, talking animatedly with Hendrix and Holden. She looked enchanting. Her gown was periwinkle blue satin, the kind of dress that made it impossible to look anywhere else. The fabric clung to her frame in all the right ways, shimmering faintly as she moved, with a plunging neckline that showcased a long, delicate silver necklace that dipped between her breasts. She was radiant, magnetic—the kind of presence that made you forget to blink.

The boys cleaned up well too, though neither would admit it. Hendrix wore his tuxedo like he'd been born to, the crisp lines and tailored fit snug on his rugged frame. His curls were tamed just enough to look intentional, though a few strands fell loose, softening his edges. Holden, ever the classic, looked like he'd stepped straight out of a Gatsby party. His traditional black tux was perfectly tailored, the sheen of the fabric catching the light as he moved with an understated confidence. His green eyes, sharp and observant, swept the room like he was cataloging every detail.

Fanny and Blanton approached, Fanny radiant in a flowing champagne-colored gown that set off her chestnut hair, styled in loose waves that framed her elegant features. Blanton, as composed as ever, exuded calm authority as he greeted guests with a handshake and quiet charisma. Fanny swept Moon into a hug, her warmth genuine and eager, while Blanton's gaze settled on her with approval.

“Moon, my dear,” he said smoothly. “Would you let me borrow you for a moment? There are some patrons of the theatre company I'd love to introduce you to. They've been dying to meet a star of Cabaret.”

Moon shot us a quick glance, her lips curving into a small, steady smile. “Of course,” she said, tucking her arm into his with an ease that made it seem like she'd been moving in these circles her whole life. She held her head high, her movements fluid and unhurried, as if the daunting setting was nothing but another stage.

As they disappeared into the crowd, Holden nudged my shoulder, his gaze flicking toward one of the walls. “Your photography,” he said, his voice softer now, pointing at one print in particular: “that one sparks some good memories. Going out to Johns Island...that tree felt magical when we were kids.”

I followed his gaze to the large black-and-white print of the sprawling Angel Oak. Its massive, gnarled branches stretched outward and downward, some dipping into the earth before rising again. The Spanish moss hanging from its limbs gave it an almost otherworldly air, like something pulled from a storybook.

“Yeah,” I said, stepping closer. “We’d climb it for hours. The limbs were so thick. Remember how we used to pretend they were bridges, like they were leading us into some kind of secret world? And those roots—remember how we thought if we dug under them, we’d find treasure?”

Holden laughed softly, the sound warm and laced with nostalgia. “The bark was so rough, we’d come home with scrapes all over our arms, and my mom would freak out. But it didn’t matter. That tree was everything back then.”

I gave Holden a small nod, pleased that he felt what I did.

“You captured it,” he said. “Not just the way it looks but...the way it feels. Like it’s alive. Like it’s got secrets.”

I didn’t know what to say to that, so I kept quiet, letting the hum of the room fill the space between us. My attention shifted back to Moon, who was now standing with Blanton in the middle of a group of Charleston’s most polished and privileged. I couldn’t hear the conversation, but her body language told me everything—head tilted slightly, smile warm but not overdone, gestures smooth and practiced. She looked completely at ease, even as I knew this was far from her natural element.

“She’s handling them like a pro,” Hendrix said from behind me, his tone low but amused. “Look at that guy—he’s practically drooling over her.”

He wasn’t wrong. One of the older men in the group seemed utterly captivated by Moon, his laugh a little too eager as she said something that made the others smile. She was in complete control, charming them effortlessly, and I felt a swell of pride watching her hold her own among Charleston’s elite.

“She’s good,” I said, my voice quieter. “Better than good.”

Moon slipped back over to us, her blue gown catching the light as she moved, graceful but purposeful. The faintest flush touched her cheeks, but her eyes carried something sharper—intent, maybe, or determination. She came to a stop just between me and Holden, her voice low as she leaned in.

“I want to check out James’ studio again,” she said, her tone quiet but firm. “I don’t know why, but...I feel like there’s something I’ve missed. Maybe just being in the space again will help.”

I exchanged a glance with Holden, whose brows furrowed in a way that told me he was already considering the logistics. “Blanton’s office is going to be locked with the public here,” I said, keeping my voice low and steady.

Moon tilted her head slightly, her lips curving into a faint smile and pointedly looked at me. “Good thing I know a guy with access.”

Hendrix, leaning casually against the wall beside us, let out a low chuckle. “She’s got a point,” he said, his grin widening. “But sneaking into a hidden studio in the middle of a black-tie gala? That’s bold even for you, Moon.”

She shrugged, her confidence unshaken. “I have you three, don’t I? Distract Blanton.

Keep him busy while I slip away. He won't even notice I'm gone."

Holden's jaw tightened, his green eyes narrowing as he considered her proposal.

Moon looked at the three of us, her voice calm but resolute. "I just need you to trust me."

"We do," Holden said resolutely. Hendrix and I nodded in agreement.

Moon's eyes flicked toward the hallway that led to Blanton's office. "If I'm going to do this, I'll need Conrad to let me in—and keep watch."

Holden hesitated, his green eyes narrowing slightly as if he wanted to argue, but instead, he sighed. "We'll keep them busy," he said, glancing at me. "Don't let her get caught."

Moon didn't wait for further discussion. She turned, her gown shimmering under the chandeliers as she moved toward the hallway. I followed her, weaving through the crowd until the hum of conversation faded, replaced by the quiet echo of our footsteps on the polished floors.

When we reached the heavy office door, Moon glanced at me, her composure solid but her eyes carrying a spark of nerves. I punched the code into the keypad without hesitation. The keypad beeped, and the lock clicked open. "You're in," I said, pushing the door open for her.

The room was dimly lit as Moon stepped inside, her movements quiet and assured as she headed toward the bookshelf on the far wall. I watched from the doorway as she walked to the bookcase, finding the heavy book on the end that concealed the button panel.

“Stay out there,” she said, looking to me. “Just make sure no one comes in.”

I nodded, leaning casually against the wall by the entrance. “If anyone shows up, I’ll handle it. Just don’t take too long.”

Her expression softened slightly. “Thanks, Conrad.”

I stepped back into the hallway, keeping my stance casual, my gaze flicking toward the distant glow of the gallery where Holden and Hendrix were undoubtedly keeping watch to make sure Blanton and Fanny were occupied.

A few quiet minutes passed, my mind racing as I kept watch. The silence was unnerving, every distant footstep or murmur from the gallery making my shoulders tense. My phone buzzed in my pocket, startling me. Pulling it out, I glanced at the screen.

Blanton

Conrad, can you grab the second folio binder from the storage room near the east bar? I want to show a listing to a patron.

“Shit,” I muttered under my breath. The storage room wasn’t far, but leaving the hall even for a minute made me nervous. Still, ignoring Blanton wasn’t an option.

I tapped out a quick response.

On it. Be right there.

Slipping my phone back into my pocket, I cast one last glance at the closed office door before heading toward the storage room. Moon was still inside. I just hoped she wouldn’t need me in the few minutes I’d be gone.

MOON

The hidden door clicked open, and I slipped into James' studio, the faint scent of varnish and aged paper brushing against my senses as the panel slid shut behind me. The space was exactly as I remembered it—dust hung in the beam of light that spilled through the cracks, shimmering faintly, and the room exuded that same strange mix of creativity and abandonment that had haunted me since our first visit.

My heart pounded as I moved further in, my heels silent on the floor. I studied the scene before me for the second time — the large table in the room's center, laden with canvases leaned against the walls in uneven stacks, their edges layered with dust and time. And the two easels, holding James' unfinished works.

I didn't know what I was looking for, but the weight of the space pressed down on me, pulling my focus to every detail. The paintings were as breathtaking as I remembered: sweeping landscapes of the Lowcountry, Charleston's historic streets rendered in vibrant, layered oils, and gates inked with such precision that they revealed as much detail as a photograph. Every brushstroke was deliberate, every piece of his art filled with something that begged to be seen.

I stopped near the corner of the room, my gaze catching on something that felt out of place. Among the stacked and leaning canvases, one stood framed, unlike anything else in the room. The frame itself was modest—wooden, painted black, with a wire stretched across the back for hanging—but it struck me as strange. Why frame this one piece in a room full of unframed raw canvas?

I stepped closer, brushing my fingers lightly along the edge of the frame. The canvas depicted a map of Charleston, its streets winding like veins, the waterfront a vivid sweep of blue. I recognized it immediately; Conrad had photographed it during our first trip here. But as I studied it now, I couldn't see anything unusual—no symbols, no markings that might hint at a hidden message.

Still, something about it felt important. A prickle of intuition tickled at the back of my mind, and before I could second-guess what I was doing, I turned the framed work around and contemplated the covered backing for a moment.

“Fuck it,” I whispered under my breath, gripping the edge of the paper backing. It tore easily, the sound loud in the quiet room, and as I pulled the wire and paper free, the frame fell away, revealing the bare canvas.

I sucked in a sharp breath, and for a moment, all I could do was stare. The back wasn't blank.

The painting on the reverse side was nothing like the map. It was abstract, a riot of shapes and colors, with strange gruesome markings woven into the brushstrokes. It wasn't pretty, but it was arresting—a whirlwind of chaotic symbols scattered from the center which featured a cracked eyeball. The cracks twisted into grotesque vines that led to markings that slashed the canvas in color, some tiny and subtle and others bold, almost like a language I didn't understand. My heart raced as I scanned it, my fingers tracing the edge of the canvas.

This was it. This was what James had hidden. The front was a decoy—a simple map of Charleston—but the back? The back was something entirely different. A code, maybe. A legend. It felt like a major puzzle piece that we hadn't even known was missing.

I rolled the canvas carefully, ditching the broken frame behind me. The fabric was

stiff and awkward in my hands, but I figured the roll was thin enough to fit beneath my gown. I tucked it against my side as I headed to the studio door, leading back into Blanton's office. My breath was shaky, the thrill of discovery mixing with the sharp pang of urgency. I needed to get this out of here.

Slipping back toward the entrance, I glanced over my shoulder once more, the studio quiet and still behind me. James had hidden this for a reason, and now it was our job to figure out why.

The canvas pressed against my side felt heavier than it should have, each step toward the office door stretching out the seconds. I paused, my hand resting lightly on the handle, before pushing through the false door that led into Blanton's office. I walked in, but I stopped cold when I saw him. Lucien.

He was standing by Blanton's desk, the ledger in his hands, flipping through its pages with a look of smug satisfaction. His tailored tuxedo was as sharp as the cruel smile that curved his lips when he noticed me.

"Well, well," he said, his voice smooth as silk. "What a coincidence, finding you here."

My mouth went dry, but I forced myself to stay calm, my fingers tightening around the rolled canvas at my side. "I could say the same," I said evenly. "What are you doing in Blanton's office?"

Lucien's sinister smile deepened, and he closed the ledger with a deliberate snap, tucking it under his arm. "Blanton and I have an understanding," he said, his tone casual but carrying an edge that made my skin crawl. "An intimacy, you could say. Something you might remember, if I'm not mistaken."

The heat rose to my cheeks as the memory of the sex club and his unsettling presence

flickered through my mind. He was toying with me, testing how far he could push, and I knew better than to take the bait.

“I was just grabbing something for Holden,” I said, lifting the rolled canvas slightly. “A family painting that belongs to him.”

Lucien’s gaze flicked to the canvas, his eyes narrowing as he stepped closer. “How thoughtful of you,” he said, his tone dripping with false politeness. “But that doesn’t look like the kind of painting Blanton would casually give away.”

I stood my ground, though my pulse hammered in my ears. “He’s not giving it away. Holden is his stepson,” I said firmly, though I could feel his presence bearing down on me, oppressive and sharp.

Lucien’s lips curved into a smirk, and my stomach churned as I noticed the brushed gold pin on his lapel—the crow perched on a key, unmistakable. My breath caught, but I forced my gaze back to his.

“You’re quite the actress, Moon.” His voice dropped lower. “Cool, composed, charming—the perfect mask. But I see through it. This role you’re trying to play? You’re not ready for it. Stick to being a sexy Kit Kat girl and leave the adult games to the grownups.”

The menacing comment shook me, but I refused to let it show. My grip on the canvas tightened as I forced a sharp smile. “Funny,” I said, my voice laced with defiance. “I could say the same to you. Your mask is slipping, Lucien, and I see right through it.”

The air between us felt charged, an unspoken duel waged in silence, sharp edges clashing beneath polite words. His smirk faltered for the briefest second before he stepped back, gesturing toward the door with mocking indifference. “By all means,” he said smoothly, the smirk sliding back into place. “Don’t let me keep you.”

I didn't wait. I slipped out of the office and into the hallway, my adrenaline coursing as I heard the office door click shut behind me. My mind spun with the implications of what I'd seen—Lucien with the ledger, his pin, all of it.

When I slipped out of Blanton's office, the hallway was quiet except for the soft hum of distant chatter from the gallery. Conrad was standing where I'd left him, leaning casually against the wall. He straightened as soon as he saw me, his brows furrowing slightly at the sight of my flushed face and the rolled canvas clutched tightly in my hands.

"Everything good?" he asked, his tone calm but tinged with concern.

I nodded quickly, brushing past him. "Fine, but we need to get out of here." My words were clipped as I took the rolled canvas and slipped it under my gown, my panties holding it secure against my body.

Conrad fell into step beside me, his posture still relaxed, though his eyes flicked toward the office door. "What happened in there?" he pressed, keeping his voice low.

"Not here," I said, glancing over my shoulder as we moved toward the gallery floor, my heart still racing. "Just—trust me. I'll explain in the car."

He didn't argue, but I caught the subtle shift in his expression, the flicker of unease that crossed his face as we stepped back into the glittering opulence of the gala. Holden and Hendrix were waiting near a tall sculpture on the gallery floor, keeping within sight of Blanton and Fanny, who were schmoozing with guests. Their faces lit up with relief as they spotted us.

"About time," Hendrix said, his grin fading slightly when he noticed my expression. "What's wrong?"

I shook my head, my voice barely above a whisper. “We need to go. Now.”

Holden’s brow furrowed, his green eyes sharp as he glanced between Conrad and me. “What happened?”

I put a finger to my lips, hushing the conversation until we were safely outside and getting into our car.

As we quickly folded into Holden’s Jeep, the guys all stared at me with panicked impatience. “Lucien,” I said, my voice trembling slightly as I clutched the canvas tighter. “He was in Blanton’s office.”

“What the fuck!?” Conrad exploded, his tone sharper now.

“Goddammit, I stepped away for a couple minutes to take something to Blanton, and he managed to slip in the office while I was gone.” Conrad trembled with anger and worry. “I am so sorry, Moon. He could have hurt you, and I was just standing out there fucking around waiting.”

“I’m okay,” I reassured him. “He didn’t do anything to me, and I was able to learn some things.”

“He had the ledger,” I said, my stomach twisting at the memory of his smirk. “But he knows I have this.” I gestured to the canvas.

Hendrix’s expression darkened. “What did he say?”

“Enough to make it clear he’s involved in whatever this is,” I said, glancing over my shoulder again. “And he’s not just involved—he’s watching us now.”

The car fell silent as the weight of my words settled over us. Whatever Lucien’s plans

were, one thing was clear: this wasn't a game among equals—he was the fat cat, and we were the mice. He was already toying with us, waiting to see how far we'd run before he decided to strike.

HOLDEN

We piled into the kitchen as soon as we got back to the house, the anxiety from Moon's run-in with Lucien still thrumming in the air. Hendrix was the first to move, grabbing the coffee pot and setting it to brew like we all needed caffeine to think straight. Moon placed the rolled-up canvas on the kitchen island, her expression taut as she smoothed her hands over the fabric of her gown.

"What exactly did Lucien say to you?" I asked, my voice sharper than I intended as I leaned against the counter.

Her lips pressed into a thin line before she let out a breath. "It was more about what he did. He was holding the ledger." Her voice was uncharacteristically serious. "The way he acted, it wasn't casual. He knew exactly what he was looking at. And then there was his pin..."

"What pin?" Conrad asked, pulling a chair closer to the island.

"It was a crow and a key pin on the lapel of his tux," Moon said, her fingers curling into the edge of the countertop. "I think it may have matched his cufflinks, but I couldn't see them as clearly."

"Anyway, Lucien didn't say anything outright about the crow and key, but he taunted me like he wanted to make me crumble. He said he and Blanton had 'an understanding' and 'an intimacy,' implying that it gave him the right to do as he

pleased. He also mocked me—said I should keep up the Kit Kat girl act and leave the grown-up games alone—or something close to that. And he clearly is involved in whatever Blanton is in. His pin directly links him to the stamp in the ledger and the symbol in James’ art.”

Hendrix cursed softly, pouring the freshly brewed coffee into mugs and sliding one toward me. “If he knows about the ledger, he might know about James’ paintings too,” he said, leaning on the counter. “He got into Blanton’s office, didn’t he? What’s stopping him from finding the studio?”

“Us,” Conrad said firmly, pulling out the canvas and spreading it across the island. “We obviously can’t get back in there tonight, but I say we go after hours tomorrow and clear the studio. Holden, what do you think?”

I nodded in agreement. “Yeah, now that he saw Moon coming from the false door, if he didn’t know it was there before, he definitely does now. I want to get all of my brother’s work out of there,” I said tersely. “I don’t really give a fuck if Blanton notices. It’s not his to keep.”

“Understandable. Tomorrow night we’ll go back to the gallery and clear out the studio,” Hendrix confirmed.

I shifted my attention to the map of Charleston which was vibrant under the warm kitchen lights, its streets winding in intricate patterns, the waterfront drawn in bold strokes. Conrad tapped one of the intersections with his finger. “Let’s start here. James didn’t do anything without a reason—there’s got to be something he wanted us to see.”

I sat down beside him, staring at the map as if the answers might suddenly materialize. Moon pulled a notebook from one of the drawers, flipping to a blank page and grabbing a pen. “We’re going to record everything,” she said, her voice

steady now, purpose driving her movements. “Every detail, every mark. If there’s a pattern, we’ll find it.”

Conrad nodded, his gaze sweeping over the map. “These look like the main streets downtown,” he said, tracing the lines with his fingers. “King Street, Meeting Street, Broad—they’re all here. The Battery is down here, with White Point Garden right where you’d expect. But the way this map focuses on the peninsula is strange—look how detailed it gets around the old historic districts, but Johns Island and Shem Creek are barely sketched in.”

He moved his hand to the western edge of the map. “Here’s the Ashley River winding up toward Magnolia Cemetery. The industrial port areas, the Union Pier, Shipyard Creek. The lines are clean, almost too clean—I don’t see any of the hidden markings like we found in his other paintings.” His fingers drifted toward the coast. “Folly Beach is here, but the marshlands aren’t as detailed as I’d expect, especially near the Morris Island Lighthouse.”

Hendrix leaned in, tilting his head as he scanned the lines. “It’s like James was more focused on certain areas—look at how precise this is near the Ravenel Bridge and along the waterfront.”

Moon’s eyes flicked over the map, her expression thoughtful. “The trails up here,” she said, tapping near the Francis Marion Forest, “are drawn in faintly, like he wanted to include them but not give them much attention. It’s more like a suggestion than a guide.”

“But I’m confused that it’s just a map,” I said finally, leaning back in my chair. “No codes, no tricks—just Charleston laid out like you’d find in a guide, but it is weird that he gave more detail to some places.”

“Flip it,” Moon said. “If the map is one part of the puzzle, maybe the other side will

make more sense.”

Conrad turned the canvas over to reveal the painting that been hidden beneath the frame. The shift was immediate—where the front was structured and orderly, the back was chaos. The abstract shapes and swirls seemed to pulse with energy, strange symbols woven into the layers of paint like whispers from a language long forgotten.

Hendrix leaned closer and spoke his questions aloud: “It feels like the back is the real painting. But I don’, but it feels like everything James made was so intentional—why not just start on a fresh canvas if he didn’t intend for them to be linked?”

I nodded. “I agree with Moon. I guess we need to start with what we’re even looking at on the back. I’ve never seen another of my brother’s paintings look as crazy and chaotic as this one.”

“It’s abstract, but it’s deliberate,” Conrad said, his voice thoughtful. “See these here?” He pointed to vine-like lines and continued. “The only thing that I see similar between the two is that the vines are all tangled and overlap, kind of like the streets on the map.”

I frowned, tilting my head. “But why hide this abstract one in the first place? What was he so afraid of someone finding?”

Moon looked up at me, her expression resolute. “Maybe it’s not just about what’s hidden,” she said. “Maybe it’s more about how we’re supposed to fit them together.”

“Alright,” Hendrix said, straightening and folding his arms. “So, where do we start?”

“Here,” Conrad said, tapping a section where the symbols seemed denser, more intricate. “We break it down. Figure out what symbols are next to each other so we can somehow interpret the narrative he’s telling.”

As they debated, I glanced at Moon, who was scribbling furiously in her notebook, her lips moving faintly as if she were cataloging every brushstroke in her head. For a moment, the air felt thick with possibility, like James was still here, guiding us toward something bigger than ourselves.

Whatever he'd left behind, we were getting closer to it. And if Lucien was watching, we didn't have time to waste.

"I don't really know how to make sense of this chaos," Conrad admitted. "It's like my eyes are swimming everywhere without seeing anything clearly."

Moon perked up all of a sudden. "Do you guys have some painter's tape? We could section it into quadrants and search each for symbols. I'll keep track of what we identify."

Hendrix rummaged in a hall closet and came back with a roll of tape that Moon cut into thin strips so the canvas wouldn't be covered in thick tape lines.

Moon carefully sectioned the canvas into quadrants with painter's tape, her hands steady as she pressed the thin strips along the surface. The symbols were difficult to make out at first, hidden among the swirling silver vines that extended outward from the large, cracked eye in the center. The fractures in the eye were jagged, like spiderwebs of broken glass, pulling everything else into their orbit.

"It's like the eye's watching us," Hendrix muttered, leaning over the table. "And it's pissed."

"Probably judging us for not seeing what's right in front of us," Conrad said, frowning.

"Let's focus," I said. "Moon, you're taking notes?"

“Yep. Ready.” She held up a pen and flipped to a blank page. “Let’s start in the center and work out. The eye’s too obvious to ignore.”

“It’s cracked,” Conrad said, tracing the fractures lightly with his finger. “But they’re deliberate, not random. Look how the cracks spread—they guide your eye toward everything else on the canvas and the cracks twist into vines.”

“Creepy as fuck,” Hendrix grumbled.

“And fitting,” Moon said, her gaze narrowing as she scanned the area just around the eye. “What’s this?” She pointed toward a small, intricate design close to the fractures.

“A dagger,” Conrad said after a moment, his tone thoughtful. “Small but sharp. It almost looks ceremonial.”

“Or like something you’d use to stab someone in the back,” Hendrix added darkly. “This shit is twisted.”

“And there,” Hendrix pointed to the edge of a swirling vine. “Scales of justice. Barely noticeable unless you’re looking for them. Just like in that one painting.”

Moon scribbled furiously in her notebook as we moved outward, quadrant by quadrant.

“Skulls,” I said, his voice quiet. “Woven into the vines. Jesus. Their hollow eyes look like they’re staring at us.”

“And there’s a crying child,” Moon added, pointing to a faint outline near the center. Her voice tightened as she added, “Why a child? What the hell is James trying to say?”

“Maybe this one knows,” Hendrix said, tapping another symbol—a window with a tiny shadow perched on the sill. The shadow resolved itself into a crow, its head cocked as if it were watching us.

Moon leaned closer, her brow furrowing. “That’s...unsettling.”

“Yeah, well look at this.” Conrad gestured toward a cluster of roses near the edge of the canvas. The petals were red, dripping like blood, staining the silver vines beneath them.

“Of course the flowers are bleeding,” Hendrix said dryly. “Why wouldn’t they be?”

“And there’s a caged bird over here,” Hendrix added. “Right next to...is that a golden mask?”

“It is,” Moon confirmed, jotting it down. “And here—a heart. Pierced by a needle, dripping blood.”

“Lovely,” I deadpanned, my stomach twisting as I scanned further. “What’s this one?”

“A hand,” Conrad said.

Hendrix’s finger paused near another corner. “Disembodied hands,” he said, frowning. “Pulling strings. That shit’s freaky.”

We continued working our way outward, finding more symbols woven into the chaotic swirl of vines and shapes. A sailboat with a mast shaped like a crow’s silhouette. The cables of a bridge containing faint, almost imperceptible silhouettes of people hanging as if by threads.

“Flowers,” Moon said softly, her hand hovering over a cluster. “The petals form nooses. You can’t see it unless you step back.”

“And here,” Conrad said, “a broken compass.”

Moon sat back, her pen hovering over the notebook. “They’re connected somehow—to the map, to the front. But how?”

“It’s not just what they are,” Hendrix said, his jaw tightening. “It’s where they are. Look how some are clustered together, and others are way out on their own.”

Conrad nodded. “It’s like they’re meant to be matched to something on the map. The eye...it’s the center. Everything spreads from there.”

“But matched to what?” I asked, my frustration growing. “The streets? Landmarks? What’s the point if we don’t know where to start?”

“Or if the answer’s even on the damn map,” Hendrix muttered, crossing his arms. “This is starting to feel like James was screwing with us.”

“Or warning us,” Moon countered, her tone sharp. She exhaled, her grip on the pen tightening. “We’ll figure it out. This means something—I know it does.”

We sat in silence for a moment, the symbols staring back at us like fragments of a puzzle we didn’t yet understand. The weight of James’ hidden painting settled over us, heavy and unrelenting. Whatever he was trying to tell us, we knew one thing for sure: it wasn’t meant to be simple.

25

MOON

I woke up to the quiet hum of the TV and the soft rise and fall of Holden's chest beneath my cheek. The morning light filtered through the living room windows, casting a soft glow over the big L-shaped sectional we'd all ended up on again. It wasn't planned, but none of us had wanted to say goodnight alone after the night we'd had. The tension from the gallery still lingered, but here, wrapped up in each other, it felt like the world had shrunk down to just us.

I shifted slightly, the oversized t-shirt I'd borrowed from Holden slipping off my shoulder. My legs were tangled with his, and his hand rested lightly on my hip, warm and natural. Across the sectional, Hendrix and Conrad were sprawled together, Hendrix's arm draped over Conrad's back, their heads tilted toward each other like they'd fallen asleep mid-conversation. None of us had felt like sex last night—not after everything—but the intimacy of just being close, curling up and breathing the same air, had been enough.

Holden stirred beneath me, his hand flexing against my hip as he let out a soft, sleepy groan. "Morning," he murmured, his voice rough with sleep.

"Morning," I whispered back, my lips curving into a small smile. I tilted my head to look up at him, his green eyes blinking open, soft and unfocused as he woke. His curls were a mess, his jawline shadowed with scruff, and he was dashing in that effortless way that made seem like beauty sleep was a real thing.

“You’re staring,” he said, his lips quirking into a lazy grin.

“Because you’re pretty,” I teased, my fingers brushing lightly over his chest.

“Keep looking at me like that, and you’re gonna make it hard to behave.” His hand slid lower on my hip and dipped inside my waistband.

I raised an eyebrow, pushing back slightly against the hardness pressing into my thigh. “Seems like that ship’s already sailed,” I bit back a laugh.

I rolled over, tilting my chin up so I could brush my lips over his. What started as a soft, playful kiss deepened quickly. Holden’s hand slid up my back, pulling me closer as his tongue swept against mine, a slow, lazy glide that dared me to chase his. I sucked in a breath when he bit my bottom lip lightly, the sharp jolt sending heat spiraling through me. He didn’t stop there, sucking my lip into his mouth, as his other hand slipped beneath the hem of the oversized t-shirt I wore, his fingers tracing slow circles against my bare skin.

“Holden,” I murmured, the sound breaking into a sigh as he kissed me again, deeper this time, his control slipping just enough to make me shiver. He groaned against my mouth before pulling back slightly, his eyes dark with something heavy and wanting.

Before I could move, he rolled me onto my side, spooning me as his arm wrapped around my waist. His lips found the curve of my neck, soft at first, then warmer, wetter as he kissed along my skin. I moaned quietly, my body arching slightly into his as his mouth found a spot just below my ear and sucked, sending a pulse of heat straight through me.

“Watching them is going to kill me,” he murmured against my neck, his voice low and rough.

I blinked, turning my head slightly to follow his gaze. Across the sectional, Hendrix's hand had slipped beneath the waistband of Conrad's sweats, his movements unhurried, as Conrad looked across at us with his hooded ocean eyes. Conrad leaned back into Hendrix, his head resting against Hendrix's shoulder as a soft growl escaped his lips, the sound low and warm as Hendrix stroked his shaft with a slow, steady rhythm.

"Who's watching who?" I teased as Holden's lips trailed lower, his tongue flicking against my skin. My hand found his, guiding it up my thigh, my breath hitching as his fingers grazed over my pussy.

"Shh," he said softly, his lips brushing my ear now. "Just let me have this."

And I did. Wrapped in him, watching my guys, the threats of the world outside disappeared. There was only this—our warmth, our closeness, the quiet hum of intimacy that made everything else seem far away.

We'd spent the day together, the kind of lazy, comfortable hours that felt suspended in a quiet, unspoken anticipation. Coffee, light conversation, even some joking about how we were becoming too good at this whole breaking-and-entering thing—it was a distraction, a way to ignore the nerves as we planned to sneak back into the gallery later that night.

We waited until well after dark, after the streets would be clear of people popping into shops and restaurants. Conrad took the lead, like always. He moved with quiet confidence, unlocking the gallery door and punching in the alarm code quickly. The beeping stopped, and we slipped inside, the air cool and still as we found our way through the darkness.

"Everyone knows the drill," he said softly, his voice barely above a whisper. "We get in, we load everything into the crates I'll grab from storage, and we get out. Quick

and clean.”

We didn’t linger. The four of us made our way to Blanton’s office, flipping on the light once we were all inside. Everything looked pristine. Just as it had the night before, thankfully minus Lucien. Holden’s movements were sure as he reached for the hidden panel on the bookshelf. I heard the soft click of the false door mechanism unlocking, and I waited as the bookshelf slid open, revealing the entry to James’ studio.

“Alright.” Conrad stepped back to let us through. “Let’s do this.”

Conrad went in first, and I followed close behind, anticipation curling tight in my chest.

And then I froze.

The room was empty. Fucking empty.

Every easel, every canvas, every scrap of James’ work was gone. The walls that had been lined with his art now stood bare, and the long table in the center, once cluttered with brushes, paints, and sketches, was wiped clean. Even the faint scent of oil paint seemed to have vanished, leaving only a cold, sterile stillness.

“What the fuck,” Hendrix said, his voice a low growl, breaking the heavy silence.

“They cleared it all out,” Conrad said in disbelief, his tone clipped as he crossed the room in a few long strides. He yanked open a drawer in the worktable, then another, his movements growing more angry. “Not a single piece left.”

“How is this possible?” Holden said, his voice tight. “You were just here last night. It was all here.”

My pulse thundered in my ears, my stomach churning as I turned in a slow circle, my hands clutching at the air like I could find something they hadn't taken. "This can't be happening," I whispered.

"They knew," Conrad said suddenly, his voice hard and laced with fury. He slammed one of the drawers shut. "Lucien. He knew we must be on his trail with the paintings and decided to snatch them all. I don't know how he's connected, but I'd put money on the clues in the paintings leading back to Lucien."

"But he knew where to look because of me," I said, the words bitter and cold on my tongue. "He saw me leave with the canvas. He must've?—"

"It's not your fault," Conrad interrupted, his jaw tight as he turned to face me.

Hendrix turned, his tone cautious. "But how does Lucien have that kind of access? My dad keeps this place locked tight."

The implication hung in the air like a dark cloud, and I couldn't bring myself to say it. Instead, Holden did. "You think Blanton's in on this?" His green eyes burned as he looked at Conrad. "You think he worked with Lucien? That he just handed over James' work?"

"We don't know that," Conrad said, his voice steady but firm. "It's possible Lucien told Blanton he found Moon in here. Maybe Blanton thought he was protecting James' legacy or some shit."

"Protecting?" Holden's laugh was harsh, bitter. "You call wiping away everything James left behind protecting him?"

"Holden," I said softly, stepping toward him. "We don't know what happened yet. But we'll figure it out."

“But it doesn’t make sense,” Hendrix growled, pacing near the empty walls. “How did they get it all out so fast? It’s not like they knew we were coming tonight.”

“Maybe he didn’t know, but he anticipated,” Holden said darkly, his green eyes sharp as he glanced toward the door. “That sinister fuck. Lucien’s one step ahead of us now.”

“Maybe several steps,” Hendrix groaned.

The weight of it all sank in, heavy and suffocating. I bit down hard on the inside of my cheek, forcing myself to stay focused. “He doesn’t have everything,” I said quickly. “He doesn’t have the double-sided canvas. We still have the map. And we have photos of all the art that Conrad took last time.”

“And what if that’s not enough?” Hendrix shot back, his voice brutal in frustration. “We don’t even know what the symbols mean. And now, Lucien has all the originals.”

“We’ll figure it out,” I said, though my voice wavered. “We don’t have another choice.”

The silence that followed was deafening, the cold emptiness of the studio pressing in on all sides, like the room itself was mourning everything that had been stolen. James had hidden so much in this room—secrets, warnings, pieces of himself—and now they were gone, stripped away and locked in the hands of someone who would do anything to keep them buried.

Holden broke the silence first, his voice trembling as he tried to keep it steady. “It’s all gone,” he said, barely above a whisper. He paused, swallowing hard, his shoulders tense as if he were holding something back. “Every piece of his art—everything James left behind. It’s not just losing the clues. It’s—” His voice cracked, and he

dragged a hand through his hair, his green eyes shining with unshed tears. “It’s losing him all over again. A piece of him—of who he was—is just...gone.”

Holden’s chest rose and fell unevenly, his hands curling into fists at his sides as he paced. “I didn’t have much of him left,” he said, his voice breaking. “The art—it’s the only way to still hear him. When we found all these new pieces, it felt like a gift, connecting me to him again. And now it’s gone. Every single fucking piece.”

“We will get it all back,” Conrad said, his voice hardening. “I swear to you, Holden, we’ll track Lucien down and get James’ art back.”

“Not just the art.” Holden’s voice sharp as he turned to face us. His expression was unrelenting, his green eyes blazing with determination. “I don’t just want the paintings. I want to take down whoever James was trying to expose. Lucien’s obviously implicated, but if Blanton’s involved, if every fucking of member Charleston’s elite is involved—I don’t care. It all burns. And if it involves my mom too, well...” His voice faltered, and he shook his head. “Oh fucking well.”

Hendrix stepped closer, his expression grim but understanding. “I hear you, man, and we’ll go after Lucien with everything we’ve got. But this is our family we’re talking about,” he pointed out gently. “Let’s fucking hope our parents aren’t mixed up in some shady shit.”

Holden’s jaw tightened, and for a moment, the room was so still I could hear my own heartbeat. “Yeah,” he said finally.

Whatever lay ahead, whatever answers James had hidden in his work, we were going to find them. And we weren’t going to stop until we did.

“Let’s go,” Conrad said, breaking the silence. His voice was calm, but his clenched fists told a different story. “We can’t stay here. Lucien’s not done, and neither are

we.”

HOLDEN

We pulled up outside Moon's place just after midnight. The streets were quiet, the faint hum of a distant car engine the only sound cutting through the stillness. Hendrix killed the engine, and we climbed out of the car, keeping our voices low. The tension from the gallery still hung in the air, heavy and oppressive, but I could feel it shifting now. The four of us together—it felt like we were gearing up for a battle none of us knew how to fight yet.

I was glad Moon had wanted to run by her apartment for an overnight bag. The thought of her heading back here alone after everything that had happened left a knot in my chest I didn't want to deal with. She'd become a comforting presence in our house, like she belonged there, seamlessly slipping into the spaces between us and pulling us closer. I didn't want to go without that—not tonight, not any night. Having her with us made the chaos feel manageable, like whatever storm was brewing around us, we'd be able to weather with her holding us all together.

Moon led the way, her keys clinking softly as she unlocked the front door. "Be quiet," she whispered, glancing back at us. "I'm sure my roommates are asleep."

We slipped inside, the dim glow of string lights in the living room casting faint shadows across the eclectic furniture. She led the way to her room at the end of the hall, the floor creaking faintly under our steps. She pushed the door open, flipping on a light switch that just lit a bedside lamp, casting a muted glow. The four of us shuffled in behind her, lingering near the doorway at first before spreading

out—Hendrix leaning against the wall, Conrad stepping in front of her dresser, and me trailing just behind her. I wasn't sure why we all went in with her. Maybe it was instinct, or maybe it was something deeper, unspoken. She was ours—our anchor, our spark, our Moon—and none of us wanted to leave her alone.

Her room was like a snapshot of her—a mix of creativity and comfort. The faint scent of lavender still lingered in the air, wrapping around us like a reminder of everything that made this space hers. For the moment, it felt like a safe haven, a little piece of her world that hadn't been tainted by the shadows creeping into ours.

But then I saw it.

The mirror above her dresser was smeared with a symbol I recognized all too well: the crow perched on a key. It loomed large, jagged, and uneven, like it had been scrawled hastily—painted in a deep red that could have been blood.

“Jesus Christ,” Hendrix sputtered, stepping in behind me.

Moon's breath hitched, and she took a shaky step forward. “What the fuck,” she whispered, her voice trembling.

Her hands were trembling at her sides. “He was here. In my room. Touching my things.” Her voice cracked, rising with panic. “How the hell did he get in? My roommates were home— they're still asleep down the hall. How did he even know where to go?”

Her words came out in a rush, frantic and raw, as her hands hovered over the edge of her dresser like she was afraid to touch anything else. I stepped closer, my chest tightening at the sight of her so shaken. She was always the strong one, the calm one, but now? She looked like the ground had been ripped out from under her.

“Moon,” I said softly, reaching for her arm. “We've got you.”

Her head snapped toward me, her wide eyes shining with fear. “This isn’t just about the paintings anymore. I can’t believe he was in here. In my home. In my room. It feels fucking filthy.”

She wrapped her arms around herself, taking a shaky step back like she couldn’t bear to be surrounded by her own things. “It’s like he’s tainted it. Like nothing here belongs to me anymore.” Her voice cracked, softer now, but the weight of her words hit like a blow. “I don’t even feel safe in my own room. What if he comes back? What if...what if he’s still watching?”

She pressed a hand to her chest, her breaths uneven. “What if it doesn’t stop here?” Her voice dropped as she looked between us. “Should we call the cops? I don’t know if this is something we can handle on our own anymore.”

Conrad stepped closer to the mirror, searching her space with his careful eye. Then he pointed. Pinned to the wall beside her mirror, next to a cluster of her theatre photos and belongings, was an envelope. It was thick, sealed with black wax, the imprint of the crow and key pressed into its surface.

My stomach twisted as she reached for it, sucking in a sharp breath. “Let us,” I said quickly, stepping forward.

She glanced at me, her expression torn between fear and defiance, but she nodded and let her hand drop. I pulled the envelope from the wall, feeling its weight as I turned it over in my hands.

“What’s in it?” Conrad asked, his voice low but tense.

I slid my thumb under the seal, breaking it with a soft crack. Inside was a folded piece of heavy paper, its thickness and fine grain a quiet display of wealth. The text was typed, the letters precise and unnervingly clean.

I unfolded it, my eyes scanning the words, each line tightening the knot in my chest.
Then, I read it aloud to the group.

To the one who steals from the Keeper's sight,

You've walked where shadows veil the light.

The Chthonian waits where the roots run deep,

Where secrets are buried and silence keeps.

Return what you've taken to its rightful place,

Or you'll learn the cost of the Keeper's grace.

The crescent watches; the path is clear,

But tread with care—or your end is near.

The words hit like a punch to the gut, each line sharp and deliberate, leaving no room for doubt. This wasn't a prank—this was a promise.

Hendrix's jaw clenched as he re-read the note, his stormy blue eyes darkening with anger. "They think they can scare us with cryptic poetry?" he challenged, his voice low and dangerous. He gripped the stationary in his hand, his knuckles white. "Fuck that. Whoever the 'Keeper' is, they don't know who they're dealing with. They want to play games? Fine. Let's play. But no one threatens you, Moon. Not while I'm breathing."

Moon stood frozen, her arms wrapped tightly around herself, her gaze fixed on the mirror. "It's about the canvas," she whispered, her voice trembling. "They know I took it. They know we have it, and it's valuable."

“They know everything,” Conrad said darkly, stepping closer, his jaw clenched as his eyes swept over the room. “The mirror, the letter—it’s not random. They wanted you to feel this, Moon. They wanted us all to feel it.”

My grip tightened on the letter, the edges crumpling under my fingers as a cold rage burned in my chest. “It’s not just her,” I said, my voice low and hard. “This is for all of us. They’re telling us to stop, to back off. A threat toward Moon is a threat toward us all. And they think they can scare us into submission.”

Hendrix let out a bitter laugh, his eyes flashing with defiance. “Well it is fucking scary, but that won’t stop us,” he snapped. “They just gave us a reason to dig in.”

Moon took a shaky breath, her eyes finding mine, steady despite the tremor in her voice. “What do we do now?” she asked, her words laced with both fear and resolve.

I folded the letter slowly, slipping it back into the envelope. My gaze shifted to the mirror, the blood-red symbol staring back like a taunt. “We keep moving,” I said, my voice sharp and resolute. “We figure out what’s on that canvas, why it terrifies them so much. We don’t stop until we know exactly what they’re hiding.”

“And I don’t think we can call the cops,” Conrad said quietly. “People like this own the cops. We’re going to have to track him down ourselves. The Keeper. Lucien. And whoever the fuck else he works with.”

“And when we do?” Hendrix asked, his tone quiet but sharp, a quiet storm brewing in his eyes.

I turned to him, the weight of James’ loss, of everything they had taken from us, pressing heavy in my chest. “Then we burn it all down,” I said, the words cold and certain.

The room fell silent, but the walls knew better—this wasn’t the end. This was the

inhale before the scream. Moon's mirror reflected the blood-red symbol, its jagged edges glaring like a scar against the glass—a warning, a dare. It wasn't just a challenge; it was a declaration of war. Whatever was coming, it would consume us, twist us, shape us into something unrecognizable. But there was no way out. No mercy. No turning back. Only the fire ahead—and the ashes we'd leave behind.