



Kill, Sleep, Repeat Vol. II (Killer #2)

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Category: Suspense Thriller

Description: She's trained to kill. But will she risk everything to escape?

Nineteen-year-old Sophie Jones has been molded under her mother Charlotte's lethal guidance, mastering killer skills to inherit the family's assassin business. Bound by blood and blades, their mother-daughter bond is as unbreakable as it is volatile. But when a mission goes sideways and Sophie spares an innocent life, her unwavering loyalty begins to fracture.

Back home, Charlotte's latest target ignites a desire she can't ignore, blurring the line between duty and something far more dangerous.

As buried secrets resurface and relentless enemies close in, Sophie and Charlotte must confront the deepest betrayal of all—the one that comes from within.

Kill, Sleep, Repeat Volume II is a high-stakes, addictive thriller, pulling readers deeper with every page, unraveling shocking secrets up to the final explosive twist. Perfect for fans of Karin Slaughter and Gillian Flynn, this is a story of deadly devotion, twisted bonds, and the haunting cost of family secrets.

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Page 1

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 2:26 am

PROLOGUE

The first time she tried to run, I let her. Sat back, arms crossed, and watched her make her play, all frantic energy and poor judgment. She didn't get far, of course—people like her never do. They think freedom is a switch you flip, a door you can just walk through. But it's not. Freedom is earned, stolen, fought for. And she never had the stomach for that kind of fight.

By the second time, though, I wasn't laughing anymore. Tracking her down, undoing the mess she left in her wake—it wasn't amusing. It was exhausting. Keeping her close had turned into a full-time job with more overtime than I ever signed up for. And yet, I couldn't quit. That's the thing about people who make you feel alive: they have a way of tying themselves to you, no matter how much you might wish otherwise.

So here we are. On this train, on this track, barreling toward the end of a story that's already been written. If you're reading this, you've probably put together the basics by now. The wreckage, the bodies, the echoes of something that couldn't quite stay hidden. But don't make the mistake of thinking you know what happened here—not yet .

The truth is, you can't tell a story like this from one angle. You can't understand until you've seen it from all sides, until you've looked through my eyes. What you have here is a story about inevitability. About control, about holding on, and about what it costs to keep someone who doesn't want to be kept.

This train, this beautiful piece of engineering, is the perfect metaphor. Right now,

we're slicing through the Rockies at seventy miles an hour, the diesel engine roaring ahead, the vibrations humming up through the soles of my boots. The snow is coming down hard outside, piling up on either side of the tracks, but in here, it's warm. Quiet, even. Just the two of us, heading toward the one stop this train will ever make.

She hasn't figured it out yet. Not fully. She's a few rows ahead of me, her forehead pressed to the window, staring out at the endless white, punctuated with towering pines, the mountains standing watch on either side. She probably thinks she's on some kind of scenic escape, some detour to nowhere while she plots her next move. But she's wrong.

There's no conductor to check her ticket this time. No whistle to signal the next station. Just the relentless pull of the engine, the inevitability of steel on steel, carrying us to the end of the line.

Speaking of the conductor—he didn't take kindly to my plans. We had a bit of a disagreement, you might say. He's up front now, slumped over the controls, his role officially played out. The passengers weren't thrilled, either, but they're gone now. I pulled the brake at a crossing and made sure each one of them got off safely. Some screamed, some cried, some tried to fight back. But in the end, they all left.

I told them they'd thank me later. That a night in the snow was better than what was waiting for them on this train. They didn't believe me, but that's fine. It wasn't their story to finish.

Now, it's just us. Just me and her, alone in this metal beast, gliding through the wilderness toward something she can't yet see. The cabin smells of recycled air, old upholstery, and the faint metallic tang of blood—not much, just enough to notice if you're paying attention.

She always had a good poker face, but even she's struggling to hold it together now. I

can see the way her fingers twitch against the armrest, the way her gaze darts to the emergency exit every few minutes. She's calculating, weighing her options, wondering if she could make it if she jumped.

She couldn't. Not at this speed, not in this weather. I made sure of that.

She thinks I'm doing this to punish her, to prove some kind of twisted point. She couldn't be more wrong. Everything I've done, every move I've made, has been for her. To keep her. To save her. From what, she never cared to understand.

The truth is, she's been running since the day I met her. Not just from me—from herself, from her past, from the parts of her she doesn't want to face. I've spent years trying to show her that running doesn't fix anything. It just brings you back to the same place, over and over, until you finally stop.

And that's what this is about. Stopping. Not just the train, but everything. The chase, the fight, the endless cycle. She'll thank me one day, I think. Maybe not today, maybe not tomorrow, but eventually.

For now, the engine carries us forward, steady and unyielding. The tracks stretch out ahead, a perfect line into the abyss. We're moving faster now, the mountains closing in, the snow blurring into a white haze.

She hasn't said a word in hours, and I haven't pushed her. There's no need. Words won't change what's coming.

This is it. The final act. The end of the line. And you know what?

I've never felt more alive.

Page 2

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 2:26 am

1

CHARLOTTE

Three weeks earlier

The driver drops me a block from Vincent Marano's brownstone. The humid New York City night clings to me, the heat amplified by the maze of concrete and glass. Even in the dark, the street buzzes with life—muffled laughter from a nearby stoop, the rumble of a passing subway beneath my feet.

I walk the last stretch in heels that were not made for uneven pavement, the echo of my steps blending with the ambient city noise. Risky? Sure. But time isn't on my side. I promised Sophie I wouldn't take long, and she made me swear—swear—to watch *Legally Blonde* with her afterward. As if that were the worst thing I'd do tonight.

Vincent's brownstone looms ahead, nestled among its tidy, multi-million-dollar neighbors. The warm glow of sconces flanking the front door contrasts with the harsh, distant glare of streetlights. The place is deceptively understated, a quiet facade hiding the man inside. There's no gate or hedge, but the cameras perched above the stoop and angled discreetly at the door don't miss a thing.

I smile at one, tilting my head like I'm posing. Men like Vincent? They like to watch.

The stoop is clean and polished, and as I reach the top step, the door opens. He's waiting.

Vincent leans casually in the doorway, his shirt open just enough to suggest casual wealth. His dark hair is slicked back, his jawline sharp and deliberate. The kind of man who pretends to live for pleasure but is a slave to control.

“You’re early,” he says, his eyes sweeping over me in one lazy, proprietary pass.

I brush past him, the scent of leather and expensive cologne wafting out as I step inside. “You’re observant.”

The entryway is narrow but elegant, the kind of luxury designed to be subtle. The floors gleam under the soft glow of recessed lighting. To the left, a sitting room filled with midcentury furniture; to the right, a sleek staircase leading upward. Vincent closes the door, the sound of the latch a quiet exclamation point to the tension that hangs in the air.

“Thirsty?” he asks, his gaze lingering too long.

I turn, just enough for the fabric of my dress to pull tighter. “Depends.”

He smiles, slow and deliberate. “On what?”

I let the moment stretch, then shrug. “On whether you have anything worth drinking.”

He chuckles low in his throat, moving past me to the open-concept kitchen. The click of a bottle cap and the clink of ice against glass punctuate the silence. He hands me a drink—gin, neat—and watches me as I swirl the liquid, letting the light catch the surface.

I don’t sip. Instead, I set the glass down and step closer. The air between us thickens, his chest almost brushing mine .

My eyes hold his. “Not bad.”

Vincent’s hand finds my hip, his touch firm, testing. I let him think he’s in control, leaning into his space just enough to encourage the illusion. His breath is warm against my ear, his voice low and rough.

“You like the game, don’t you?”

I arch a brow, my lips curving. “What game?”

His grin widens as his fingers slide lower, testing boundaries. I let him, my heartbeat steady, my hand trailing up his chest. His breath catches when I tilt my head, exposing the line of my neck, but I stay still.

He thinks he’s won.

My lips brush his ear. “Maybe I’ve made a mistake coming here.”

He pulls back, confusion flickering in his eyes, and that’s when I strike. The knife slides from beneath my hem, the blade a cold, sharp extension of my intent.

I press it to his throat before he can react, the tip biting into his skin just enough to draw blood.

His startled laugh bubbles out, though it’s shaky. “So, this is what you’re into?”

I smile, tilting the blade just slightly, letting him feel its weight. “You really have no idea.”

What follows is fast and brutal. He lunges, his arrogance flaring as he grabs my wrist, twisting hard. The knife clatters to the floor, but I’m ready. My elbow connects with

his nose, the crunch satisfying as blood splatters across his pristine floor.

He stumbles, grabbing at me, but I'm faster. The knife is back in my hand, and this time, it finds his side. He gasps, his strength ebbing as I press him against the wall, my breath steady, while his turns shallow.

"Please —" he starts, but I twist the blade, cutting off whatever he thought he'd say.

He slumps to his knees, his hands clutching at the wound. I sit and wait as the light in his eyes fades, and then I crouch beside him and wipe the blade on his expensive shirt.

"Messy," I say, tilting my head as I study him. "But effective."

The brownstone is quiet now, save for the soft hum of the fridge. Blood pools on the hardwood, soaking into the edge of a rug I'm sure cost more than most people make in a year.

I move to the kitchen, grab the gin he poured, and down it in one go.

On the way out, I pause to check the security system in the hall closet. The monitors show nothing out of the ordinary. A few wipes with a rag and my fingerprints are gone.

The humid night greets me as I slip out the door, my heels clicking against the stone steps.

I'd love to stay and have another drink, to savor the aftermath, but Sophie's waiting. And a promise is a promise.

CHARLOTTE

The room is dark except for the pale glow of the bedside clock. 4:17 a.m. I'm on my back, the thin hotel sheets twisted around my legs, sweat slick against my skin despite the AC humming loudly in the corner. Even three years later, it feels strange waking up alone. I look over, half-expecting Michael to be there.

But this morning is different.

The air is thick, as if the dream left something behind—some residue, clinging to the edges of my mind. It wasn't a nightmare. Not exactly. It was him.

Warren. We were back in Alaska. And I was in that room.

The dream clings to me, lingering like something wedged under my skin. I sit up, but rubbing my eyes does nothing to shake it off—it stays, stubborn, as if it's determined to be remembered. The room is too still, too quiet, save for the distant hum of the city below. I push the sheets aside and swing my legs over the edge of the bed. My feet meet the thin carpet, and I hesitate for a beat before rising, moving to the bathroom, as if the next step will somehow make it go away.

I splash cold water across my face, the shock of it sharp, but the disquiet clings to me, clouding my thoughts. I breathe in deeply, letting the air fill my lungs as I stare at my reflection—no wig, no makeup, just me having to face myself.

“Mom?” I hear the soft creak of the door behind me, and turn to find Sophie standing in the threshold, her hair pulled into a messy ponytail. She’s wearing an oversized Columbia sweatshirt, the sleeves dangling past her fingertips. She looks younger than her eighteen years, but there’s a fire in her eyes—one I’m trying to harness. “You couldn’t sleep either?”

I brush past her into the small kitchenette, setting the coffee pot on the counter. “I don’t sleep much.”

She shifts her weight. “It’s the big day,” she says, but her voice lacks conviction.

I keep my back to her, pouring water into the coffee maker. “Sure is.” The monotone in my reply mirrors her own. “You ready?”

Behind me, I hear her shift again, the faint sound of her palms pressing against the counter. “I guess. Kind of feels like a waste of time when there’s...everything else.”

I take a breath before turning to face her. “You’re going to college. We agreed on that.”

She straightens, her eyes locking onto mine. “ You agreed on that.”

I set the coffee pot down harder than I should, the sound cutting through the air. “We don’t always get what we want, Sophie. College isn’t just about you. It’s about the cover.”

Her jaw sets, her knuckles pale against the edge of the counter. She wants to offer a rebuttal, but she doesn’t. Good .

I pour two mugs of coffee and hand one to her, stepping back to lean against the opposite counter. “If you can’t balance this with everything else, you’re not ready for

everything else.”

She wraps her hands around the cup, staring down at the swirling liquid. “You keep saying that.”

I study her for a moment. She’s strong, but her confidence wavers too easily. That’s why I’m here—to make sure she doesn’t falter when it matters.

“Sophie.” My tone sharpens, and her head snaps up. “This isn’t just about you. A good cover means blending in. Knowing how people think, what they want, what they’re hiding—that’s information. It’s power. College gives you this. Without it, you’re exposed. And neither of us can afford that.”

She appears to mull over what I’ve said. The nod she gives is stiff, her lips pressed into a thin line.

“Stop sulking,” I snap. “You’ve got orientation in a few hours. No one’s going to care what’s going on in your head, and you have to play the part. You’ve got to sell it, Sophie. People notice cracks. Keep your feelings in check, or people will start asking questions. You don’t want that, believe me.”

Her shoulders stiffen, but she doesn’t argue. She knows better.

She rolls her eyes instead. “Anything else?”

I glance at the clock: 4:36 a.m.

“No,” I say, taking a long sip of coffee. “Not yet.”

3

CHARLOTTE

The city's heat is relentless, even in the shade of Columbia's iconic campus. The sidewalks pulse with the energy of August—too many people, too much noise, and not enough relief. I stand on the corner of Broadway, sunglasses shielding my eyes as I watch the churn of students and parents filing through the university gates.

My phone buzzes. Carlo.

I ignore it.

Sophie stands next to me, rifling through a tote bag stuffed with orientation schedules and welcome packets. Her hair's down today, waves brushing her shoulders, but the heat has already plastered stray strands to her temples.

"This is stupid," she says, pulling out a map of the campus like she might actually need it. "I already hate this place. It's a waste of time. And why did we drive here when we could've flown?"

I glance at her, my voice flat. "So we could spend quality time together, and you need to understand the area."

She rolls her eyes, shifting from foot to foot. "You and your cryptic answers. It's New York, not the Amazon."

I let her frustration roll off me. She doesn't get it yet—why we're here, why I made her sit through hours of traffic to arrive under the cover of normalcy. But she will.

My phone buzzes again. A text this time: Call me. Urgent.

"Sophie," I say, sliding my phone into my palm. "Go check out the student union."

Her brow furrows. "Why?"

Rule #11: People rarely see what's right in front of them. That's why you always dress the part. It's easier to blend in than to disappear.

But I don't say that to her. "Because I said so." I nod toward the gates. "And stop sulking."

She glares at me but grabs her bag and walks toward the campus entrance. Once she's out of sight, I hit call.

"Finally," Carlo huffs with a sigh as he picks up.

"What is it?"

"We've got a hit. Your target's in New York. Harlem, to be exact."

I straighten at the news. "Who?"

"Celeste Smith," he says, his voice tense. "Ring any bells?"

I don't answer right away, but my pulse quickens. Celeste was one of Michael's trusted handlers—the kind who made things happen and kept her hands clean in the process.

“She’s running a lounge not far from Morningside Park,” Carlo continues. “Fancy place—good food, better clientele. But rumors say she’s still moving product on the side. Serious connections, Charlotte. Tread carefully.”

“Funny. I thought I was good at my job.”

“This isn’t a joke,” he snaps. “She’s not some street-level dealer. You screw this up and she’ll bury you before you see it coming.”

I hang up without another word.

Inside the campus gates, the buzz of Columbia is both electric and exhausting. Parents clutch reusable coffee cups like lifelines while students—young, nervous, and pretending not to be—cluster around orientation booths. The air smells faintly of hot pretzels and ambition.

I spot Sophie by the library steps, her head tilted as she listens to a tour guide in a Columbia hoodie. A half-empty soda can dangles from her fingers.

She sees me approach and raises an eyebrow. “What’s the verdict?”

“Orientation’s exactly what you’d expect.”

“No,” she says, her voice sharper. “What’s going on with you?”

I glance around. Too many people, too many eyes. “We’ll talk later.”

She folds her arms. “Of course. Later. Always later.”

Her tone annoys me, but I let it slide. “Enjoy the rest of the tour,” I say, brushing past her as I head for the exit.

Back outside, I pull out my phone and skim through the dossier Carlo sent. Celeste's name catches my eye, her photo pinned to the page, her face frozen in time.

Celeste Smith. Lounge owner. NYC.

The notes are brief, but the warning is clear: Protection likely.

I swipe the screen, the words lingering in my mind. Celeste is smart, methodical, and ruthless. She doesn't leave loose ends, which makes her both a threat and an opportunity.

Sophie appears suddenly, her expression as stormy as the dark clouds rolling in over the city. "I can't do this," she says. "Turns out, I hate people."

"I see."

She shifts, restless. "So what now?"

"Now," I say, "we catch a cab. Time to learn the streets."

Her eyes widen in disbelief. "Wait, really?"

I don't look at her as I speak. "Welcome to the real world."

She doesn't ask questions. She slides into the cab beside me, her posture stiff as we pull away, the city already pulsing around us.

The cab swerves through traffic, the scent of tar and exhaust mingling with the faint odor of musty upholstery. The list I'm mulling over feels heavy as the cab picks up speed, weaving between pedestrians and honking cars.

Celeste doesn't know we're in town, but she will soon enough.

And Sophie? She's about to learn what it really means to adapt.

CHARLOTTE

The restaurant is exactly the kind of place Celeste Smith would choose—pretentious, loud, and full of people too self-absorbed to notice what’s happening around them. The walls are lined with mismatched art that’s supposed to look eclectic but just feels cluttered. The clink of wine glasses and laughter fill the air, drowning out anything less than a shout.

Perfect.

Sophie and I slide into a corner booth. She’s sitting straighter than usual, her chin lifted, lips pressed together in that tight line I know so well. But I see past it.

“She has eyes on her,” I say, nodding subtly toward Celeste at the bar. She’s exactly as Carlo described: petite but sharp-featured, dressed in a sleek black dress that looks as deadly as she is.

Two men are seated a few tables away, ostensibly enjoying their meals but clearly keeping a watchful eye on her. Discreet and professional. Security.

Sophie’s fingers tighten on her menu. “She’s surrounded. ”

“Which is why we wait. People get comfortable. They make mistakes.”

“And if she doesn’t?”

“She will.”

Celeste throws her head back in a laugh, one hand casually resting on the arm of the man to her left. She’s in her element, enjoying the power of being untouchable—or so she thinks.

“But why her?” Sophie asks. “She doesn’t look all that threatening...”

I pause, weighing how best to answer, knowing I could go a million directions with it. Instead, I decide on the truth. “It’s Rule number fourteen: always know who’s holding the leash.”

Sophie cocks her head. “So, she’s holding some metaphorical leash? And now she has to die?”

I glance around the tables then shoot her a sharp look. “Jesus, Soph. Keep your voice down.” I shift my silverware—fidgiting with the knife and fork as I adjust them, making sure they’re lined up just right, a quick, annoyed movement that says more than I care to. “She thinks she is—she was .”

“Seems like a lot of trouble for something you speak of in past tense.”

“Everyone answers to someone, even if they think they don’t. You need to figure out who’s pulling the strings before they yank yours.”

She calls my bluff. “So, this is about revenge?”

“No. It’s about Rule number four: always finish what you start. Half measures are dangerous, Sophie. Leave loose ends, and they’ll strangle you later.”

I don’t think she buys it. “You remember the plan?”

Sophie nods. “I shadow you. Watch and learn. No mistakes.”

I let the words settle between us. “And no hesitation.”

She flips her menu over and pushes it to the edge of the table. “You act like I didn’t hear you the first time.”

An hour later, Celeste leaves the bar. Her two security details follow her, but they’re blending in—calm, professional, as though they’re just part of the night. We trail at a distance, weaving through the crowd, making sure we don’t draw attention. I can see Sophie staying in lockstep with me, her movements more confident, but there’s still a touch of hesitation in her.

Celeste rounds the corner into a narrow alleyway behind the restaurant, the kind of place where someone could disappear. The perfect choke point.

My hand brushes Sophie’s arm. The signal.

She moves ahead, steps steady. I follow close behind, my hand brushing the cool metal of my gun. Celeste is distracted, fiddling with a cigarette. One of her men is handing her a lighter. As if a gift from God himself, the other heads toward the street, scanning from one direction to the other before moving back toward the lounge.

Sophie steps closer, then she freezes.

It’s subtle—a hesitation so brief that most people wouldn’t notice. But I do. Her hand falters, hovering near her pocket, the place where I know her weapon waits.

But she’s too slow.

Celeste looks up. The man with the lighter straightens, his hand dropping to his side,

reaching for something. I understand what I have to do.

I move fast. No hesitation. No second chances.

I step between Celeste and her security. My gun is already drawn, aimed at his chest. The shots ring out in the narrow space, quiet but clean. He stumbles, then drops.

Celeste doesn't react fast enough. Her eyes widen in surprise, and I'm on her instantly, hand gripping her throat, my knee in her back, pinning her to the alley wall.

I take a breath, my grip tightening. A quick, clean movement, just as I was taught. No drama, no struggle .

Her body goes limp in my arms and I drop her, just like that.

I don't stop to savor the moment. Instead, I grab Sophie by the arm, dragging her out of the alley in the opposite direction from which we came.

We don't speak until we're back at the hotel. Sophie sits on the edge of the bed, her head in her hands. There's a crisp, sterile scent that hangs in the air—clean, almost clinical, but with an undertone of something soft, like fresh linens or newly pressed sheets. It's the smell of a place that's been recently prepared for someone but not lived in yet.

"You froze," I say, standing over her. My voice leaves no room for excuses.

"I—I didn't mean to."

"Intentions don't matter. Actions do." I pace the room, the adrenaline still burning through me. "Hesitation gets you killed, Sophie. It gets me killed."

“I’m sorry,” she says, but the words do nothing to soften me.

“Sorry doesn’t fix this. Hesitation — emotion — fear— it has no place in our work. I thought you understood that.”

She doesn’t respond.

I sigh, forcing myself to sit across from her. “This isn’t just about you anymore. We’re cleaning up your father’s mess, and that means no mistakes. We don’t get second chances in this line of work.”

Sophie looks up at me, her expression hardening. “He wasn’t my father. You lied about that too.”

“He was your father in every way that mattered.”

“I don’t want to talk about it.”

“Fine,” I say, leaning forward. “But Soph—next time, there won’t be anyone to step in.”

“So you’ve said.”

She turns away, staring out the window. The silence stretches between us. I know she’s angry, and I know she’ll hold onto that anger like armor.

Which is good. She’ll need it.

5

CHARLOTTE

The knife whistles past my face, embedding itself in the wooden crate behind me.

“Missed.” I don’t bother softening the word.

Sophie lowers her arm, lips pressing into a hard line. Sweat drips down the side of her face, but she doesn’t wipe it away.

“I’m trying.”

“Trying doesn’t count.” I walk over, yank the knife free, and toss it back. It clatters against her palm before she tightens her grip. “Again. Aim this time.”

She throws it, but she looks at me like she’d rather be anywhere else, and I don’t blame her. The warehouse reeks of mildew and metal, the kind of place where you can’t help but feel like you’re being watched, even when no one’s around. It’s the perfect place for training. At least, that’s what I keep telling myself, standing across from Sophie, knife in hand.

The city noise is muted here, but it doesn’t matter. I’ve been tracking someone for the last three days. He’s been tailing us, never too close, always hanging just far enough back to look like an accident. He’s not an accident. I’ve seen him. Sophie hasn’t. Not yet .

“Pick it up,” I say, watching her eyes flicker to the knife on the ground.

She doesn’t move immediately. Instead, she stares at it, her jaw tight, her mind running through whatever excuse she’s come up with. That’s fine. I’ve got time.

“Throw it,” I add. “And aim.”

Her fingers close around the handle, slow and deliberate. The knife leaves her hand, sails through the air, and hits the crate with a dull thud. Barely a scrape. It’s not enough.

“Missed.”

Her face tenses, as though I don’t understand the situation. But I do. All too well. She’s thinking about that boy she met at orientation. The one who keeps texting her, the one she keeps texting back when she thinks I’m not paying attention.

I’ve tried to explain it to her, in a way she still hasn’t fully grasped: Men are wonderful, but you have to be careful. The wrong kind of man—and sometimes even the right one—will find a way to make your world very, very small. I suppose time will prove that, but waiting for it to do so? That’s dangerous.

“I didn’t ask for a try,” I continue, walking her way. “I asked for a hit.”

Her knuckles are white around the handle of the knife, her eyes burning with frustration, but she holds herself back, still trying to figure out how far she can push without me pushing back harder.

“Throw it again,” I say.

This time, she throws it harder, faster. The blade grazes the edge of the crate, barely

grazing the target. It's closer. But not close enough.

"Better," I tell her. "But if that were a throat, you'd be dead."

I can feel the frustration radiating off her, like she's ready to explode. She wants to yell, to quit—but she doesn't. Not yet. That will come in time. Especially when I explain to her that the new "friendship" she's got going has to stop. I've seen the way she looks when a new text comes in, and it's not good. Trouble rarely comes with a warning, except this kind. It's clear as day to anyone paying the least bit of attention.

"Do you think it's enough?" I ask, stepping closer. "Because this isn't a game. I didn't teach you this for fun, Sophie. You're not going to get a second chance next time."

She lifts the knife again, her arm trembling as she sets herself up for another throw. Her hands are shaking. I don't say anything. I'm waiting for her to break, for her to prove to me that she's ready for something more than what she's been doing.

The next throw goes deeper. Not much, but it hits the wood with a better sound. The thud is louder. She's getting there.

Her arm shakes when she lowers it, exhaustion lining her features, but I don't care. I'm not here to coddle her. I'm here to make sure she survives. I watch as she picks up the knife and throws again, her motions more deliberate, more controlled. She gets a little closer with each throw, her frustration feeding her focus.

She's starting to get it. She's starting to understand that hesitation is dangerous.

"Again," I say, but it's not a request. She picks up the knife and throws. This time, she sinks it an inch deeper.

“Good,” I say, but there’s no praise in my voice. “Now ten more. Same spot.”

Her eyes flash, disbelief crossing her face.

“You want to learn or not?” My voice cuts through the air like a blade. “This isn’t about you, Sophie. It’s about both of us. So if you’re going to waste my time, I’ll leave. But if you want to get out of here alive, you’ll stop playing and start doing.”

She doesn’t say anything, but I don’t need her to. She picks up the knife again, throwing it with a sharp, controlled force. One throw after another. I watch the sweat start to bead on her forehead as she works, her movements growing more precise with each repetition. She’s angry, but it’s a good kind of angry. It’s the kind of anger that pushes her past her limits. By the time she’s on throw number ten, her arm’s trembling, but she hasn’t quit.

I take a long look at her, trying to think of something to say, but come up empty. She may never speak to me again, but she’s still standing. That’s something.

“Good enough for today,” I say. “Back to the hotel.”

“I want to go back to my dorm. You know, like a normal college student.”

“Tomorrow. Tonight, I need you with me.”

I expect her to push back, but she doesn’t.

CHARLOTTE

The heat wraps around us the moment we step out of the warehouse, sticky and suffocating. It's almost a relief compared to the stuffy air inside, but I'm not looking for relief. I'm looking for the guy who's been trailing us.

I don't tell Sophie yet. It's better if she figures it out herself. She has to figure it out herself. She's been silent since we left the warehouse, trudging along like the weight of the night is dragging her down. Maybe she knows. Maybe she doesn't.

In the back of the car, I tell the driver to take us to the hotel. The chaos of the city filters through the windows, but my mind stays locked on the man following us. He could be anyone—agency, enemy, someone in between—but he's out there, and I know he's not far. Sophie sits beside me, her body stiff, her eyes fixed on the blur of lights outside. She doesn't say a word. Neither do I.

Back at the hotel, she storms inside like the heat followed her in, dumping her frustration into the room. She flings herself onto the bed, the mattress creaking under the force. Her limbs go slack, but it's not the kind of relaxation that brings relief. It's the exhaustion of someone holding herself together by a thread. Her gaze stays locked on the ceiling, her chest rising and falling faster than it should. I can feel her anger crackling through the room.

I lean against the doorframe, letting the silence stretch. "You're angry."

She doesn't respond.

"That's good," I say, my voice cold enough to slice through her quiet. "Use it. You'll need it."

I step forward, keeping my tone even but firm. "I know you think I'm being hard on you. But you hesitated with Smith. And you were unfocused tonight. You can't afford to hesitate, Sophie. Not now, not ever. You know that."

Her head turns slowly, her eyes locking onto mine. "I get it."

"You don't." I move closer, shrinking the distance between us. "This isn't just about you. Every hesitation, every second you waste, every time you miss—it puts us both at risk. And if you think I'm going to let you fail just because you're having a bad day, you're wrong."

"Who said I was having a bad day?"

"It's pretty apparent, Soph—you don't have to say anything. It's in how you're being ."

"And how am I being?"

"Emotional."

"Oh, I'm sorry. I'm a human who has feelings. You'll have to forgive me for not being a robot like you."

"Emotions are like stilettos—sharp and dangerous. Show them off, and someone will use them against you."

“Oh, God. Another of your rules.” She scoffs. “I can’t believe you’re comparing the way I feel to shoes. But then, it’s you, so...”

I shrug. “What? It’s true. The only thing that should be on display is your confidence—and maybe your shoes. This is business, love. Although, it’s good advice for life in general, if you ask me...”

“Yeah, well, I didn’t. ”

Her eyes shift to her phone, the look in them empty, distant. But as she reads, her spine straightens, telling me everything I need to know.

Five minutes later, she shoves the phone in her pocket. Her shoulders are squared now, her expression unreadable. The anger hasn’t gone—it’s been buried, refocused.

That’s fine. Tonight, she can stew. Tomorrow, there’ll be no room for it.

HAYLEY

There's something off about my family. It's not just the little things anymore, like Mom avoiding questions or Sophie getting weirdly cagey. It's everything. The way they disappear for long stretches, the whispers on phone calls they think I can't hear when they visit, the secrets they're not even trying to hide anymore.

I've always been good at noticing things. And now I can't stop noticing. Maybe it's because I hate it here. Maybe it's because Mom refuses to let me come home, which isn't even normal.

That's why I'm here, alone in the library, scrolling through endless articles on my phone. Boarding school should be a gift when you're trying to figure out why your family's lies don't add up. No one's hovering over my shoulder. No one's asking questions. But it's not a gift. My mother is a liar. My sister is a liar. And if I can find out exactly what it is they're lying about, I can use it to my advantage. It will be my ticket home.

And that's where I need to be, because that's where Elliot is. Sure, he has a new girlfriend now, but I've checked her out on Insta, and she's hardly anything to worry about. Provided I can get back to Texas. Soon.

I search up recent murders in NYC, because I know this will be what Mom is looking at. Her fascination with true crime is odd to me; it should be odd to anyone. I mean, what kind of person wants to read about murder all the time? I know being a flight

attendant is really boring, and she has to deal with assholes all the time, but still. It's not normal. That's what Dad used to say, anyway.

I pause on an article at the top of the search results. Gruesome Murder of Trafficking Suspect Vincent Marano. My thumb hovers over the screen as I skim through it. Murdered last night. Few details. Police say the public should be on alert, but feel it's an isolated incident.

I beg to differ. In fact, I know that name.

Not from TV or the news, but from Mom's computer. I wasn't supposed to be snooping around on her laptop, but I did once, years ago, when I was looking to see if she'd ordered my birthday present. I thought maybe she was hiding something nice—a new phone or the trip to Disney I'd been asking for. Instead, I found files. Names. Faces.

Vincent Marano was one of them.

I feel slightly dizzy as I scroll back to the photo accompanying the article. It's the same guy I saw in Mom's files. I'm certain of it.

The librarian clears her throat, snapping me out of my thoughts. I glance up. Mrs. Fairchild is glaring at me from behind her desk, her hand on the light switch.

"Five minutes until closing, Hayley."

I nod, slipping my phone into my pocket. "Got it."

The article stays with me as I walk back to my dorm. It doesn't make sense. None of this does. I've tried telling myself that Mom and Sophie are just...unusual. Different. But something else is going on.

It can't be a coincidence.

Later, in the quiet of my room, I pull up the article again. My roommate is out—probably sneaking vodka into her Coke at one of those lame study parties I've stopped pretending to care about. That's fine. I need the space.

The words on the screen blur as my mind races. Mom's always been secretive, but this feels bigger. It feels dangerous.

I scroll back to the top of the article, where the photo of Vincent Marano stares back at me, hollow and lifeless.

My phone buzzes in my hand.

A message.

Unknown number. Just six words: Are you looking for the truth?

My breath catches, and I sit up straighter, staring at the screen. I don't move, don't blink, just wait for something else.

A second message appears. I can help you find it.

I glance around the room like whoever sent it might somehow be watching me. My fingers hover over my phone. I shouldn't respond. I know that. But curiosity—my biggest flaw—wins out.

Who is this?

Three dots. They disappear. Then reappear.

Someone who knows your family's secrets.

The blood drains from my face. My hands tremble as I lock the phone and toss it onto the nightstand, like creating distance will erase the message.

I try to focus on the noises outside—the distant sound of laughter in the hall, the faint creak of floorboards overhead. Normal things. Safe things.

But I'm not imagining it. Someone knows something. Someone who's watching, waiting.

And they want me to know, too.

8

SOPHIE

The streets of New York are alive—too alive. The noise of traffic, voices, the bright pulse of neon flashing through the cracks of the buildings. People shuffle by, lost in their own world, and I’m trying to focus on anything but the man behind us.

He’s still there. Has been for at least the last seven blocks. Which is how I know he’s following us.

Plus, I noticed him yesterday. He didn’t stand out at first—just another face in the crowd, just another person who might’ve been walking the same path. But now? It’s obvious.

I glance at Mom, pretending like everything’s fine, like I don’t feel that twinge in my gut, that cold weight settling in the pit of my stomach. She’s walking ahead, her heels clicking against the sidewalk like she doesn’t even notice. But I do.

And I can’t shake the feeling that something’s wrong.

“Mom,” I say, trying to sound casual, “Is that guy with our agency?”

She doesn’t even look back. “I don’t think so. Why?”

My stomach tightens. That’s when I know. I don’t know why, but I feel it. This isn’t just a coincidence. It never is. He’s too close. Too persistent. He’s not here for

nothing.

I start walking faster. My legs feel shaky, but I make them move, one step after the other. I'm not thinking about anything else anymore—school, the annoying roommate I'm going to have to figure out how not to kill, the texts I haven't responded to—none of that matters. Only him. Only his footsteps behind me, too steady, too close. That's all there is.

The alley is ahead. Dark. Quiet. The kind of place no one would hear you scream, if things went sideways. I'm not thinking about the consequences. I can't. I just need him to follow us in. I need him to make the mistake.

I glance at Mom. She's just walking, not looking at me. She's already read the situation. She knows. She's waiting for me to handle it.

Really, I'd prefer dinner over murder, but what can you do?

Besides, maybe it will get Mom off my back for a while. Probably not, though a girl can dream.

But that's all it is. A dream. And I know better than to hope for easy answers.

The alley smells like trash and old beer. The air feels thick and sour, like it's choking on something. It's the perfect place to do this. I reach for the knife, my fingers shaking just a little as I pull it out of its sheath. The metal is cold in my hand, steady. I grip it harder, trying to ignore how my skin feels like it's crawling.

I don't want to do this. I really don't. But I have to. He's closer now. Too close.

His footsteps slow behind me. He's right there, close enough now that I can feel his breath on my neck. I don't dare turn around, but his proximity feels like a weight on

my chest. My throat tightens around the lump of fear I can't swallow down.

I can't wait any longer.

SOPHIE

I turn quickly, my heart hammering in my throat. My hands tremble, and the knife feels impossibly heavy in my grip, but I don't hesitate. I drive it into him.

The blade sinks deep into his abdomen, and my stomach lurches with the motion. It's not quick or clean; it drags, tearing through flesh. The sickening sound of it fills my ears, wet and visceral. He doesn't make a sound at first. His eyes are wide, confused, as if he can't comprehend what just happened. As if he didn't think I'd do it.

I twist the knife, and his breath catches, a thin gasp escaping him. Blood floods out, dark and thick, quickly staining his shirt. I shove him against the wall, my hands slipping, coated with blood. He claws desperately at his side, trying to stop it, but his hands are useless, trembling and slick.

I press harder, my pulse roaring in my ears, my breath shallow, ragged. My hands are numb now, but I don't stop. He doesn't get the chance to fight back.

I twist the knife again, deeper this time. He gasps, choking on his own blood as it spills from his mouth, staining his teeth. His body goes limp, hands falling useless to his sides. His knees buckle, and he crumples to the floor.

He doesn't scream. He doesn't beg. His body just goes down with a soft thud, and I stand there, watching it happen like this is someone else's life.

I step back. His blood pools beneath him, spreading into the dirt of the alley. It's thick and dark. I tell myself it looks normal, like it's been there all along.

I feel it. The terror. It's not gone. It's still there, burning in the pit of my stomach, knotting my gut into something heavy and cold. I didn't think it would feel like this—so wrong, so sharp, so final.

But I'm still standing. And he's not.

I don't look at his face. I can't. I don't know what I'd see there, and I'm not sure I want to. But I know one thing: I did what I had to. Even though my hands are shaking, even though my skin feels tight and wrong.

I hear footsteps—Mom. She's looking at the body, the blood on the ground, but her face doesn't change. She doesn't even blink. She just tosses her coat my way, which should seem odd given that it's the dead of summer, but it's my mother, so it feels perfectly normal.

"Let's go," she says, motioning for me to put it on. "We can order room service."

I don't argue. I don't even hesitate. I slip my arms into the coat, feeling the weight of it settle over my shoulders like an old, familiar burden.

In the car, on the way back to the hotel it's quiet. The city lights blur past the windows, but my mind is stuck in the alley, with him. I can still see the look in his eyes, the way he tried to fight, the way he never had a chance.

Mom doesn't say anything at first. She just watches me, her gaze intense, like she's trying to see something beneath my expression .

Finally, she speaks. "You did good."

She wants a response I can't give her.

"You handled it," she says it like it's no big deal, like it's nothing.

I turn away, focusing on the passing lights. I can still hear him gasping, see the blood on my hands.

"You're still alive," she continues, her voice detached. "That's what matters."

I can see she wants me to say something. But what is there to say?

She sighs wistfully, almost like she's satisfied with herself. "Next time will be easier."

Next time .

That thought bothers me more than the blood I can still smell on my skin.

Mom leans back in her seat, her tone softening just enough to be noticeable. "Don't worry, Soph. You'll get better."

The words are meant to encourage me, but they settle heavy in my chest.

Easier.

Better.

I press my forehead against the cool glass of the window, trying not to think about the man's expression when he realized what was happening. I think about those unread texts instead. I wasn't going to respond, I was going to let it go, like I know I should. Now, I'm not sure.

I think Mom is right. Next time will be easier.

That's what scares me.

10

SOPHIE

You blink, and you're leaving the hotel room. Blink again, and you're on the streets of New York, trying to pretend that everything's fine. Blink one more time, and you're walking into a party, swallowing down every fucking ridiculous piece of guilt that's stuck in your throat.

I stare at the ceiling for a while before I even think about moving. The city lights keep blinking through the curtains, making the room feel like it's alive in some way I don't want to be a part of. I can hear Mom's soft breathing from here. She's sleeping, probably dreaming about whatever it is she dreams about—orders, control, perfect little assassins.

I don't look at her for too long—just long enough to make sure she's out.

I'm a little surprised she didn't wake up when I pulled the covers off and got up. She doesn't miss much. But for tonight, I need a break from her, from all of it. From the killing, from pretending, from the fear that's been sitting in my chest like a hot rock all day.

I grab my phone off the nightstand. I'm not surprised when I see Malik's name flashing across the screen .

Malik: Hey, Rob's throwing a party. You coming or what?

I don't even think twice.

Yeah. Send me the address.

There's something absurd about it. The way the words come out so easily. I'm already thinking about how to explain it if Mom wakes up and asks where I'm going. But she won't. I added an Ambien to her nightly glass of red. She's going to kill me, but she's also going to have the best night's sleep she's had in a long time. Maybe that will be worth it to her.

Time will tell if it's worth it to me. I keep trying to convince myself that this is normal. At some point, I really did think I could have a normal life. And maybe, in another world, I'd be at some lame bar with friends I didn't know that well, talking about shit that doesn't matter, and none of this would be my reality. But that's not the world I'm in. Not as long as she's around.

I pull on my jacket, trying to ignore the way my fingers feel like they're still trembling. I'm surprised Mom didn't notice something was off. She has a way of reading me, and right now, I'm way off script. I glance at her, once more, but she's still breathing steadily in the dark, her head slightly tilted, like she's in another world.

I slip out the door quietly and close it behind me.

The city's buzzing with everything I'm trying to forget. The street's crowded, even at this time of night, like the world's in fast forward and I'm the only one who's moving at half-speed.

I make it to Rob's place in what feels like record time, but I don't feel any better. If anything, I feel worse. Everyone else is laughing, shouting, acting normal, like none of them know what it feels like to do something you can't take back. The music's loud enough to rattle my teeth, and it's all the distraction I need to keep from thinking

about anything real.

I spot Malik right away. He's standing by the kitchen, talking to a group of people, his smile wide and effortless. When he sees me, he grins and waves.

"Sophie!" he calls, and I force myself to smile back.

"You actually showed," he says, his voice more amused than surprised. "Thought you were too good for this shit."

"Guess not."

Malik looks at me for a second, his expression shifting. "Relax, Sophie. It was a joke."

When I don't say anything, he gives me the once-over. "Come on, let's get you a drink. You look like you need it."

Three drinks later and sweet, unassuming Malik is trying to convince me my biggest problem is that I'm homesick. "It's completely normal," he says, slurring his words in a way I find slightly endearing.

"Right."

He stares at me for a long beat until I finally add, "I mean, yeah, I know."

"So what have you been up to, Sophie Jones? You only respond to about one in ten texts, so it's hard to tell if you're avoiding me or if you're just busy."

I grab a drink from the counter, anything to fill the space between us. "Just, y'know... Hanging out with my mom and trying not to stab some random guy in an alleyway." I

say it too casually, but it's out before I can stop myself.

"That's New York for you."

"No kidding. In Texas it's easier. We just use guns."

Malik laughs, the sound light, like it's all just a joke. But there's a flicker in his expression, something that shifts, subtle but noticeable. "You're funny, Sophie Jones."

I tilt my head back, swallowing down the burn of whatever drink I've grabbed. It's cheap, it's bitter, and it's perfect. Because in a second, the noise of the party fades away, and I'm not thinking about the knife in my hand or the blood on my clothes or what happened in that alley. Just for a second, I can forget .

I take another drink, feeling the edges of my thoughts blur. The party spins around me, people laughing, dancing, doing all the things kids my age are supposed to do. And for a moment, I think about what it would be like to be one of them. To live a life that isn't measured by how many bodies you've left behind.

But then Malik asks another question, and I'm pulled back into reality. "You ever think about what people really want?" he asks with an offhandedness that feels deliberate, like he's testing me.

I glance at him, trying to find the right words, but my mouth is too dry. "What do you mean?" I ask, though I think I already know.

He shrugs, flicking a finger toward the chaos around us. "You know. Everyone's out here pretending. Like we're all doing this because we want to. But do you think we even know what we really want? Or is it all just...this?"

He gestures at the room, at the mess, the noise. “It’s kind of funny, don’t you think? We’re all just pretending to be someone we’re not, wanting something we really don’t.”

I can’t help it. I laugh. Not because it’s funny, but because it’s the truth. “You have no idea how often I think about that.”

He raises his cup in my direction. “Birds of a feather,” he says, and I hate myself a little because I think I might actually like him. Neither one of us can afford that.

So I have another drink, and then another. The party is still loud, the music thumping in my chest, but my head’s already somewhere else. Somewhere darker. I can feel the knife in my hand again, the way it felt to twist it into someone who thought they were safe. The look in his eyes when he realized he wasn’t.

I smile, though, as I lead Malik out to the balcony, because no one here knows and I can be whoever I want.

And maybe that’s the only thing I have left to hold onto.

CHARLOTTE

I step off the curb, scanning the street for a cab. Sophie's still behind me, trudging along like she's carrying the weight of the world on her shoulders.

The sun is up, the heat rising off the pavement, and I feel the sweat gathering at the back of my neck. But it's not the heat that's bothering me. It's her.

Sophie stumbles to a halt beside me, rubbing her eyes like she's just pulled herself out of a dream. Her steps are slow, uneven, like she's wading through molasses. She's barely holding it together, and we're not speaking.

"We're not here for nothing," I say. "This is called having a job, Sophie. You know, responsibility."

She doesn't even look up. The hangover's got a hold on her, and for some reason, she assumes I'm the one who's supposed to fix it.

We're on our way to check out an apartment, which was one of my better ideas, that much is clear. Texas is entirely too far away, and right now, the only thing that matters is dragging Sophie back into the game, not letting her fall into whatever mess she's trying to create for herself.

I hear her sigh behind me, but I don't care if she's tired or hungover. I don't care if she feels like shit. She said she wanted this life, this world. I didn't drag her into it,

and it's too late for second thoughts now.

We step into the polished lobby where the agent greets us, but I barely register the niceties, the smiles, the small talk. I'm focused on Sophie, barely able to keep her eyes open as we head into the first apartment. She's there, but she feels miles away.

When she asks to wait in the lobby, I don't give in.

I look over the sleek space—modern, spacious, just the right amount of anonymity. It would work. But I don't care about the apartment. I care about getting Sophie back into focus. Ever since we arrived in NYC, I could feel her fading further away, like she's not even here. It's like I'm carrying both of us, and I'm not sure how long I can hold her up.

The agent is talking about the kitchen, the layout, the “luxurious” amenities. But all I hear is Sophie, mulling about in the background, her coffee sloshing around in her hands.

I glance back at her, taking in the slumped shoulders and distant eyes. It's like she's somewhere else entirely, her mind running miles ahead of her body, and I know she's thinking about that boy. He's trouble—for her, for me—and Sophie's too young and too naive to see it. She thinks she can have it all, but she has no idea the effort it takes to keep up that kind of lie.

That's when I hear her soft sigh. It cuts through the agent's words, pulling me back to a moment I should've left behind, one I shouldn't be thinking about now. In my mind, we're back at the hotel.

The stillness in the room was suffocating, and I could feel the space between us growing. Sophie's eyes were unfocused, as if she was locked in some quiet battle with herself. The tension in her body was unmistakable. She was trying to hold it

together, but I could tell she was losing.

I turned, meeting her eyes, and the calm was gone. “You drugged me.”

Her hands stilled, like she was trying to make her body disappear into the bed. She didn’t look away, but I could see it in her eyes—she’d been caught, but she wasn’t going to easily admit it.

“I didn’t think you’d notice,” she said, her voice almost apologetic, but I heard the lie in it. She wasn’t sorry. She was just frustrated I caught her.

"Of course you did," I said. "You just thought you could pull it off without me seeing the strings. Did you really think I wouldn’t notice when you slipped something in my drink? When you were standing there watching me sleep?"

Sophie opened her mouth to say something, but then she just closed it. She was trying to find the right lie, but I wasn’t listening to those anymore. She can’t fake it. Not with me.

“I just wanted you to get some sleep,” she finally said, like she was justifying herself, but there was a dark edge to it. "You needed it. I needed you to be...rested."

Her words hit me harder than they should. It surprised me how effortlessly the lies rolled off her tongue.

I let out a slow breath, taking a step forward. “That’s not why you drugged me, Soph. You know it, and I know it.”

Her eyes flashed, but she didn’t look away. “I just didn’t want you to be so...on edge all the time. You’re so high-strung, Mom. Always going, going, going. I thought maybe if you took a break?—”

I held up a hand, cutting her off. “This isn’t about me. You did it so you could sneak off and do whatever the hell you wanted. You did it so I wouldn’t have anything to say about it, so you could avoid hearing the truth.”

Sophie flinched, but she didn’t back down. She was digging herself deeper, trying to make it sound like she was doing this out of some warped sense of care. But I’m not stupid. I knew exactly what she was doing.

“I just wanted to get away for a little while,” she said, her words clipped, defensive. “Without you breathing down my neck. I just?—”

“Just what?” I snapped. “Just what, Sophie? Don’t lie to me. You are walking right into something you know you shouldn’t. And maybe it’s because you’re lonely—maybe you just need a friend. But this business doesn’t lend itself kindly to friends. If you don’t want to face what we’re doing here, what you signed up for, you should have thought about that a long time ago.”

She stared at me for a beat, her face hardening. And then, in a move I didn’t expect, she spoke again, this time quieter. “I did it because you needed it. You’ve been working too hard, and you’re—” She stopped, then forced the next words out. “You’re pushing me too hard.”

I waited for the anger to rise, but something else hit me first. A flicker of something almost like admiration. The audacity of it. The way she could just twist things, make herself out to be the martyr here.

I almost laughed, but I bit it back. “You did it for me?” My tone shifted, the words sharp but with a hint of something else. “You think this is how you help me?”

She wasn’t listening anymore. She’d already found her justification, and it didn’t matter what I said now. “Yes,” she said firmly, her eyes meeting mine, as if daring

me to argue. "I thought you'd be better off."

A moment passed. I looked at her, taking it all in. She was wrong. She was so wrong. But there was something there, something I didn't want to admit—she almost believed her lies.

I felt my jaw tighten. "That's your answer, Sophie? You didn't think? You didn't think I'd see through this?"

She didn't flinch this time. She was waiting for me to go on, to yell, to break her down—but I didn't. Because it didn't matter anymore.

"You've got a lot of work ahead of you," I said. "But this? This isn't the way to go about it."

Her expression shifted slightly. Was it doubt? Maybe. I didn't know.

It wasn't. It was anger. Her scoff told me that much. "But that's not the only reason I did it..."

"Oh, wonderful. Please enlighten me."

"I know you paid that man to follow us."

"So?"

"So you let me kill an innocent person. And for what—to prove I could?"

"No," I said, meeting her gaze. "I did it to teach you a lesson."

"Of course you did."

I didn't flinch. "Rule number ten, Sophie. If you can buy it or blackmail it, don't trust it. Loyalty is expensive. And anyone willing to sell theirs will eventually sell yours too."

"That doesn't even make sense. Maybe he just needed the money."

"Maybe...but you're the one who didn't bother to check."

She opened her mouth to respond, but I didn't give her the chance. I turned my back and walked out of the room, leaving her there to think about what I said.

12

CHARLOTTE

I turn toward Sophie, my nails digging into my palms as I fight the urge to snap. She's not even pretending to pay attention, her posture slumped, her eyes glazed. She's making small talk with the agent like she's here for a social gathering instead of an apartment search. I've had enough of this.

I don't know how to get through to her. She needs to focus. We're not here to make friends. We're here to work. She wanted this. She said she wanted it.

When I told her that in the car on the way over, she didn't deny it, which I suppose was meant to be a win for me, but it didn't feel like one. It's like she's forgotten the whole point of this—everything we're doing here is to make her stronger, more capable, yet she's done nothing but make it harder.

My blood boils. This isn't how I planned for today to go. How is she ever going to be able to manage in life if she can't even deal with finding a place to live? She should be paying attention, not wasting time chatting like this is a casual outing. I'm not going to be around forever. These are things she will need to know. But before I can tell her this, before I can tear into her, the agent's voice cuts through the tension, sharp and direct.

“Charlotte, the kitchen's over here, but if you want, we can?—”

Her voice pulls me back to the present. I glance at her, realizing I've let myself drift.

The agent's already half-turning, waiting for me to follow her.

And I'm about to when my phone buzzes. I glance down— Carlo.

"Excuse me," I say to the agent, stepping from the living area into the hall. For the first time all morning, I smile. I know exactly what this is. It's the first good thing to happen all day.

I swipe to answer. "Carlo."

"Charlotte," his voice comes through, tight, serious. "We're changing course."

My smile fades. "I'm in the middle of something."

"I know," Carlo says, his tone going flat, professional. "But we need to change direction. There's a new priority. We've got a celebrity on the radar who's hosting a series of high-profile events. But there's more happening behind the scenes. You'll get closer to this than you think. I need you to get in, build access."

"This wasn't the plan." Frustration creeps into my voice. "I've been waiting three years. Three years of your delays and distractions. You promised me—this was supposed to be the time. It's why I came to this filthy, overcrowded city."

Carlo's voice softens just a touch, but it's still all business. "I get it. But trust me, this will set everything else up. The work on the list? It'll feel like a walk in the park once you're inside."

I hold the phone to my ear, keeping my expression neutral as his words sink in. Another network. Why? Changing course now makes no sense. But then, none of the agency's requests ever make sense. They like it that way. I play along because it keeps food on the table and—on most days—I like being alive .

“Details?”

“I’ll send them,” Carlo replies. “But the goal’s simple: get access. Once you’re inside, everything else falls into place.”

I glance over at Sophie, who’s still standing by the window, staring out at the city like she has no fucking clue what she’s supposed to be doing. “What’s the timeline?”

“Now,” he says, sharp. “It’s moving faster than we anticipated. You need to move quickly, but be smart. Keep it tight.”

“Got it,” I say, already thinking through the steps. I’ve hated every celebrity I’ve ever met, but I’ve never been disappointed by a challenge.

I’m about to end the call when Carlo speaks again. “There’s something else. It needs to be handled today.”

I glance at Sophie again, her eyes vacant. Sometimes, swift action is the best lesson. “You’ll get me the details?”

“Of course,” he responds curtly. “But be careful. There’s more attention on you than you realize. Move like you’ve been doing this your whole life. Don’t screw it up. The list will happen when it’s time, but right now, this is the priority. Understood?”

I nod, though he can’t see me. “Understood.”

The call ends, and I look up. Sophie’s on her phone, texting someone. She’s no longer staring out the window, lost in her head. Her posture’s more alert now, and I know exactly who she’s texting. She’s never been good at hiding it, but this time, she’s not even trying.

I turn back to the agent, who's still rambling about square footage. I'm done with the apartment. I'm done with everything, possibly even Sophie. She's a liability—a distraction. And right now, I can't afford to be distracted.

But she's my daughter. What am I supposed to do? I can't dispose of her the way I do everyone else. The anger surges, a knot in my chest; it's the feeling of being trapped. She's not ready. I've been holding out hope, but I'm starting to realize—maybe I made a mistake. And I don't make mistakes.

I grab my bag and head for the door. "We're done here," I say, not bothering to look back. "I hate this place."

Sophie glances at me, her eyes flickering, and we leave in silence. The city moves around us, but all I can think about is the email from Carlo waiting in my inbox. I need this. Sophie needs this. Even if she doesn't know it yet.

CHARLOTTE

The house smells like dust and old money—an unbearable mix of things that should have been burned away a decade ago. But here we are. Another estate. Another person to wipe off the map.

I don't know why this job, this man, but it isn't my place to ask questions. Besides, I don't have to. It can only be one of a few reasons: Someone's made an enemy. Someone doesn't like the competition. Someone has enough resources to make someone go away. In the end, it doesn't really matter, I suppose. I do what I came to do, and I move onto the next job.

But this doesn't stop my daughter from asking questions. Why are we here? How long is this going to take? When can we go back to the hotel? Do I have any aspirin? Can you die from a hangover?

Sophie's walking a few paces behind me, as usual. Her footsteps are uneven, and she's barely keeping up. She looks like she's about to pass out, and I want to scream at her to shut up, to get it together, but that would be a waste of energy. I can feel it in my bones—the weakness. The lack of forethought. It's suffocating her, and I'm not sure how much longer I can let it slide.

I step over the threshold into the entryway. The quiet here is almost unnatural. The house is too perfect, too clean for someone who has committed the kinds of sins I know this man has.

I don't look back at Sophie. Not yet. But I can feel her pulling away. I know what she's doing—watching, waiting. Second-guessing.

I know what I have to do.

I reach into my jacket and pull out my gun. The cool metal feels good in my hand. I don't check the safety. I don't need to.

Sophie's eyes meet mine from across the room, but she doesn't speak. She knows the drill.

I lead the way to the kitchen, where the man's already sitting at the table. He's supposed to be working, reviewing paperwork—his family business. And he is. He doesn't even notice me when I enter. I step into his line of sight, and his eyes flicker up to meet mine. He freezes. Which is what I want.

The room's still too quiet. His pulse is too loud.

The gun feels heavier than it should. There's no emotion in this. There can't be. I know this moment—this split second before everything goes to shit. I've done it too many times before.

I pull the trigger.

The noise is deafening in the stillness of the kitchen. His body jerks back, the blood spurting across the table and the wall behind him. I don't flinch. I don't even blink.

His body slumps. He doesn't make a sound, just falls to the floor like a puppet whose strings were cut too soon.

Sophie doesn't move. She doesn't look at me. She's still standing there, watching him

die, and I don't know what to make of it.

I step past her. "You should've done it. "

Sophie blinks like she's been snapped out of a trance. Her face is pale, her hand still gripping the doorframe like she's afraid to follow. She's standing there like she can't decide if she's going to throw up or collapse.

"I—I couldn't."

I know.

I don't need to say anything. She's aware of what's expected of her. And she knows the consequences of failure. I won't be able to protect her forever. The agency will dispose of her. She knows too much; she's seen too much.

I don't wait for her to catch up. I walk down the hallway, my heels echoing in the otherwise silent house. I'm pissed, and it's not only with Sophie. The man was supposed to be alone. But he isn't.

Carlo was either wrong or he lied on purpose.

Regardless, it doesn't matter. It is what it is.

The next one is crouched in the living room between two end tables, a woman with too much makeup and too little time to figure out how much danger she's really in. I move quickly. A shot to the chest, and she's gone before she even has the chance to beg.

Blood splatters across the wall. It's messy, it's brutal, and it's exactly what I need today.

Upstairs, there are footsteps. I take the stairs two at a time, each step deliberate, closer to what I hope is the final act.

This job was supposed to be easy. In and out. One target.

But as I push open the door to the bedroom, I see another man standing there—expecting me.

He's holding a gun.

I don't hesitate. Not for a second. I pull the trigger faster. He's still trying to aim, his hand shaking. The gun goes off. But it misses.

I fire once. The shot rings out and hits him in the neck.

He drops, his blood pooling across pristine sheets.

I stand over him, watching his life bleed out onto the bed. It's a quick death. Clean. No lingering.

Sophie stands behind me. Her face is tight, her hands trembling.

I can feel her eyes on me, trying to read something in my face. I can feel the judgment—hers, mine, maybe both. But it doesn't matter. Not now.

We're done.

I turn away, pushing past her without another word. The house is silent now, but it won't stay that way for long.

Sophie doesn't speak as we walk out, but I feel her presence behind me. The air

around us feels thick, heavy. She wasn't expecting to have to murder an entire family any more than I was. It's a first for her, not for me. It's a line she won't be able to erase, no matter how many times she tries to justify it.

But she'll be fine.

Eventually.

14

HAYLEY

Boarding school is supposed to be about finding yourself or whatever crap they tell parents to justify the tuition. But all I've found is that I hate this place. The halls are too quiet. The rules are suffocating. And the people here? They're fake. The only thing I've figured out is that none of this is where I'm supposed to be.

It's been a week since the last message. A week since I sat there, frozen, staring at the screen. "Are you looking for the truth?"

I can help you find it.

The words are like poison, and the more I think about them, the harder it is to swallow. Someone knows something. Someone is out there, watching, waiting. They've disappeared, gone silent, but the tension in the pit of my stomach hasn't.

I wish I could forget about it, but the more I try, the more I can feel it—like a trap closing around me. I'm stuck here, far away from Texas, and every minute that ticks by feels like I'm sinking deeper into something I can't see, can't understand. And it's like no one else cares.

Not Mom. Not Sophie .

I glance down at my phone again, then away. I've been checking it obsessively, hoping for another message, another hint this isn't some joke. But nothing. Just that

silence. It's killing me. I've tried digging deeper—searched the same articles on Vincent Marano a hundred times, looked at the same photos, the same facts. Nothing new. Every lead feels colder than the last. It's like trying to dig through ice.

But the texts...they keep nagging at me.

Someone who knows your family's secrets.

It was like a threat. It didn't feel like a coincidence, and that's what haunts me the most. It's not the only thing.

Texas. I can't stop thinking about getting back home. That's where I belong. With Elliot. Not that he cares. Not anymore.

I stare at my phone, my thumb hovering over his Instagram story. It's stupid, but I've been obsessing over it for days, watching every post, every laugh he shares with her. Zoe. That's her name. She's not even interesting. A glossy brunette with an over-filtered life. She doesn't get him like I do. She doesn't know him. Not the way I do.

It makes me want to scream. To break something. To do something.

I scroll to her profile and stare at her bio. Empathy enthusiast. Cat lover. Caramel latte addict. What does that even mean? It's like some perfect little list of things she's supposed to care about, just to sound nice. It reads like she took it straight from her mother's profile. But Elliot likes her posts. Every single one. And she likes his.

I hate her. I hate her for having the life I want. For having him. She probably doesn't even care about him—not really. Not the way I do. I feel the anger bubbling up in my chest, hot and sharp, and I know I shouldn't do it. But the idea takes root before I can stop it.

I could scare her.

My fingers move before I can even think about it. I pull up that fake account I made months ago when I was bored and wanted to see what would happen. It feels kind of stupid, but also like I'm actually doing something for once. Something that's just mine.

The cursor blinks at me like it's daring me to go through with it.

I start typing.

You don't know him like I do. You're not safe, not like you think you are. If you're smart, you'll stay the hell away. I hope you listen. Otherwise, I'll end you.

I feel a strange sense of satisfaction as I reread it. The words are heavy, and perfect. Possibly too much. But I don't care. Reading them makes me feel dizzy. Almost happy. So, yeah, I don't care. I don't care if it's too far. She deserves it. It'll save her in the end. I'm protecting her. She'll thank me one day.

Send.

The rush that comes after tapping that button is intense—a sick thrill, like I've finally done something that matters. I have the power now. Not her. Me. Elliot will die when he finds out. In a good way. He'll love it. He'll love me for it. He'll realize what a mistake he's made.

But then the rush fades, and the fear sets in.

Oh well, it's done.

Still. What if she figures out it's me? What if this blows up in my face? What if she

reports it? What if Elliot finds out and hates me for it? My palms start to sweat and I toss my phone onto my bed like it's burned me.

I lie back, trying to ignore the cold sweat creeping up my neck, but it clings to my skin like a warning. The room is too quiet, the silence thick and suffocating. Shadows dance across the walls, twisting into shapes I don't want to see. I can't shake the feeling that they're closing in, just like the weight of what I've done. I try to convince myself it's fine. No one will connect the dots. After all, I never typed his name. Anyone could have sent that message. It could've been an accident, a misfire.

But still, the anxiety claws at the edges of my thoughts, gnawing at me with sharp, hungry teeth.

And the worst part? I still don't feel any closer to getting what I want. I'm thinking about what a disaster this is, what a mess I've made. That's when I hear the knock on the door.

15

HAYLEY

The door slams open, and Hannah steps in like she owns the place. She's grinning, holding a bottle of vodka she swiped from God knows where. "You still alive in here, Hayley?" she says, her voice too bright, too loud.

I try to act casual, but the way the floor seems to tilt beneath me, the way my stomach flips, it's all too much. "Unfortunately."

She drops her stuff on the bed like she's been invited, not like she barged in without asking. "Perfect. You need a drink. You look like hell."

She holds up the bottle, shaking it for emphasis, and hands it to Max. He's grinning too, clearly pleased to be here, in my space. Max takes a long swig, passes it back to her with a nod, and then he's offering it to me, like it's some kind of gift.

Normally, I'd turn it down. But not now. Not today. I'd give anything to forget the last fifteen minutes of my life, let the buzz wash everything away. I take the bottle from him without saying anything and take a quick gulp. It burns all the way down, a sharp sting that cuts through the haze of my thoughts. Maybe it'll help .

A long pause hangs between the three of us, like the silence knows too much. I try not to let the panic show on my face. But then Hannah picks up the bottle again, her eyes flicking over to my phone, which is lying there on the bed, just waiting to betray me.

“Wanna take a pic for Insta?” she asks, her voice playful, mocking. “I bet you could do something cute with this bottle and that mess of clothes on your floor.” She doesn’t even glance at me when she says it. Her eyes are fixed on the clutter, the clothes strewn across the room, like none of it matters but the photo.

But it does. I see it all instantly. I feel the blood drain from my face. Every muscle in my body freezes. She picks up my phone. It’s too late now. I can’t stop her.

“Don’t—” I say, but my voice is weak, like a warning far too late. My throat is dry, burning. I can’t swallow. I want to grab the phone from her, but it’s already in her hands.

Hannah scrolls through the photos without even looking up from the screen, her thumb flicking up and down, passing by selfies, campus shots, random pictures. I can’t breathe. It’s like she’s flipping through the pages of my life, each one feeling like a mistake. I watch as she stops.

The phone buzzes. A new message.

Zoe.

Hannah reads the message out loud. “Who is this?”

I feel my stomach drop to my feet. I want to die right there. I can’t breathe. Everything feels like it’s spinning out of control. It’s too late.

Hannah glances at me, her eyebrows raised in surprise. “Who’s Zoe?”

I stare at her. The words won’t come. I want to lie. I want to pretend I don’t know who she is, but my mind is blank. My whole body is numb .

“Hold up,” Hannah says, and I know she’s found it. She’s found the thread with Zoe. She’s reading the message.

“That’s...that’s pretty messed up, Hayley,” Hannah says, her voice quieter now, like she’s trying to make sense of it. “This is some psycho shit.”

She hands the phone to Max.

I don’t speak. I can’t. The room feels like it’s closing in on me, the walls pushing in. I can’t get enough air. It’s like I’ve been caught under water, and I’m sinking.

“Who’s Zoe?” he asks.

I don’t know what to say. I don’t know how to lie my way out of this.

I try to force a laugh. It comes out sharp, too fast. “I...I don’t know. Just some girl.”

I can see the screen clearly now, even though I’m not looking at it. If you’re smart, you’ll stay away. Otherwise, I will end you.

The message I wrote. The one that’s about to ruin everything.

I didn’t think it would ever come to this. I thought no one would ever see it, that I could pretend it didn’t matter. But it’s real now.

Hannah doesn’t look up at me. She doesn’t say anything for a long moment. She just stares over Max’s shoulder and reads.

My heart slams against my ribs. I can feel the pulse in my throat, in my hands, like it’s going to explode. I don’t know how to get myself out of this.

“Wow, Hayley,” Max laughs. “I knew you were a bit strange, but this is certifiable.”

“It was just a joke.”

Hannah looks at me for a long time, her gaze cutting through me like a knife. It feels like she can see right through the lie. There’s no need for words—her silence says everything. I can feel it: her doubt, hanging in the air, thickening with each passing second.

She doesn’t buy it.

And in that moment, I know: it’s only a matter of time before everyone else knows too.

16

ANONYMOUS

I really can't be sure if I want to kill her or fuck her. Probably both. What a bloody mess she's made of things. And it just keeps getting worse.

This is the thing you cannot begin to understand about a woman like that—it's damned near impossible to let her go. Try as you might. It's like trying to tear a thread loose from a sweater while it's still on your body. She doesn't leave you. Not physically, not mentally. She's a constant. A shadow you can't shake, no matter how much distance you put between yourself and her.

I first encountered her at some vapid work event, a customer appreciation , I think they called it. Not for me. It was nothing but glassy-eyed smiles, flimsy name tags, and small talk. Not my kind of thing.

But there she was—the kind of woman who can make you feel like a side note in your own life. She had that air about her—effortlessly charming, too good at making people feel comfortable. I didn't trust her immediately, but there was a crack in the armor. A vulnerability I couldn't quite put my finger on. Her laugh was too loud, her words too rehearsed, as though she were playing a part.

But she played it well.

I don't know why I kept watching her. Maybe it was because the lighting was low and I didn't figure she'd recognize me later. Maybe it was because she wasn't afraid

to make me uncomfortable. She had this way of letting her eyes linger just a fraction too long, like she knew things about me that I didn't even know myself. It wasn't the kind of attention that made you feel seen. It was the kind that made you feel exposed. And I didn't like it, but I couldn't get enough of it.

We ended up in the same place a few times after that: a coffee shop here, a nondescript office building there. I could feel her presence before I even saw her, like an itch under my skin. A tickling anticipation. She wasn't subtle about it, either. She was deliberate. She knew she was being watched.

One evening, I followed her after she left a meeting. She walked briskly, purposeful, as if she had somewhere to be—maybe it was a lover, maybe a deal, maybe something entirely different. Whatever it was, it wasn't meant for me. She could feel me in her periphery, but she didn't acknowledge me. Not once.

I don't know when I started properly following her. Maybe it was after she turned down my offer for a date on that pathetic app she's always on. Or maybe it was after a string of brief but endearing messages which ended with her writing back—sharp and cold—“Do I know you from somewhere?”

I told her she didn't. She doesn't.

But for whatever sick reason, I respected her more in that moment than I had in all the hours before.

It wasn't long before I started figuring out where she went. I shadowed her to those places you don't really go unless you have to—boutique hotels, empty warehouses. Places where secrets get exchanged, where stories are erased and rewritten. I followed her into the night, watched her pull into a grimy alley and disappear behind a door I didn't have access to. It wasn't the location that drew me in. It was what she did when she thought she was alone.

She wasn't nearly as clean as she thought she was.

There's something thrilling about catching a person off guard. That moment when they let their mask slip. It's pure satisfaction, the kind you can't buy. The kind you can only get from someone like her—someone who has no idea what they're leaving behind when they walk away. The sense that you're not in control, that they're playing a game they never told you about. That's the moment I'm waiting for. The one where she realizes she doesn't have the upper hand anymore.

There's something else, though. A tenderness, an odd kind of softness in her eyes when she looks at people. It's the thing that stops me from pulling the trigger, even when I'm so damn close to it. That tenderness, buried underneath the carefully constructed walls. It makes me hesitate.

But only for a second.

She doesn't think I'm watching. She probably doesn't even care. But I see the way she checks her phone in a hurry, the way she adjusts her hair in a reflection. The way she drags her coat over her shoulders like she's hiding something—maybe it's guilt, maybe it's a secret. Either way, she's not the polished professional she pretends to be. She's flawed, like the rest of us. And I don't want to just watch anymore. I want to know her. I want to get close enough to rip those secrets from her, piece by piece.

And maybe, just maybe, I'll have what I need to end it all.

But right now, I'm not done. Not by a long shot.

17

SOPHIE

I wake with a jolt, my body stiff and disoriented. My eyes snap open, and for a second, I have no idea where I am. The fluorescent lights above buzz faintly, flickering like they're struggling to stay on. I stare at the ceiling, trying to shake the fog from my brain. The remnants of a dream are still there, just out of reach, like it's teasing me. I can't remember it fully, but I know it was intense—faces and sounds blurring together, leaving a cold, tight knot in my stomach.

I glance at my phone. 8:46 p.m.

Panic hits me hard. I'm going to be late. I didn't mean to fall asleep. Just an hour, a quick nap, that's all I needed to clear my head. But now, I've wasted the evening.

I throw the sheets off and swing my legs over the side of the bed. The floor is cool, but the air in the room feels thick, like it's trying to smother me. I shake it off. I'm supposed to be out the door, ready for my first solo assignment—visiting the nightclub, working my way into the VIP section, getting an invite to the afterparty. Simple, right?

But I've still got a million things to do.

I pull myself together as quickly as I can, trying not to freak out. The last few days have been too much, too fast. This city, the noise, everything moving a thousand miles an hour—it's starting to feel normal, too normal. But the tension? The edge that

doesn't go away? That's still there.

Lily's at her desk, her back to me as she types away on her laptop. She's got that fresh-faced college girl vibe, the kind of person who looks totally out of place in my world of secrets and lies. When I first met her, I wasn't sure what to make of her. Too cheerful, too friendly, too open. But after these past few days, I find myself grudgingly warming to her. She makes me feel like I'm someone who could use a friend, even if I don't really know how to be one.

"Hey, you're up." Lily turns her head toward me, that same easy smile on her face. "You headed out?"

I nod, swallowing hard to clear the dryness in my throat. "Yeah. I'm supposed to check out this bar called The Raven with a girl I met in biology. Seems interesting."

She raises an eyebrow, smile still lingering on her lips. "The Raven?"

"I think that's what she said."

This is a lie, of course. There is no girl from biology.

"She also mentioned something about an afterparty..." I add, already mentally shifting into work mode. But Lily's not done.

"Wait, afterparty at—?" She doesn't finish, but her expression changes. Something clicks, and I realize where this is going before she even says it.

"I've been invited to one of those before," she says casually. "It's actually a great time. Should be fun."

Her excitement is palpable, and for a moment, I envy how easily she fits into her

world. She's a college girl, social, genuine. Not like me. I'm not going to have fun. I'm going to get the photos, get in, get the intel, and get out.

That's the plan. But the moment she mentions it, I can feel an opportunity slide into place.

"Who's going?" I ask, keeping my voice casual, though my mind is already calculating. "To the afterparty, I mean? Anyone I might know?" If she's been there before, she knows people. She's been in those circles. She can be the key to getting the access I need. I just have to use that.

Lily doesn't pick up on my shift in tone, though. She's all smiles, all chatter. "Oh, you know. A few people from the scene. Models, influencers, the usual."

I keep my expression neutral. Perfect.

She's excited. I'm calculating. As usual.

"You wanna tag along?" I ask, feeling the cold calculation slip into my tone.

She doesn't seem to notice. "Yes! I'll help you pick out something to wear," she gestures at my clothes. "For sure—you can't wear that. You've gotta stand out."

I force a smile. "Right."

She's already at her closet, pulling things out—tight dresses, heels, stuff I don't usually wear. I grab one that looks halfway bearable, black, fitted, a little lower cut than I'd like, but it'll work. Lily's bouncing around me, her energy like static, making my head spin. I hate the way it pulls at me, but I don't let it show.

"I think this one's it," she says, pushing it at me. It fits like a second skin, and I feel

naked the second I slip it on. Too much, too little, all wrong.

“You good?” Lily calls from across the room, already throwing on her own outfit.

“You look—” She pauses when I step out of the bathroom, one eyebrow raised.

“Okay, maybe that’s too much, but it’ll definitely get us in.”

We leave the dorm together. I’m wearing the too-much dress, my stomach a tight ball of nerves and something else I can’t name. Lily, on the other hand, is glowing. She’s stepping into the night like it’s just another weekend, her life still intact, still free of complications.

And I wonder if I’ll ever be able to live like that again.

18

CHARLOTTE

I 've been in New York for a few days now, and the city feels like a joke. People bustle around, every street corner brimming with energy, but none of it matters. The chaos doesn't seep in; it doesn't touch me. It's almost like I'm watching from a distance, a spectator in a world that doesn't belong to me. Sophie's on my mind more than I care to admit, but even that feels like another distraction. Another fucking thing to deal with.

I don't have time for worry, not that I'd ever call it that. The word is weak, and I'm not weak. But there's something gnawing at me, an itch I can't scratch. Maybe it's the odd text I got last week, and then the identical one I received this morning.

It's time to tell the girls.

At first I thought maybe it was Carlo. Or the agency. It's something they do from time to time—test your mental fortitude. See if you might be slipping. But I'm not. I won't.

And besides, I'm not so sure it was Carlo or the agency. I get the feeling it might be someone else entirely. Someone who knows too much.

But I can't think about that now. It's not going to change anything. I have other needs that need tending to. I have to clear my mind.

The city is full of noise, but it's hollow. No matter how many people I pass, no matter how many bodies brush against mine, it feels empty. Like I'm still running on autopilot—doing the same thing over and over. A job here, a target there. It's all the same. Just moving from one task to the next.

So, I decide to do what I do best: shut it all off.

I pull up the dating app. No use pretending I'm searching for anything substantial. I'm not looking for a connection—I don't believe in that nonsense anymore. But sex? Sure, that's something I can work with. Something quick. Something without strings. A means to an end. The idea of being touched without a second thought feels strangely soothing. A distraction. It's been too long since I've felt that kind of heat between my legs.

I swipe through the profiles with mechanical precision, my eyes skimming past the typical bullshit. I'm not looking for a date, just a body. They all want something from me, something I can't give, but that's fine. I'm not giving anything away either. I pick one. Young -ish . Decent body, nothing special. He's the right type—cocky, eager, and too dumb to know he's dealing with someone who doesn't give a shit about his personality. He looks like someone I can use and dispose. He looks like someone who will make it easy.

I set up the meeting quickly, the text exchanged with the kind of brevity that cuts through everything. He doesn't need to know anything about me. All he needs to know is that he's here for one reason—and I'm not about to waste time explaining it to him.

I'm in the hotel room first. Stylish, sleek, the sort of place that doesn't scream for attention but still says plenty. Just the way I like it. My heels click sharply against the floor as I wait. Of course, he's late.

When there's a knock at the door, I don't hesitate. I open it and find him standing there, a little too eager, his smile too wide. He's younger than I expected. Late twenties, maybe. His muscles strain beneath his shirt, and that cocky smile grates on me instantly. He thinks he's special. He's not.

"Hey, gorgeous," he says, stepping forward.

I just nod, stepping aside so he can enter. He's too forward. Trying too hard. He starts talking, his words coming out faster than they should, desperate to impress, eager to charm. The sound of his voice is irritating, and I feel my patience start to thin. I don't care about him. I don't care about anything he's saying. He's just a body to use and toss aside. And yet, I listen. I keep my face impassive, though inside, I'm already fuming. The noise of his voice, the effort he's putting in—it's too much. He's wasting my time. I just want to fuck.

Which is what I tell him. Lucky for him, he listens.

We don't make it to the bed. Instead, we fuck against the wall, his hands gripping my hips too hard, his breath hot against my neck. I arch my back and let him think he's doing something right. I let him think he's in control, that this is exactly how I like it. It's easier that way.

I've long stopped pretending to care. His kisses are sloppy. I don't return them. Just doing what needs to be done, nothing more. There's no feeling in it. But I don't need to feel.

His hands roam my body—too rough, too eager—but I force myself to moan anyway. The sex is exactly as I expect: mechanical, detached, void of any real emotion.

And still better than nothing.

My hands slide up his chest, feeling the tension in his muscles, the heat of his skin. His groan vibrates against my mouth, and suddenly, it's like a spark. It's not even the force of it; it's the way it makes my body respond. My nails dig into his skin, finding the steady pulse beneath. My breath catches for a split second—unexpected, uninvited .

We move to the bed, where he's quick to fall into a rhythm, his movements getting faster, harder. I feel it then—the sudden throb of something more than just friction. It's the heat, the pressure, the almost unbearable intensity of it all, pulling me in against my will. And I hate how good it feels. I hate how badly I want it. But I don't stop. I lean into it, sinking into the rhythm he's setting. This is what I came for.

The warmth in me builds, tightening, coiling. It's almost too much and yet, never enough. The tension between us is unbearable, a slow burn that threatens to undo me.

And just as it's about to snap—he stops. In the middle of it. Suddenly.

He pulls back, panting, his eyes wide and desperate. “I—sorry. I need a second,” he says, his voice breaking the moment.

What the fuck?

I freeze, my body still humming with the remnants of desire, my skin aching for him to finish what he started. But it's gone, just like that. The heat lingers, burning through me, but he's pulling away, his hands trembling as he sits up. I feel the absence of him immediately, like a void that's impossible to fill. The frustration rolls over me in waves.

“Fuck,” he says, his hands running through his hair. “I can't... I'm sorry. I—” His voice breaks again, this time more genuine.

The vulnerability in him is pathetic, and yet, there's something about it that twists in my gut. I want to kill him for ruining it. I want to make him beg for my attention again. Instead, I just lie there, staring at him, my chest still tight, my body a taut wire ready to snap.

He sits up, wiping his hands on the sheets like he's doing something. Like he's not a fucking wreck. I watch him, my body aching with the sudden absence of his touch. The heat doesn't go away, but it shifts into something sharper, more irritated.

"Fuck, it's just—I don't know," he says, and I almost roll my eyes. His tears come next. The sobs, the pathetic, ugly sound of him breaking down right there in front of me.

I could end this now. I should end this now. A clean, simple solution. He killed my orgasm. He's wasting my time, and I could make sure he never wastes anyone's time again. The thought flits through my mind like a flash, but it passes before I can fully grasp it. I don't move. I don't reach for the gun in my purse. I don't snap his neck, even though it would be so easy. Instead, I let him cry.

The sobs are maddening. They gnaw at my patience. He's broken. I can see it now—his eyes wet, his face contorted with misery. He's disgusting, a mess. And I'm just lying there, watching him, waiting for it to end.

I should kill him. I should take what little power I have left in this moment and end it. Make him stop talking. Make him stop existing. But I don't.

When he's finally done, when the sobs slow to a sniffling whimper, I let him leave. He pulls himself together, shoving his shit together like nothing happened. He tries to say something else, but I don't let him. I just open the door. He leaves. The door clicks shut behind him.

I stand there staring at the door for a long time, my body still tingling with irritation. The emptiness that follows is strange. Not the usual satisfaction of being done with someone. Not the rush of power. Just...emptiness.

Why didn't I kill him? If I wasn't going to come, I could have had the next best thing. I should have killed him. If nothing else, it would have put both of us out of our misery.

The thought nags at me. Maybe I've gotten soft. Maybe Sophie's influence is starting to seep into me. I'm disgusted with myself for even considering it. I don't have time for softness.

But I wonder.

What the fuck is happening to me?

19

SOPHIE

The club hits me like a punch. The music slams into my chest, deep and unforgiving, like a live wire cutting through the air. The lights are strobing—too fast, too bright—blurring the people around me, the sweat, the bodies packed too close. It's hot, suffocating. The air smells of alcohol and something darker, something wrong. The crowd moves as one, like they've rehearsed it. I hate it. I hate how easy it looks; how effortless they make it seem.

I hand the bouncer a hundred-dollar bill. His hands are swift, not even a glance at our IDs. He doesn't need to look. He already knows what we are. His eyes flick over us once, a quick read, and he lets us through. Lily's already pulling me into the fray, dragging me with her, her laugh cutting through the bass, high and bright. She doesn't belong here. I don't belong here.

I feel every eye on me as we step into the room, the crowd washing over us, brushing up against my skin like a tide of heat, body odor, and drugstore perfume. My stomach twists. But my brain clicks into gear, ticking off the boxes—getting in, getting the intel, getting out. Yet, the world around me is suffocating—too loud, too bright—and Lily's pulling me deeper into it. She's so fucking eager, like she's in her element, while I can barely keep my skin on.

She leans into me, shouting in my ear, asking where the girl from biology is supposed to meet us. I offer an easy lie. Tell her the girl from biology flaked. She buys it, of course.

She grins, wide and innocent. “Guess you’re glad you’ve got me then.”

I nod, but my skin crawls. It’s all fake here. The excitement, the smiles, the way she moves through the crowd with her own bright bubble of warmth—it’s a goddamn performance. I want to yank her out of it, but I don’t. I need her for the job. She’s the link, the key to getting in deeper. No one’s ever going to like me as much as they like her, so I have to play along, stay calm, stay in control.

I keep my head down, blending in as best I can, but it’s not easy. Every step feels like I’m moving through molasses, the pressure building in my chest. I’m not like these people. They wear their smiles like shields, their wealth like armor. I see through it—see the hollowness behind their eyes. They’re all playing the same game, and none of them realize how close I am to cutting through the facade.

The room spins around me—every laugh, every flash of movement, every glance pulls me in deeper, and my mind starts to scatter, fraying at the edges. But then Lily’s nudging me, grinning, all wide-eyed and giddy, and I turn just in time to see her pointing to the back corner of the room.

A man stands there—tall, dark, his suit sharp and gleaming like he’s someone important. He’s flanked by men just as polished, each of them with a look that screams power, the kind that makes the air feel thick. I feel it, low and dangerous, that raw hunger that drives men like him. These are the ones I’m supposed to be studying. These are the ones I’m supposed to get close to, learn from. I’m here to see them, to understand them, to slip inside their world and rip it apart for the agency. For my mother.

Lily’s voice breaks through my thoughts. She’s laughing, so fucking carefree, and I feel the cold knot of anxiety coil tighter in my chest. The job. The people. They’re all blending together, too many distractions. I need to focus, but I can’t. The lights blur, the music suffocates, the faces of strangers shift and melt.

Then Lily's slipping away from me, moving toward the VIP section, and my pulse spikes.

Fuck.

I reach out instinctively, my fingers brushing the air, but she's already too far. I see her laughing, talking to a bodyguard, her smile wide and easy. It doesn't even register in her head, how easily she's stepped into their world. She's already caught the right attention, and I'm too slow.

I watch her disappear into the VIP area, her laugh echoing behind her, and my stomach twists. I should've stopped her. I should've kept her with me, but it's too late. I should've known better.

I stand still for a moment, watching. The pressure inside me boils over. I know I should move, but I can't. I'm stuck, frozen for just a second. And then I follow. I have no choice.

Inside the VIP room, everything shifts again. The air is thick with perfume and alcohol, too slick, too polished. Everyone here wears their influence like a second skin. I scan the faces, snap a few photos, my hands moving on autopilot. But my eyes keep coming back to Lily. I can't keep track of her. She keeps slipping through the cracks, lost in the sea of perfect smiles, perfect faces, perfect lies.

I try to ignore it, focus on the job. But the unease won't leave me. The crowd shifts, the music blurs, and then I lose her completely. I search for her for half an hour before I really start to worry.

Fuck.

I scan the room, pushing through bodies, my mind running in circles. There's

something wrong. I feel it in my gut, gnawing at me like a hunger I can't ignore. I push harder, shoving past people, until I finally find her.

She's surrounded by people, but the scene isn't what I expect. The room spins as I take it in, my stomach clenching.

Lily's pale, wide-eyed, her body stiff. She's not okay.

One of the men has his hand up her dress. She's barely conscious, her body frozen, her eyes wide with terror. He's groping her. The others are circling, waiting for their turn. Someone's filming it.

I feel the blood drain from my face.

For the first time, I understand what Mom was trying to tell me. This world? It doesn't give a shit. It's not pretty, not clean. It's dark, ugly, and this is the price. This is the cost of everything I've stepped into.

I see the fear in Lily's eyes, the desperation.

Something inside me snaps.

I don't think. I don't ask myself if this is right. I just act. I pull Lily out of the circle of men, shoving them away, ignoring the confusion, the shouts, the looks. My heart's in my throat, but I force my body into autopilot. Lily can barely stand, so I find a group of girls my age, slip them a few Benjamins, and ask them to take her to the ladies' room and wait for me there.

Then, I turn back.

I move fast, cold and calculated, eyes locked on the man who was touching her. He's

still watching me, his gaze curious, not knowing what's coming.

I ask him to join me in the men's room. He doesn't argue, he doesn't hesitate. He thinks I'm just another girl playing the game.

I slam the door shut behind us, and I don't hesitate, either.

I don't think .

I just do.

Charlotte was right. The job's never easy. But it's always clear.

I'm going to make sure he won't hurt anyone again.

20

SOPHIE

The bathroom door slams behind us, the sound cutting through the chaotic bass of the club. He's still smiling, that cocky, sure-of-himself grin, as if he knows exactly what's about to happen. As if he already owns me. His hand brushes the edge of my dress, and I bite back the revulsion crawling up my throat.

"Thought we could have some fun, babe," he says, his voice low and mocking. "You look like you could use it."

I don't move. I don't speak. I'm not here for fun.

I let him think he's in control, that he's making the choices. He leans in closer, the smell of alcohol and sweat rolling off him like a cloud, his breath hot against my neck. My hand slides into my purse.

The screwdriver's cool handle rests against my palm, cold as ice.

He moves, reaching for my panties, fingers digging into the fabric of my dress, pulling me closer. He doesn't know it yet, but he's already dead. Every part of me screams for him to back off, but I stay still. I wait for the right moment.

And then it comes .

Before he can press me into the wall, I whip the screwdriver out of my purse, my

movements fast and precise. I drive the tip into the side of his neck, the metal biting through skin, muscle, and the soft tissue beneath. The force of the impact splits the carotid artery, and with a sickening lurch, the metal sinks deeper, scraping against the bone. Blood erupts in a hot, violent pulse, splattering across my hands, arms, and his face. His eyes widen in disbelief, his mouth opening and closing like he's still trying to process what's happening.

He staggers back, gasping for air, his hand flying to his neck as if he can stop the blood, as if he can undo what I've just done.

But he can't.

I twist the screwdriver, ripping through arteries and muscle, feeling the pressure give way as his body jerks violently. His mouth opens in a silent scream, but it's useless. His airways are clogged, the blood rushing too fast. He drops to his knees, coughing, but nothing comes out except the thick, wet gurgle of his own blood.

He's still trying to process what's happened. He's not smart enough to know that it's already over.

I move, swift and merciless. His hand weakly reaches for me, but I'm done with him. Done with his arrogance, his false confidence, his predatory nature, his power plays. I crouch down, bringing the screwdriver up to his face. He stares at me, eyes wide and disbelieving, and I don't hesitate.

I shove the tip into his right eye. Don't worry. It's just the tip.

The sickening crunch of the lens bursting under the pressure is almost too much to bear, but I don't flinch. The pop of the eyeball breaking apart, the warmth of his blood dripping onto my fingers, it's all there—too real, too visceral, as I twist the bit deeper, driving it further into his eye socket.

He chokes out a strangled cry, but it's not words anymore. It's just sound—animalistic, broken. His other hand comes up, trying to stop me, but I'm already moving again.

I jab the screwdriver into his other eye.

The same sickening snap, the same violent eruption of blood and tissue as I destroy him, piece by piece. His body starts to go limp now, his movements slowing. But he doesn't die fast enough. He gurgles, drowning on his own blood, his limbs twitching, his mouth moving, trying to scream.

I drive the screwdriver down again, hard, into his throat, and that's it. The light in his eyes dims, the blood bubbling from his lips fading into a gurgling mess. His body jerks several times, before it goes still.

I stand over him, chest rising and falling, covered in his blood, my breath coming in harsh, ragged bursts. My hands are slick with it, but I don't care. I don't even flinch. I look at him, lying there, a mess of blood and flesh, his face ruined beyond recognition.

I wipe the screwdriver off on his clothes, careful to keep it clean. The job's done.

But I know it doesn't end here. This is just the beginning.

I step out of the stall, quickly wash up in the sink, scrubbing his blood off my skin like a maniac. When I'm satisfied, I slip into another stall, pull a spare dress from my bag, yank the bloodied one off, and stuff it into the Ziplock, sealing it up for later disposal.

Once I'm dressed, I exit the stall and check my reflection in the mirror. The room feels smaller now, the club's music distant, the weight of what I just did hanging in

the air. I wipe my hands on the backup dress as I move through the men's room, past the door, into the chaos of the club. I find a side door and step out into the night. I just need a moment to breathe, and then I'll go back for Lily. The world outside seems so much louder, so much more alive than it did before.

But in my head, it's still.

Dead silent.

HAYLEY

The vodka bottle empties faster than I expect. Max leans back on my bed, his feet dangling off the edge, and laughs at something Hannah says. I don't know what, exactly. Her words are slurred, tumbling over each other like she's forgotten how they're supposed to go together. The bag of coke sits on my desk, its contents spread thin, the aftermath of their idea of fun.

My head swims, not from the alcohol—I didn't drink that much—but from the tightness winding itself around my chest. Max keeps looking at me like I'm supposed to join in, like I'm one of them. But I'm not. I never have been. I sip from my water bottle and watch them, Hannah sprawled out on the floor now, her laugh hiccuping into silence.

"You're quiet," Max says, tilting his head at me. His smile is too big, too fake. He doesn't notice that Hannah hasn't moved in a while.

"Just tired," I lie. My voice is steady, even though my pulse isn't.

Hannah's breathing starts to change. It's subtle at first, a soft rasp that could almost pass as nothing. But it grows louder, more uneven. Her chest rises and falls in shallow bursts, and she coughs, a weak, wet sound that sticks in the air.

I glance at Max. He's oblivious, scrolling on his phone, one leg bouncing like he's trying to burn off energy. He doesn't notice her at all.

But I do.

I see her lips turning pale, the sweat beading on her forehead, the way her fingers twitch like she's trying to grab hold of something that isn't there.

"Max," I say, keeping my tone casual. "Hannah doesn't look good."

His head snaps up, his phone slipping out of his hand and onto the bed. He looks at her, his brow furrowing, and then back at me.

"She's fine," he says, but his voice cracks.

"She doesn't look fine."

He moves to her side, crouching down, shaking her shoulder. "Hey, Hannah. Wake up."

She doesn't respond. Her breathing is louder now, each gasp like a jagged edge cutting through the room.

"Shit," he screeches, shaking her harder. "Hannah, come on. Wake the fuck up."

Nothing.

Panic flickers across his face, quick and sharp, like he's just realized he's holding something that could explode in his hands.

"She's not waking up," he says, looking at me like I have the answer.

Something stirs inside me, but I don't move. I just sit there, watching. Calculating. The pieces slotting into place faster than I can think.

“You gave her too much of that shit,” I say, my voice low, even. “Didn’t you?”

He flinches. “It wasn’t— I didn’t?—”

“It’s yours,” I press, letting the words land heavily. “You gave it to her. You brought it here.”

He stares at me, his mouth opening and closing like a fish out of water.

“We should call someone,” he finally says, his voice shaky. “An ambulance or something.”

“And tell them what?” I snap, standing up. “That you gave her too much coke? You think they’re just gonna pat you on the back and let you walk out of here?”

His face goes pale. “I didn’t know?—”

“It doesn’t matter,” I cut him off. “They’ll pin this on you. You brought it here, Max. You gave it to her. You think they’re not gonna figure that out?”

He looks at Hannah, then back at me, his panic mounting.

“She’s dying!” he shouts, his voice cracking.

“Exactly,” I say coldly. “And if you call for help, they’ll know it’s your fault. They’ll figure out what’s in her system, they’ll trace it back to you, and you’ll be fucked. Basically forever.”

His hands shake, his breathing ragged. “I can’t just— We can’t just?—”

“Do you know what it’s like in prison, Max? You’re a small guy, with a pretty face.

Not really a good combo, if you ask me.”

He just stares at me, like he wants to say something but he’s misplaced the words.

“No one has to know you were here,” I say, stepping closer to him, my voice soft, almost soothing. “If you leave now, no one will ever know. I’ll handle it. I’ll say I found her like this. That I didn’t see you. You’ll be safe.”

His eyes widen, desperation at first, then something else. Relief. “You’d do that?”

I nod, keeping my expression calm, steady. “Of course. I’m your friend, Max.”

He hesitates, glancing at Hannah again. Her breathing is barely there now, a faint whisper, and her lips have turned blue .

“I—” he starts, but he doesn’t finish.

“Go,” I say firmly. “Before it’s too late.”

He doesn’t need more convincing. He stumbles to his feet, grabbing his phone, his jacket. He looks at Hannah and then at me one last time, his eyes filled with something that might be gratitude or fear or both.

“Thank you,” he mumbles before rushing out the door.

The silence that follows is deafening.

I turn back to Hannah. She’s still now, her chest barely rising and falling at all. I crouch beside her, watching her face, her body.

And then I sit back on my heels, and consider my luck.

No one will ever know. Not about this.

Not about that message I sent to Elliot's stupid girlfriend.

I'm sorry Hannah has to die.

But it's better this way.

ANONYMOUS

Look, I didn't intend to get this wrapped up in her life. It's just...well, it seems like she could really use the help. It started out relatively slowly, not like some great love affair. I just wanted to dip my toe in. Test the waters, so to speak. Next thing I know, I'm neck deep, and things are really starting to get interesting. First thing I don't understand is how someone who appears to be such a great mother can have no idea what her children are up to.

I mean, I watch her juggle her little family circus, putting on the whole "I've got it all together" act. She's so good at it. I can't even decide if I admire her or if I'm disgusted by how much she's faking. The fact that she doesn't see it—that the whole damn world is watching her spin her perfect little lies—that's the fun part. I almost want to give her credit for managing it all without ever breaking a sweat.

But then things start to unravel. You think you've got a hold of everything, but then you hear about the OD in London—her younger kid's friend, no less. I thought it was bad before. The skipping class, the constant need to be on social media, instead of actually living life. And don't get me started on that boy she's into.

I don't care that she's out of the country; it's one of those things you just know will work itself out. At least that's what I told myself. It wasn't until later that I found out about the older daughter, and that's when I realized I'd miscalculated. There were bigger fish to fry. I thought the younger one had issues. Wrong. This kid wasn't going to let herself slip under the radar that easily.

Sophie? She's a lot like Charlotte. Both of them think they can hide behind the curtain of their so-called perfect lives. But Sophie? She doesn't even have the decency to pretend. She's out there, making her mess in the open, no apologies, no half-assed explanations. I watched her walk into that club in New York, clearly not giving a damn. I should've seen the signs, but I was too busy trying to understand the mechanics of it all. Too busy taking stock of the situation.

There she was, like a magnet for trouble. I watched her with the same curiosity I'd reserve for a beautiful, helpless animal. The lights, the music, the bodies pressing in from all sides— this was her element, the kind of chaos she thrives in. But when it went sideways, when it turned into that kind of chaos— that kind of mess—I knew I had to act fast.

The thing is, I've learned how to cover my tracks. This isn't my first time at the rodeo. You don't get away with being me without having a plan B, C, D, and E. As Sophie stepped outside, looking like she hadn't just buried a body, like she wasn't on the edge of whatever hell she was about to drag herself into, I knew what had to happen next. Charlotte really wouldn't be happy if her perfect little life fell apart that easy, and what can I say? I happened to be in a decent mood and leaning more toward the fuck than the kill end of the spectrum at that particular moment in time.

So I moved through the crowd without anyone noticing. They were all too busy drinking, too busy getting lost in the noise of the night. I didn't care about them. I cared about Sophie—and what she might have left behind.

The club, as it turned out, had a little too many cameras. Not that I couldn't handle it. I'd planned for this. As soon as I saw what Sophie had done, I took action. I made some phone calls, called in people who'd know exactly what to do and how to do it.

Why? I can't say. Maybe it's because I couldn't blame her for what she'd done, even if she made a terrible mistake in the way she went about it. So she's an amateur? Who

can blame her for that? We all start somewhere.

I didn't know if I'd be able to get to her in time, but that's where the fun begins, doesn't it? As she made her exit, I was already two steps ahead, watching from a dark corner. She never even noticed. She couldn't, not with everything spinning around her like that.

If there's one thing I've learned from Charlotte—and her daughters—it's that you don't let things just happen. You control them. They may think they're running the show, but they're wrong. They always are.

23

SOPHIE

Mom's apartment is quiet—too quiet—like the walls are listening. I'm curled up in the corner, knees drawn to my chest, arms wrapped around them like I can hold everything in if I just keep still enough. The darkness in here doesn't feel like it's part of the room; it feels like it's inside me, settling in my bones, a cold weight that makes it harder to think. My phone's beside me, buzzing in the silence, but I don't move to check it. I don't need to. I know who it is. Malik.

I don't know what I'd even say, or what I'm supposed to do next. So I stay frozen, waiting for something—anything—to snap me out of this.

But nothing does. My mind just keeps going back.

Lily. The murder. The blood.

I still can't shake the image of him, his blood pooling on the floor, his face distorted with confusion and pain. It wasn't supposed to go this way. I was supposed to make the connections I needed to get into the afterparty, slip in unnoticed, do the job, and get out. But Lily...she tagged along, and that's where everything fell apart.

The lock clicks, and my heart jumps into my throat. Mom is going to kill me. I push myself to my feet just as the door swings open.

Mom steps inside, her silhouette sharp and commanding. For a moment, she feels me,

but doesn't see me. Then, when her eyes find mine, everything freezes. Her hand twitches at her side, moving like she's about to pull a weapon.

"Mom, it's me," I say quickly, my voice strained. "Don't?—"

Her hand freezes mid-motion, her eyes narrowing, scanning me like I'm some kind of threat. A flicker of recognition, then something colder. A tension I can feel across the room.

"What the hell are you doing here?" she demands, stepping further inside. "Why aren't you at the dorm?"

I stand up, smoothing out my dress, trying to seem composed. "I needed to talk to you," I say, my voice steady but my nerves on fire.

Her gaze sharpens, piercing through me like she's trying to find the hole in my story. "At four in the morning?"

I hesitate, just a moment too long. Then I force the words out. "I couldn't sleep. I thought...maybe we could strategize. About what I saw at The Raven."

The way she looks at me makes me feel like I'm the most transparent person in the world. She knows it's a lie, but she lets it hang in the air.

She takes a step closer, narrowing her eyes, her voice cutting through the silence. "Strategize?" she repeats, almost mocking. "What happened tonight, Sophie?"

She pinches the bridge of her nose, and I take notice of how her spine straightens. "Tell me everything. Start from the beginning, don't leave anything out."

I keep my face neutral, showing her nothing. Not this time.

“I’ll handle it,” I say, the words tasting like metal. “The cameras, the cleanup, everything. ”

Mom steps closer again, her eyes never leaving mine. “You’ll handle what? ” she sneers. “Goddamn it, spell it out.”

“I went to The Raven tonight. To make the connections, get into the afterparty. I thought it would give us the leverage we need. But Lily...she tagged along.”

“Lily?” She looks at me like I’ve just grown two heads. “Your roommate?”

“That’s the one.” I see her eyes harden, but I push forward, unable to stop the words once they’ve started. “They drugged her, Mom. I didn’t know what was happening until we were in the VIP room, and one of the men...he was assaulting her.”

The words stick in my throat, and I can feel the weight of everything crashing down. It was supposed to be easy—get in, get the intel, and get out. But I saw the look in Lily’s eyes while they had her pinned down, and I couldn’t let them get away with it. Maybe I couldn’t kill them all, at least not right then. But I could take out the immediate threat.

“I dragged her out of the room as fast as I could. She wasn’t responding, not fully, and I didn’t know how much she remembered. But before I could get her out of there... that guy—he followed me. He... he grabbed me, pulled me into the men's room.”

I pause, the flash of violence rushing back. “I had no choice. I—I mean, he had me cornered. I had to make sure he couldn’t hurt anyone else.” I exhale sharply, my voice tight as I push through the words. “I killed him, Mom. In the bathroom stall. It was quick, but it wasn’t clean. The blood—it’s everywhere. It’s all going to fall apart if anyone connects me to it.”

She doesn't say anything at first, just stands there, watching me with that cold, assessing look. My chest is tight, my breath shallow. This isn't how it was supposed to go down. This wasn't part of the plan. And then I remember the cameras. The damn cameras. The ones that are going to have picked up everything.

"There are cameras, Mom," I continue, my voice breaking. "A lot of witnesses. People saw me. I—I don't know what to do. If they have footage of me, if someone talks..."

She shifts from foot to foot, steady and deliberate. I brace myself for her reaction, but she doesn't seem angry. Not yet. She's cold, calculating, always thinking. It's what I've learned to expect from her.

"So," she says, her voice low, "you went to The Raven to make connections, but you couldn't keep your emotions in check. You let that man push you, and now we have this mess to clean up."

I'm too raw, too scared to hide it. "I didn't let him. I did what I had to do. You're the one always telling me not to hesitate. Well, this time I didn't."

Her eyes narrow. "You're a liability, Sophie. You didn't think this through. You didn't plan for the cameras, for the witnesses. You didn't even know how to control the situation."

I swallow hard, not able to argue because she's right. I should have been smarter. Should have known what could go wrong. But I didn't. And now it's my problem to fix.

She pinches the bridge of her nose. "Rule number eight: a clean job is a quiet job."

"I know, Mom. I didn't come here for a refresher on your rules."

“Well, you’re getting one,” she says with a sigh. “Because you really fucked up.”

“I know.”

“Noise attracts attention. Attention gets you caught. And getting caught is for amateurs. That roommate of yours—she’s noise.”

“I’ll handle the cleanup,” I say, sounding more sure of myself than I am. “I’ll get rid of the footage. Make sure no one talks. I’ll fix it.”

Her lips twitch, almost like she’s about to smile, but it’s not a kind smile. It’s the kind that makes my stomach turn. “You’ll handle it?” she says, her voice thick with disbelief. “You couldn’t even handle one man without making a mess. What makes you think you’re ready for cleanup?”

I don’t answer. There’s no point. She’s not looking for an explanation. She’s looking for an excuse to remind me of how badly I’ve failed.

“Let me guess,” she says, with another long drawn-out sigh. “This tough act you’re putting on...it’s all bullshit. Face it, Sophie—you’re here because you’re scared. You don’t know how to fix this, so you ran to Mommy to clean up your mess.”

I clench my fists, nails digging into my palms. “I’m not scared,” I say, the lie tasting bitter on my tongue. “I just thought?—”

“You didn’t think,” she cuts in. “That’s the problem. You don’t think. You act. You react. And now we’re in this mess because you couldn’t keep your emotions in check.”

Her words are sharp, deliberate, each one landing like a slap. But I don’t let them show. I can’t. If she senses any weakness at all, she’ll eat me alive.

“I’ll take care of Lily,” I say, shifting the focus. “She doesn’t remember much. They drugged her?—”

She cuts me off with a laugh, low and humorless. “You think that matters? Spotty memory or not, she’s a loose end. And you know we can’t have loose ends.”

My stomach twists. I knew this was coming, but hearing her say it out loud still makes my stomach sick. “She’s not a threat,” I say quickly. “I can make sure she doesn’t talk. I’ll?—”

“Stop.” Her voice is ice. “You’re not going to charm your way out of this, Sophie. If she becomes a problem, I’ll handle it—or the agency will. End of discussion.”

I want to argue, to tell her that Lily doesn’t deserve to die for being in the wrong place at the wrong time. But I know it won’t matter.

Charlotte doesn’t care about fairness or morality. She cares about control. She cares about keeping her hands clean. She cares about saving her own ass.

“I’ll make sure she’s not a problem,” I say instead. It’s not a promise I can keep, but I’m hoping it’s enough to make her back off. For now.

Charlotte eyes me for a long moment, then turns away, heading toward the safe hidden behind the bookshelf. “It’s a bit too late for that.”

I watch her, my jaw tight, my fists still clenched. She doesn’t see me as her daughter. Not really. To her, I’m just another tool. And tools that don’t work get thrown away.

The thought settles in my chest like a stone, heavy and unshakable. I’ve always known that failure isn’t an option. But tonight, it feels like the margin for error is thinner than ever.

As she opens the safe, I make a silent promise to myself: I'll handle this. The cameras, Lily, everything. Not for Mom, but for me. Because if there's one thing I've learned, it's that the only person I can rely on is myself.

She closes the safe and turns back to me, her expression unreadable. "Get out," she says. "Before I say or do something I regret."

I nod, forcing my legs to move toward the door. But as I step into the hallway, I can't shake the feeling that no matter what I do, it won't be enough. Not for her. Not for the agency. Not for anyone.

And maybe, just maybe, that's the point.

24

CHARLOTTE

I adjust the auburn wig just so, then pop the brown contacts in, apply a heap of mascara, and attach the fake nose. When I check my reflection in the mirror, I can't help but smile. I hardly recognize myself.

My phone buzzes on the counter, wiping the smile off my face. Carlo . I leave it for later. For after. When the job is done.

Speaking of, I don't know how to thank Carlo. All I can say is that I really owe him one. I'm not sure why it surprises me. I figured I'd have to singlehandedly clean up Sophie's mess at that club, but then I realized the agency has people for that. Not that this means either of us, Sophie nor I, are going to make it out of this alive. That still remains to be seen. But, thanks to Carlo, at least Sophie's not going to prison. Not tonight, anyway.

When I thanked him, he acted like it was nothing, and that made me think that maybe he's right. Maybe it is nothing. Maybe I need to give a little more grace. Sophie wasn't wrong in what she did; I'm even a little, dare I say...proud. But the way she went about it, well, that was not good. So she's not exactly pulling her weight? She's young, she's still figuring it out, and maybe I've been a little hard on her. I've decided tonight, it's different. Tonight, I'm not babysitting her. I'm giving her a second chance. I'm training her.

We're headed to Manhattan for a reason—there's a job to do. A target to eliminate.

Someone from the list. Not a friend, but a business associate. He's been meddling in things that don't concern him, and now it's his turn to go. We've tracked him down, and I've been watching him for long enough. He'll be dealt with before morning.

I step out of the bathroom. The heels of my boots echo against the floor, sharp and hollow. Sophie's sitting at the window, staring out into the city, her body slumped like she's waiting for some kind of answer that'll never come. She doesn't look at me when I walk in, but she doesn't have to. I'm not surprised. She's been avoiding me more and more lately. She's been doing that for days now.

"Ready?" I ask, my voice cutting through the silence. It's a loaded question, and she knows it. I don't need to say more.

She nods, but it's not enough. "Yeah."

Her voice is too soft, too hesitant. I step closer, just enough so she has no choice but to turn around and look at me. "Don't fuck this up, Sophie. Just for once, I'd really appreciate not being let down."

She swallows hard, but doesn't flinch. She's learning. Slowly, but she's getting there. I'll give her that much. "I look stupid."

"You look fine," I say noting her long black wig, fake chin, and the fat suit that adds thirty pounds to her tiny frame.

"I can't walk in this."

"You'll manage."

"It's hot, I'm burning up and I'm pretty sure my chin is going to fall off before we even hail a cab. "

“You’re right,” I say pulling some adhesive from my bag. “That humidity is a killer.”

I slather it on and then turn on my heel and head for the door. “There. Now, let’s go.”

I don’t check to see if she’s following. I don’t need to. She doesn’t have a choice.

25

CHARLOTTE

The streets of New York are darker tonight. There's no moon out, but neon signs stretch across the city like jagged streaks of light, throwing sharp, garish colors across the concrete. There's still movement, a few people here, a few more there. But none of them matter. Only the one we're after does.

We reach the address. The building is impressive. It's clean, functional, and far too sterile for its own good. The kind of place where people try to blend in. Try to seem ordinary. I slip inside without a sound, moving past the concierge like I own the place. Sophie sticks close behind, but I can feel the unease radiating off her. Her shoulders are tight, her eyes flicking nervously. She's expecting something to happen. I can see it, but I don't say anything. I can't—she has to figure it out for herself.

“Get out of your head,” I tell her. “This requires you to feel, Sophie. Do you understand what I'm saying?”

She says she thinks so, which tells me she has no clue at all.

But that's okay. This is how you learn.

We make our way to the door. The mark is inside. He's not alone, but that's fine. He never is. He's always been careless—too many enemies, too many wrong moves. And now it's come back to bite him.

I pull out my gun, feeling the familiar weight in my palm. It's comforting, like it's part of me. "You wait here," I tell Sophie, my voice leaving no room for argument.

Her mouth opens, like she's going to say something—maybe something stupid—but I don't give her the chance. I push the door open just enough to slip inside.

The scene inside hits me like a slap to the face. My mark, the one I've been tracking for days, is sprawled out on the couch, tangled up with a woman. They're making love, slow and messy, unaware of the danger that's about to swallow them whole. I stand there, frozen, my mind struggling to process the sight before me. I'm not in the mood for a double tonight. One and done, that's what I was aiming for.

But the longer I wait, the more it becomes apparent that what I want doesn't matter. They aren't stopping. It just goes on and on, like they're on to something, like they're trying to give tantra a run for its money. I've seen a lot of things. But I've never seen this.

Talk about stamina. I'm not sure whether to be disgusted or impressed.

The woman is moaning, her fingers gripping his chest as she arches against him. He looks too comfortable—too fucking satisfied. It pisses me off. I can't name the feeling, but something about this scene makes the blood in my veins run cold. It's too intimate, too real, too fucking human. A sharp contrast to my encounter at the hotel the other night.

These aren't just two people fucking. They are in love.

And if that doesn't make a person homicidal, I don't know what will.

Of course, it makes me think of Michael. I close my eyes for just a second, the image of the woman's body pressed against his reminding me of the times I've tried to

forget. The way Michael used to hold me like this, like I was the only thing in the world that mattered. And then, like all things that feel too good to be true, it all came crashing down.

None of it was real. Not our marriage. Not how I thought he felt about me. He was using me. I was using him. We were both pretending—and not very well, I should add—pretending to be something, to be someone we were not.

The thought of him, the way we used to be, makes a knot tighten in my stomach. The truth is I miss being married. I miss having a person to come home to, to call when the shit hits the fan, to have an emergency contact that isn't my kid or coworker. But I push these thoughts away, the same as always, forcing myself back to the task at hand. I can't let myself get raw about something like this. Not now. Not ever. Regret is a waste of energy.

I made the decision. I had Michael handled. And while a part of me does regret it—I mean, in hindsight I can see that maybe I might have overreacted—I know it was for the best.

Love, or anything that even remotely resembles it, has no place in this business. It was always going to be kill or get killed, once the cat was out of the bag. Once we'd seen each other for who we really were.

But enough about that.

I step further into the room. They don't notice me at first, but then he does. His eyes flicker up, widening in recognition. And for a split second, I see it—the realization that his life is about to end. The fear in his eyes makes me feel a strange resolve.

The woman gasps, turning her head, her eyes widening in shock.

I don't wait. I don't give them a chance to process. I raise the gun, aiming right at my mark. Before he can say anything, I pull the trigger. The shot echoes, loud and sharp, and his body jerks back. Blood splatters against the woman's chest, but she doesn't move. She's frozen, her eyes locked on her lover.

I don't flinch. I don't blink. This is just business.

The woman makes a move for the door. I don't give her the chance. One more shot, quick and clean, and she drops to the floor. It's done.

I glance back at Sophie, still standing in the doorway. She's frozen, her hands trembling, her face pale. She's staring at the blood, at the bodies, at the mess I've made. She doesn't say anything. She doesn't have to.

"What the fuck are you doing?" I snap, stepping toward her. "I told you to wait for me out there."

She blinks, slow, her eyes still glazed. "I couldn't..."

"You couldn't? Please tell me you have something better to offer than that." My tone is harsh, but I don't care. I'm not here to babysit her. I'm here to teach her.

"It sounded like he was killing her. I had to see."

"He was. But in a good way. And now, not so much."

"I'm sorry. I'm just hot." She nods at the fat suit. "I'm sweating like a pig in this thing."

"That is not a politically correct thing to say, Soph."

“You just murdered two people in cold blood—and you’re schooling me on right and wrong?”

“I was polite about it. No one suffered.”

Sophie doesn’t move. She doesn’t speak. The look on her face—like she’s waiting for some kind of approval for her behavior, some reassurance that this is okay—drives me up the wall.

“When you don’t listen, people get hurt,” I say. “That woman,” I motion with my gun, “she is dead because you got impatient. Because you had to see.”

Sophie doesn’t offer a response. She’s still standing there, but I don’t need her to say anything. She needs to learn what happens when you see things you shouldn’t. She needs to learn fast.

I turn and walk to the bags. We’ve got work to do.

And as I leave the room, I don’t look back. The bodies, the blood—the lesson I just taught my daughter—it’s already forgotten. The job is done. And I’m already thinking about the next one.

26

HAYLEY

The craziest, most unbelievable, never in a million years kind of thing happened. Zoe wrote me back. Not just a who is this message either. She spilled her entire life story, seriously just laid it right out there like the treasure trove it is. And let's just say this, it was not what I was expecting. She is desperate with a capital D.

And I have to admit, as much as it pains me, I might have been wrong. But maybe it's a good kind of wrong. Elliot is definitely not who I thought he was. She wants to break up with him! I know this sounds lucky for me, but it isn't. I mean, not really. She told me I was right. I didn't even realize that I wanted to be right. But now I have a new friend, so it's all good. She vaguely remembers me, but we didn't exactly have the same interests. Not counting Elliot, that is.

That's not a problem anymore, either. Zoe wrote that she's tried to break up with him several times, but the last time he smashed her face into the dashboard of his truck and it broke her nose. He said he was really sorry afterward and he took her to a movie, the kind he never wants see, and so she didn't break up with him. But not because of that, more because she's really scared. And she wants to know: can I help her?

I've given it a lot of thought, and I think I want to. I mean, she had a really great nose, and relationships should be fifty-fifty, and if Elliot can't handle a "girly movie" every once in a while, then what do I even want with him?

The door to my dorm room opens with the kind of squeak I've heard a thousand times, but today it sounds louder, like it's warning me. I can feel it. The tension, the heat rising in my chest, the suffocating weight of everything I've done, all the mistakes I've made. I pause for a second, leaning against the doorframe, as if somehow the act of standing still could push everything back into place. This is when it hits me. Maybe Hannah's death doesn't have to be in vain. Yes, she was going to die eventually; no one lives with a drug habit like that forever, not even rock stars. But I have to admit my part in this, that I helped things along, and it wasn't right.

I walk in, close the door behind me, and immediately set to work. Her body is gone—Hannah's body—but the damage remains. The air feels thick with it, every inch of the room screaming reminders of what happened. There's a mess I still need to clean up. A mess that's only getting worse by the minute. Not because anyone else knows—Max not included—but because I know. It's been eating at me, but I had to wait until things died down a little, until the coast was clear. At the very least, until her body was stuffed away in some freezer.

Now, that's done, I have no choice but to scrub it all away, wipe it clean, get rid of the evidence. If I don't, they'll find out, and everything will fall apart. I lift up the rug and pry open the slats in the floorboard. And there it is. I drag the trash bag out and start rummaging through everything I'd tossed in: the coke, the weed, the vodka bottle, all the crap Hannah brought in without a thought.

I am sorry she's dead. But I hope I can in some way atone for it with this part—the part that her family will never have to see—the cleanup. The cleanup that's supposed to make everything disappear, to make it look like nothing bad happened. But it's not that simple, is it?

As I start tossing things back into the bag, I try not to think about the vomit. It's on the floor, smeared and streaked like a bad painting. The stain lingers in my mind, and my hands shake just thinking about it. What if they find out I could have helped her,

but didn't? What if there's nothing I can do to stop it?

But then...I pause. I feel a strange surge of euphoria, like I've just won some twisted game. Hannah's death? The school can't touch me. They don't know about what happened—no one does. Except Max, but he won't talk.

Hannah's actual cause of death is still pending toxicology. It'll be six to eight weeks, at least, for that to come back, and by then I'll be long gone. Either way, it doesn't matter. No one can ever prove I could've helped her but didn't. She was just a young girl who made some bad decisions. Trusted the wrong people, too. But that will forever remain our little secret.

The guilt feels like a tight knot in my chest, but it's not enough to dull the satisfaction. This is how it had to go down. This is how it always goes down when you're me.

I grab the last of the trash and head toward the door, bag in hand, but a buzzing noise stops me. My phone. It's vibrating on the bed.

I know what it is before I even look. Another cryptic message. The ones that keep coming. The ones that tell me to keep my nose and my hands clean. The ones that hint at something bigger, something darker, that I haven't fully figured out yet. But I'm not stupid. I know what it means. I know what it's telling me.

I check the message anyway, my fingers moving quickly across the screen . "Clean up your mess, Hayley. And keep it clean. Or else."

I swallow hard. The world feels like it's shrinking again, closing in on me. But I can't let myself fall apart. Not now. I have to keep it together. For what comes next. For the meeting.

They've sent for my mother. She's coming from New York tomorrow, flying all the way to London to meet with the headmaster. I don't know what they'll say to her, but I already know what I'm going to say. I'm going to say whatever it takes to get me out of here. I have a plan. I have to do what my dad used to always talk about. I have to balance the scales of karma. I made a big mistake. I have to make it right. After all, Zoe needs my help.

27

ANONYMOUS

How do you convince a person they've bitten off more than they can chew? That really, more than anything, they need a vacation? Turns out, you can't. You've just got to hope fate takes its course and things work themselves out.

In this case, I suppose they have, because she's on a red-eye to Heathrow and I'm here. In her apartment that feels like it should be my home too, but, well, maybe in time. She just has to see the light, and that's fine, because I'm nothing if not an optimist.

The apartment's quiet, almost too quiet. I let myself in, careful not to leave a trace. I know this place. I've been here before. Once. But that was days ago, and I need a refresher.

Her medicine cabinet? A bust. A few vitamins, a bottle of lotion. I'm sure that's what everyone keeps in theirs—boring. No painkillers, no hidden bottles of Xanax. Not that I thought she was the type.

I move on.

The kitchen's sparse—no surprise there. No secret junk food stash. No half-empty wine bottles in the fridge. It's not like I'm trying to find some big secret, or that I'm wondering what she does to cope. I don't have to. I know.

The bed's unmade, but that's just Charlotte. I'm not expecting a nightstand full of love letters or some kind of dramatic evidence of a broken heart.

Her closet's bigger than I expected. Not that I'm judging. She works hard for this, no doubt. A flight attendant. Must be nice. All those fancy trips. All those nice clothes. Duty free. Too many shoes to count. Louboutins. Manolos. A couple of pieces that cost more than I'd spend on a week's worth of groceries.

I touch a jacket. Soft, like the kind of thing you never really need but wear to show off. I make sure nothing's out of place, then move on.

I can see everything from here, and there's not a damn thing worth looking at. No secrets hidden away in drawers. No locked boxes. Just her life, sprawled out in front of me, like some half-finished puzzle I'll never quite get.

But, hell, that's not why I'm here, is it? I'm not interested in her wardrobe or her spotless bathroom. No. I'm after something else.

I make my way to the desk, slow and deliberate. There's nothing personal about it. It's all business. A laptop, a couple of files. The usual.

I open the computer, looking for something. Maybe an email that says too much. Maybe a clue. Something to tell me who she really is. But it's all clean. Too clean. No dirty little secrets tucked away.

Her life? Boring.

I move past it. Step into the living room.

I already know I don't have to worry about a dog or cat. Not even a fish. Charlotte's not very good at taking care of herself; the last thing she needs is to be responsible for

anything. Plus, she's always gone, which is lucky because the last thing I need is for her to walk in and surprise the both of us. She'll be back soon, but not before I'm long gone.

I reach into my bag, pulling out the cameras. Four of them. I set them up with careful precision, every movement measured. No room for error. One in the corner by the window, one near the door, one facing the couch. And the last one? Hidden inside a decorative vase.

Once they're in place, I set up the feeds. I can see everything.

Everything.

And then I sit down, the weight of what I'm about to do settling in. It's not about her secrets. It's not about finding some skeleton in her closet. It's about the quiet thrill of watching.

I click through the feeds, one by one, watching her apartment come to life on my phone. The hum of the lights. The soft creak of the floorboards. It's all there, just waiting for her.

I sit back in the chair, a little too comfortable now, as if I'm meant to be here. Not in some invasive, shadowy way, but as though I'm simply part of her world.

I'm not worried about getting caught or what she'll do if she finds out.

It's not about that.

It's about being here. Right now.

Watching. Keeping track.

Because someone has to look out for Charlotte. Someone has to be there to make sure everything stays on the up and up. She can't do it herself.

And, really, if I wasn't here, who would?

It's truly for her own good. Though I doubt she'd agree.

28

HAYLEY

I get dressed quickly, putting on the uniform that's supposed to make me look like everyone else. Like I belong here. Like I'm not carrying around all these secrets.

The meeting is in less than five minutes. I check myself in the mirror. It's not the worst I've ever looked, but it will have to do.

I walk into the headmaster's office with my mother at my side, trying to ignore the thick smell of polished wood and expensive cologne. There's a chair waiting for me, but I don't sit. Not yet.

"Hayley," the headmaster says, his voice stern but measured. He's a man who's seen too many students like me, who's tired of their shit. "We've had some concerns. About your behavior. Your"—he clears his throat—"your recent actions."

I stand there for a moment, letting his words hang in the air, and then I speak. "I don't think you understand, sir," I say, my voice smooth, like I'm putting on a mask. "My actions? My friend just died. "

"Yes, and I'm sorry about Miss Lowry. But we attempted to schedule this meeting three times before?—"

"My mother is very busy."

The room goes silent for a moment. I can feel the headmaster's eyes on me, his curiosity piqued. "Well, she's here now."

"Right," I say, crossing my arms. "Obviously. But you see, after my father's death...it's been hard for her. Harder than anyone realizes. She thinks sending me here is some kind of solution. But it's not. She's just avoiding facing the truth. She doesn't want to be reminded of him." I let the words sink in, careful with every one. "Which is why I think it would be in everyone's best interest if I were sent home. Where I can be with her. Where she can stop pretending everything's fine."

The headmaster looks at me, his eyes narrowing. He's not sure what to say. My mother shifts beside me, her gaze darting nervously between me and the headmaster. She's still grieving. She's still stuck in the past. But it's not her I'm worried about now. It's the headmaster. He's the one I have to manipulate. He's the one who has to officially kick me out of this place.

"It's not healthy, you know," I continue. "Keeping me here like this. I don't belong here. I haven't for a long time. It's not fair to you, Headmaster, and it's not fair to me. You don't want a student who's being torn apart inside. Believe me, I'll just make things worse."

My words hang in the air for a second, and then I watch as the headmaster's eyes soften. He's seeing what I want him to see. A troubled student. A broken family. A situation that's too complicated for this place.

He leans back in his chair. "I see," he says slowly. "Perhaps you're right. Perhaps we need to reconsider your situation here."

I start to cry, real, proper tears, as the satisfaction bubbles up in my chest. I've won.

"Mrs. Jones—Charlotte—I think Hayley is right. I think it's best for all involved if

other arrangements are made for your daughter's education."

I choke out a sob then, grateful for the way he talks about me in third person, like I'm not even here. It tells me that soon I won't be. I look over at Mom, who is livid. Absolutely livid. But what is she going to say? She can't make them keep me.

That doesn't stop her from trying. "What if I paid double the tuition—I'm sure the additional funds could really help out around here, no?"

He rubs at the stubble on his chin. "Perhaps something could be arranged."

I realize I have to act and fast. "I'll kill myself," I say. "Just like Hannah—her parents—they didn't listen either, did they? And now it's a stain on your reputation." The tears fall faster. "Maybe if I can't be in Texas, maybe I just want to be in heaven with her."

"We live in New York now," Mom says. "It's not hell, but?—"

The headmaster looks defeated. He looks like he really wanted that extra money, but that some part of him, the intelligent part, knows it's not worth it. "I think Hayley is right, Mrs. Jones. I think she needs more than we can give her here, at this time."

"I see," Mom says. "My daughter can be quite a handful."

She grabs a tissue from the desk and tosses it in my direction.

I blow my nose, and I mean really let everything out. All eyes are on me, and when I'm finished I say, "I get that from my father."

"Well." Mom stands and brushes her dress. "I guess that's that."

“We’re sorry to see you go, Hayley,” the headmaster says.

We all know he’s lying, but no one says it. Instead, it’s all tight smiles and stiff handshakes. And then, as I leave the office, walking out into the cold London air with Mom at my heel, I feel that same knot of anxiety in my stomach. There’s something I’m missing. Something bigger than me, and I’m too close to it now. Too close to whatever game I’m being pulled into.

But for now, I’m free. For now, I’ve won.

29

SOPHIE

Mom has flown to London for a few days to retrieve my juvenile delinquent of a sister, but somehow she always sees me as the problem child. That's fine. It gives me a few days to live, to be at peace.

It's not all fun and games, though. I still have school. I still have work. I still have to gain access to an afterparty, and this time I am not taking Lily. She hasn't really spoken to me since everything happened. I looked it up, and this is common with sexual assault victims, the withdrawing into themselves, so I try not to take it personally. It's kind of sad, though, because I thought we might be friends, but then I realized I can't have friends.

But no one said anything about a lover. Surely I'm allowed at least one of those. Mom has several. She thinks I don't know, but she's never been as good at hiding things as she thinks she is. Besides, I saw those people the other night and I had to know. Is that what it's really like?

The passion, the heat...it was...well, it was a lot. Every boy I've ever known and even a few "men," they just sort of fumbled their way through things. It looked nothing like that. So you could say I was curious, and you could say I had a certain amount of time to kill.

I couldn't help myself. I called Malik.

And I'm not going to go into all the details, but let's just say he knows things. He can definitely find his way around, so to speak. It was great. Until it wasn't.

Because now what am I going to do? It's not like you can settle for a two when you've had a ten. Even a seven couldn't remotely compare. I just can't figure it out...why would anyone, ever, want to settle? It's like when you know, you know. You can't un-know what you know.

Which tells me only one thing. This is bad; this is very bad.

It got me thinking...how many Maliks can there be out there? Is it a numbers game? Is it luck? I didn't know. So I started asking around, and let's just say this...there are a lot of disappointed women out there.

So I did the only thing I could do. I went out with him again. Even though I know better, even though Mom is going to kill me, even though things are probably going to end in a very terrible way.

Thankfully, I have work to take my mind off things.

The club tonight is called Nocturne, which is about as cliché as it gets for a place that charges a cover fee you can't even afford if you're not VIP. The bouncers don't even look at me when I walk past them; they just nod and let me through. Could be the dress. Could be the cash I slip them. Either way, it doesn't matter.

Inside, the bass is vibrating the walls, and the lights flash in time with the pulse of the music. People are packed like sardines around the bar, but I'm not here to hang out with drunk girls who don't know what to do with their bodies. I'm here for business.

I make my way to the VIP section, sliding through the throngs of sweaty, writhing people. The bodyguards all wear black. They're armed and wearing ear pieces, which

means one thing: important people are here. People I need to know about.

I scan the crowd, trying to find a familiar face among the sea of influencers, actors, and random socialites. But then my eyes land on him. Tall, dark, and wearing a perfectly fitted suit that tries too hard to stand out. I overhear someone refer to him as "Rico" and that's all I need to know. He's a bodyguard for some pop star I don't recognize. Probably not my business to know her name either.

I wait for the right moment. Finally, he steps away from his post, just far enough that I can make my move. He looks distracted, and I don't waste the opportunity.

"Hey," I say, tilting my head in a way that I hope reads mysterious but approachable .
"You a fan of the music?"

He smirks, a little amused, a little cocky. "I'm here to protect the talent. I don't listen to this crap."

"Well," I raise an eyebrow, glancing around the room, "I'm not here for the music either."

His gaze sharpens. I can tell I've piqued his interest. He's going to ask what I want, which is a good question, and one I don't have an answer for. I'm here because the agency told me to be here. I'm here because they gave me an assignment, they need information, and the rest isn't my business to know. His brow raises, and right on cue, he says, "What are you here for, then?"

"I was hoping I could get into the afterparty. My friend knows someone at the label. Says you know who's going."

His eyes flicker with suspicion, but he doesn't ask me for proof. Doesn't need to. He's been working this job too long to trust anyone at face value, but he's a man of a

certain type, and I know how to appeal to that .

A few minutes of small talk, a promise of a night that could be more than just another job, and I'm in.

As he leads me through the velvet ropes, I hear someone shout his name—a voice sharp with authority. My stomach tightens. This could go south fast. I just have to remember what Mom always says: Stay focused. Remain in character. Don't get murdered.

30

SOPHIE

I blink, and suddenly I'm slipping into a cab outside a sleek, modern building on Columbia's campus, the neon lights of a downtown bar flashing in my peripheral vision. I blink again, and I'm stepping into a private party, champagne spilling into my glass as laughter and the steady pulse of New York's heartbeat mix. I blink three times, and I'm at an afterparty, the music louder, the people sharper, the night stretching somehow as far as the skyline.

I wake up to the chaos of a lecture hall, my thoughts tangled between last night's cocktails and a professor's monotone. A quick swipe of my phone and I'm scrolling through invites—party at a club, an exclusive rooftop event, some private loft in Tribeca.

Life is one invitation after another. I look up, half-dazed, and realize the day's blurred into night again. Somehow, I've made it to dinner with friends—exhausted, but I make it work. It's all the same. Blink and I'm awake. Blink again and I'm drifting. Blink three times, and I'm back where I started—always moving, never quite standing still.

That's the rhythm of it .

Always moving, always on the edge of something more.

Three months pass and nothing really happens and everything happens and now I'm

back in the Hamptons.

I'm speaking to that boy again, the one everyone but my heart tells me is a bad idea, and thank God, and finally, because even though it's stupid, really, I thought I might actually die.

But he's not here because he can't be a part of this faction of my life, and while that's probably what will kill it in the end, this is just how it is.

The house is insane, sparkling in the moonlight, with a pool that probably costs more to maintain than all four years of my tuition combined. The flashing lights are blinding, and the people milling around are trading stories about their latest purchases, the vacations they just got back from, and who knows what else. Nothing important.

I slip into the crowd, trying to blend in while my mind races with the list of people I need intel on. There's the CEO of that tech company, someone the agency is interested in knowing more about, and a few key players from Hollywood that I'm supposed to track.

I spot my target in the back—thick neck, a gaudy watch, chatting with someone who looks way too young to be here. But then again, looks can be deceiving. The guy's name is Gregory, and according to Carlo, he's been mixed up in shady business for years. My agency wants to know exactly who he's dealing with.

I fall into the rhythm of things here without much effort. Smile. Laugh. Flirt. Do what I have to do.

But I'm not here for the party. I'm here for the intel.

I head toward the bar, grab a drink, and try to figure out how to get close to Gregory

without being too obvious. He's deep in conversation with someone, but I don't mind waiting. I've got time.

I'm halfway through my second drink when I hear a soft voice, just close enough for me to catch it. "Sophie?"

I freeze. My gut tightens. I don't need to turn around to know who it is.

Lily.

I face her slowly. She's standing there in a black dress that hugs her body just right, her hair perfectly styled, the kind of effortless beauty that's almost too polished. Her expression is almost unreadable, but I can see the flicker of surprise in her eyes. She wasn't expecting to see me here.

"Lily," I say, trying to keep my tone light, but it's hard. I should've seen this coming. "What are you doing here?"

Her smile is a little tight, but she's quick to recover. "I could ask you the same thing," she says, glancing at the drink in my hand. "I didn't think this was exactly your scene..."

I just shrug. "I'm here with a friend." I can't help it. I lie, the words slipping out easily

Her eyes narrow slightly. "The girl from your biology class?" she asks, with an edge to her voice.

"Yeah, that's the one."

She tilts her head. "I see."

The smile on her face is almost too knowing, like she's dissecting me in that quiet way she always does. But before I can ask her anything else, she cuts me off with a small laugh.

"You don't belong here, Sophie."

I frown, but she doesn't let me answer, stepping closer to me. "No offense," she adds, her smile twisting. "I just didn't think you'd be into this... scene."

"I'm not," I say, shifting my weight, a strange feeling tightening in my chest. "I just came with my friend. That's all."

Lily watches me for a beat, eyes glinting with something sharp I can't quite place. "Right."

She doesn't say anything more for a moment, but I feel the tension between us building, thick like smoke in the air. And then—without warning—she drops the bomb.

"If you're looking for work, I could help you out," she says, her voice lowered.

"Work?" I glance around the room. "You mean like bartending?"

She laughs an easy laugh like the joke's on me. "Come on, Soph—I know you're not that naive."

"I'm afraid I might be."

"Fine," she says, rolling her eyes. "I'll spell it out. If you need money...I'm actually with the company that helps organize some of these things. I can get you in with them, if you want. You could probably do a lot more than just stand around looking

for your friend.”

I’m going to have to make her spell it out. I’m too at risk for saying the wrong thing.

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, I’m an escort, Sophie.”

I blink, unsure if I heard her correctly.

“Don’t make that face,” she says, almost laughing now, but it’s not a happy sound.

“I’m an escort, Sophie. It’s how I pay for school.”

The words hit me like a cold wave. My mouth goes dry, but I don’t know what to say.

I open my mouth, then close it again, the shock of it hanging between us.

“An escort?” I repeat.

Lily just nods, like it’s no big deal, and suddenly it feels like I’m looking at a stranger. “Yeah,” she says, almost apologetically. “Everyone has their thing, right? It’s just business.”

“Of course. I mean, yeah, I get it.”

“I’m not on the clock tonight, just here as a ‘friend’ of the person throwing this party.”

I blink. “A friend?”

“Yeah, don’t look at me like that.” She shakes her head, the glint of amusement returning to her eyes. “Okay, fine. He’s a client. But I’m not really ‘working’ right now. It’s all about knowing the right people, right?”

The way she says it makes my stomach flip. I should feel relieved. She's offering a way in. But somehow, the idea of it doesn't sit right with me. For sure it won't sit right with Charlotte. Or the agency. It's too much. Too close. It'll blow my cover, if it's not already blown.

"You're not the only one with secrets, Sophie," she says, almost too casually.

"That's funny," I say, forcing a smile. "But like I said, I just came here because of my friend. She knows someone..."

"That's what they all say."

"Maybe. But I really mean it."

Lily gives me a knowing smile, the kind that says she's not fooled, but she doesn't push. "All right. Your loss," she says. "If you change your mind, though, you know where to find me."

Just like that, she disappears into the crowd, leaving me standing there with the taste of her words still on my tongue.

For a moment, I just stand there, trying to shake off the weirdness of the conversation. Lily...an escort.

I turn back to the task at hand—Gregory is still talking, still distracted, still within reach. I can't afford to let this throw me off.

I remind myself of why I'm here: to get the intel. And I suppose in a way I have.

I tell myself it doesn't matter.

I've got a job to do.

31

HAYLEY

I count the days like I'm marking off the final stretch of a race, but it's not a race to the finish. It's a countdown to freedom. Less than a month to Christmas break, and I'm back in Texas. Back with everything I'm supposed to leave behind.

I've been staring at the city through my bedroom window for months now, and it still doesn't feel like home. It's better than London, I'll say that. Still, it's just another place where I'm supposed to fit in, but all I really do is watch time pass me by. Mom's hardly here, which means it's like I'm living by myself in a nice apartment with way too much space and silence. Sophie's doing her whole college thing, and I'm stuck here wasting my life away.

Charlotte put me in this pretentious private school, where I skip as much as I can, and spend the rest of the time pretending to care about tests and teachers who probably wouldn't give a damn if I failed every single class.

It's strange, you know? I always thought that being away from Texas would be this huge escape, but now I just feel... disconnected. I can do whatever I want, which I guess should be a relief. But it isn't. Not really. Because "whatever I want" is just me alone in an apartment in the middle of New York, staring out the window and plotting how to fix things that aren't mine to fix.

Like Zoe.

That situation has turned into something I can't ignore.

I don't know if she actually thinks I can help her, or if she's just reaching out to someone—anyone—to pull her out of this nightmare. But I promised her I'd try. After everything I've been through, I can't just walk away from someone who's as trapped as I was.

The cryptic anonymous texts stopped, though. After that last one, the strange warning from whoever's watching me, they went silent. Maybe they figured out I'm not the one they should be worried about. Or maybe they don't care anymore. Either way, the pressure's been off... but that doesn't mean I'm not still trying to piece together whatever I can from what's left.

I need to do something.

Elliot and Zoe are still in Texas, but I can't rely on a single thing there to fix what's broken. So I have to act from here. From New York. And I can't waste any more time. Zoe sent me a pic. She has another black eye, and her parents are starting to not buy the whole, "it was volleyball" bit.

Charlotte comes and goes, like a ghost that's trying not to be seen. I'm starting to realize she's always been like that. I can hear her footsteps when she gets home late, or when she leaves early, but most of the time, I don't even know where she's been. And when she does stop by, she just...observes. I don't get it. I'm not a problem she's worried about fixing, but she'll never admit that. She only cares about Sophie. Dad was the one who loved me, who cared about me, but he's dead and now there's no one.

But Zoe.

She cares. Sure, it's just because she needs me, but still. Sometimes you just need to

be needed .

So Mom should be proud. I've learned to fill the void in my own way. One thing that does keep me busy is figuring out how to get Zoe away from Elliot. If I could just talk to her directly—no distractions, no bullshit—I could probably get her to see the logic in what I'm saying. But I can't. All I have is our DMs. All I have is the tiny fragments of hope I still cling to. And I have to move fast. Because if I don't, if I just sit here like I've been doing, nothing will change. And nothing can stay the same for too long.

I flop down on the sofa, pulling out my phone. I stare at the screen, not really thinking about what to say, just needing to say something. I type a few words—just an idea, a plan, whatever it is that might get her out. The longer I wait, the worse it gets for her. And I can't let that happen. Not again.

The message reads:

I've got a plan. You don't have to stay with him, Zoe. You'll be okay, just listen.

But even as I send it, I can't help but feel like I'm playing a game I'm not sure I can win. There's a part of me that wonders if Zoe will even get it. Or if she'll think I'm crazy. Or worse—what if she doesn't trust me? What if this is a waste of time?

But then I remind myself— it's not a waste of time. Even if it doesn't work out, at least I'll know I tried. And that's all I have left to hold onto, really.

I lean back and close my eyes, letting out a breath I didn't even realize I was holding. The silence in this apartment is thick. Even though I'm surrounded by millions of people, I've never felt more alone. I can't keep pretending that I'm okay with this life, with the way what I want keeps getting pushed aside, waiting for a better time, waiting for things to settle. They never do.

I should be happy. I should be grateful that I'm here, in this nice apartment in New York, going to some overpriced school that's trying to turn me into something I'll never be. I should be grateful that Sophie has her life, that Mom does whatever she does. I should be grateful, period. But I'm not.

I'm just tired.

And I can't wait for Christmas break. For Texas. For everything to finally break open.

Maybe then I'll find a way to make it all better.

32

ANONYMOUS

The cameras are hidden well enough that she doesn't even think to look for them. I've watched her for months now—sometimes I think more than I've watched anything or anyone in my life.

Every inch of the apartment, every corner of the kitchen, is captured in high definition. I know every line of the room, the slight angle at which she tilts her head when she's listening to someone, the way she places her glass down with a soft click as though her hands are too delicate for the world.

But tonight is different. Tonight something is actually happening. More than the usual, just a person going about her everyday life.

Her life used to be so interesting. Then it got boring. I know it hasn't been easy for her since her husband died. Being a single parent and all, being the sole breadwinner. Plus, there was the pandemic and that really changed everything. For a lot of people. But it seems things are picking up again; it seems they are taking a turn. And I don't like it. I don't like it at all.

The candles in her kitchen flicker, casting shadows that make her look almost ethereal, like she doesn't belong here. And she doesn't. This city was always meant to be a temporary thing, but it's becoming a bit too permanent for my liking. What was supposed to be a few weeks has turned into three months.

The weather has turned. The leaves have fallen, and she's still here. Why is she still here? I'd like to think it's because she can't let go, because she's always had trouble letting go, but I know better.

It's something else. Something no amount of spying has showed me yet. Regardless, I press on.

Tonight, she's standing by the counter, her bare feet shifting slightly on the cool floor. It's a casual stance, but everything about her movements is deliberate—graceful, calculated, almost too controlled. The kind of woman who knows exactly how to hold herself in a room. Even when she doesn't try.

I don't know how she does it. I don't know why she still pulls me in after everything. I hate New York. But she's here, so I'm here.

Tonight, she's hosting a dinner party. A Friendsgiving, even though these people aren't really her friends but neighbors. That's Charlotte for you. Good at being fake.

She's wearing a simple cocktail dress—nothing extraordinary, but to me, it's perfect. The way her fingers delicately trace the rim of her wine glass, the way her lips press together, like she's holding something back. She doesn't seem to notice how much attention she draws. But I do. I always do.

I focus in on the guest standing opposite her, a man I've never seen before. His posture is slightly off—too relaxed, too eager. He's leaning in a little too much, trying to engage her with a smile that's more confident than sincere. But she's humoring him, tilting her head just so, listening to him, eyes wide and unblinking. There's a soft tension in the air between them, something unspoken but undeniably there.

She offers him a polite smile as he shakes her hand, and it's like watching a

performance. She's always performing, always in control, but with him—it's different. I see it in the way she angles her body toward him, the way she tilts her head as if she's curious. Not in the usual, calculated way she does with others—no, this is genuine. This is new.

And I know right then he's not going to be like the others. Not like the men who've come in and out of her life. I can tell from the set of his jaw that he's aware of her power, of the quiet magnetism she exudes. And I can see she's aware of it too. She always knows.

They're laughing about something—probably trivial—but there's a palpable chemistry between them that unsettles me. His laugh is too loud, his gestures too broad, trying too hard. She's amused, though, genuinely so.

It's the way she looks at him. It's subtle—imperceptible to anyone else—but I see it. She's intrigued. Interested. The way her gaze lingers on him is something I rarely see. She's invested.

It hasn't even been five minutes. Women.

I zoom in closer, my eyes tracing the way her fingers curl around her glass, the faint shift in her posture as she leans slightly toward him. She doesn't touch him. Not yet. But she might. She might.

She most definitely will.

My finger hovers over the screen, and I pause the video feed for a moment, letting the silence settle in my chest like a knot. I can't stop watching. Something in me twists uncomfortably. It's not jealousy, no. It's something else. A dark curiosity. The need to see this play out. To know how far she's willing to go.

When I press play, they're talking again, the words lost to me. His laugh rings out, and she smiles, her eyes bright, unguarded. It's an expression I haven't seen on her in years—genuine enjoyment. For him. Not for me.

She takes a step back, glancing down at her phone briefly, then back at him. I wonder if she's lost herself in him yet. If she can even remember what it feels like to be wanted by someone without playing the game. She knows how to make men crave her. How to make them feel like they're the only ones who matter.

But there's something different about this one. He's not like the others. He's too sure of himself. Too self-contained, in a way that makes him dangerous. He doesn't need her to make a move. But she will. She always does.

I see it in the way she adjusts her posture again to match his, the subtle shift of her hips, how she touches her hair just a little too casually. She's playing the game. She's inviting him to play with her. She's still working out the rules.

He steps closer. The space between them narrows. There's a flash of something in his eyes—something possessive.

But Charlotte, with all her curated charm, doesn't pull away. She leans in, just enough to test the waters, to see how far she can push, to see how far he'll go. And when she smiles—when she really smiles—there's something unsettling in it. Something almost too welcoming. Too inviting. She doesn't see the danger, or maybe she does and she just doesn't care.

I can feel my pulse quicken, my breath hitch. It's not just her smile that has me fixated—it's the way she makes him feel like he's the only one who matters. And that motherfucker believes it.

They stand there for a few moments, her apartment full of people, but it's as though

they've forgotten about everyone else. It's just the two of them now, suspended in this quiet, intense bubble. He reaches out, brushing his fingertips against her wrist in a gesture that's too bold for someone who isn't already certain of his place in her world.

She doesn't recoil.

Instead, she lets the touch linger. And then, almost imperceptibly, her body shifts forward again, aligning with his in that familiar dance I've watched her perform countless times before. The magnetism between them is undeniable. It's so raw, so charged, that it practically jumps through the fucking screen. I might kill her. I will definitely kill him.

Most likely, I'm not going to kill anyone.

She can't be this stupid. Can she?

My grip tightens on my phone. I'm just about to chuck it at the wall. But I can't. Not yet. I have to know.

What's she going to do next?

Her lips part as if she's about to speak. My heart stutters in my chest. There's something darkly intoxicating about this moment, watching her— waiting to see what she'll do. What she'll let happen. How far she's going to take this.

It's almost too much.

But I can't stop watching.

And just before she opens her mouth, just before she makes the choice, her daughter

wanders into the kitchen.

Charlotte pulls away, the moment ruptured, like a balloon popping in slow motion. The spell is broken. She gives the man a quick smile, but her attention has already shifted. He stands there, awkward now, unsure of how to re-enter the scene, but she's already moved on.

Her daughter speaks to her, and Charlotte, without missing a beat, answers her, her voice soft, controlled, back to the mother she has been for so long, where her kids come first, her job not included.

But I saw it. That crack. That brief, fleeting moment where she almost let herself go.

And I'll be waiting.

Waiting for the next time.

Because it's only a matter of time before she lets it happen again.

CHARLOTTE

I was only supposed to be in New York for a few weeks. That's what I told myself. Just a short stay to tie up some things, get a bit of work done. A brief detour. But here I am, three months later, settled into a routine I never saw coming. A job here, a kill list there, my regular work, and the flight attending—it's kept me busier than expected. It's hard to believe how quickly time passes when you're constantly moving. What started as a few weeks has turned into months. I've made my peace with it, though. The city doesn't give you a chance to do anything else.

But if I'm honest with myself, it's not just the work that's kept me here. It's Sophie. It's always been Sophie. I never expected to worry this much, never thought I'd be this attached. But that's not even the main reason. Here, in the noise of New York, I can almost forget about everything else.

This city makes Texas feels like a distant memory. Back home, the silence creeps in at night, and I'm forced to hear my own thoughts. There, it's just me and the ghost of Michael, spare parts tossed around, reminders of what we had, of what we once were, and I can't even think about that right now. I don't want to go back to that life. Not yet. Not with the holidays upon us.

Here, in the chaos, I'm never really alone. The city moves around me, and it's almost as though it's keeping me from remembering all the things I try so hard to forget.

I've gotten used to Hayley's presence—too used to it, in fact. It's easier having her

here than it would be back home, and I don't mind having her around as much as I thought I would. But there's something else, something I hadn't expected.

My neighbor down the hall. The chemistry between us. He's charming, funny, and confident, and I've found myself thinking about him more than I'd care to admit. I told myself it was just a passing distraction. But when he asked to meet up tonight, I didn't say no.

So here I am, in a hotel room, waiting for him. The clock on the nightstand ticks slowly, but every second feels heavy, charged. A quiet tension that prickles at my skin. When the knock comes, I almost jump, startled by the sudden sound. I hesitate for only a moment before I open the door. He stands there, looking exactly like I remember—tall, confident, dangerous in that casual way that makes my pulse quicken.

"Hey," he says, his smile full of mystery. "Nice place."

I keep my voice steady, even as my heart races. "Sorry about the hotel. My daughter lives at home, and I like to keep things separate."

He tilts his head, a glimmer of amusement in his eyes. "We could've just gone to my place."

I close the door behind him, my gaze lingering on his lips as he steps inside. "I like things clean."

His lips twitch into a slow smile. "You might be the strangest woman I've ever met."

I shrug. "I get that a lot."

He looks like he wants to say something, but thinks better of it. The air is thick with

something unspoken, something hot and dangerous. I can feel the weight of his stare, and it sends a flicker of anticipation through me, sharp as a knife. For a moment, it's like the world outside has disappeared. It's just the two of us—magnetic, raw, no false pretenses. No promise of this being anything more than what it is.

I tell him exactly that.

“Anything more than what?” he says. “Neighbors?”

“Neighbors who fuck.”

He quirks a brow. “Sounds messy.”

“Whatever. I'll move.”

He doesn't hesitate.

Before I know it, his hands are on me, fingers digging into my skin, possessive and unyielding. He slams me against the wall, his chest pressing into mine, and his lips crash onto mine—rough, urgent. I let him take the lead, the heat of it pulling me in. It's not gentle, it's raw—an insistent demand I didn't know I wanted.

His hands roam with urgency, every touch sharp, and I respond in kind, matching his need. There's no thought, only fire and instinct. He doesn't ask for anything—he just takes—and I fucking love it. His lips leave mine, and I feel his teeth graze my neck before they press in, sharp and deliberate. The bite is intense, possessive, and I move into it, welcoming the sting.

He is everywhere—gripping, pulling, forcing me into him—and I let it happen. Every motion is faster, harder, as if he's trying to burn through me.

I really don't mind.

I sink into the rhythm, feeling his breath quicken, his chest pressing harder against mine. He moves with purpose, each push building the heat between us. It's urgent, intense. It's exactly what I need.

I close my eyes, let go.

His body slams into mine, the force driving me back against the wall. Time must surely pass, but who's keeping track? The tension rises, unbearable, and I feel myself tighten around it, the pressure building. I let it consume me, riding the wave as it crashes over me.

The release comes, sharp, overwhelming—a storm that shatters and reassembles me.

But he doesn't stop. His body keeps moving, relentless, pulling me deeper into it. I'm caught in the current, unable to break free. And why would I ever want to? If drowning feels this good, so be it.

We move from the wall, to the desk, to the bed, not that I'm keeping track. I couldn't even tell you what day it is if I was asked.

When it's over, the world snaps back, but the buzz still rings in my ears. He pulls back, his face flushed, but there's no softness in his eyes. He's still a stranger.

For a moment, I stare at him, something strange and satisfying stirring in my chest. I don't know why, but I feel...nothing. Better, I feel at peace. For once, it's not about filling the space; it's about emptying myself out. I can't remember the last time I felt like this.

But then I do.

I always do.

Neither of us speaks, which is really for the best. He knows. The way he watches me, like he's studying me, measuring something in my eyes. I want to look away, but I don't. It's a dangerous game, and I'm playing it willingly.

But I'm not stupid. I didn't come here to get lost in whatever this is. I came here for one thing and one thing only. And I got it.

I push the thoughts of seeing him again, at least in this context, to the back of my mind, focusing on the moment. Just the moment. It's obvious this can't happen again.

After a few beats of uneasy silence, he looks toward the bathroom. "I'm gonna jump in the shower. Join me."

I can't help but smile. It's not a question. "I'm good."

He disappears into the bathroom, the sound of the water turning on almost immediately. For a second, the room feels emptier, quieter. And then I feel the stir of something that's been there all along—an itch I need to scratch.

I've got work to do, and I can't afford to waste time.

I move quickly, slipping off the bed without making a sound. I dress and then grab my purse from the dresser and start toward the door, fingers brushing over the cool handle. I pause, just for a moment, to listen. The sound of water running. The faintest echoes of him shifting inside the bathroom.

I don't feel guilty. Not even a little bit. I don't owe him an explanation. I don't owe anyone anything.

Without a second glance, I step into the hallway, closing the door softly behind me. No goodbyes. No apologies. Just a quiet exit.

The elevator's too slow. I consider the stairs, but eventually, the doors open, and I step in. When I exit the lobby, a sense of freedom floods through me. The air outside is cool and crisp. I stand there, feeling what, I don't know. Content, I think? And I wonder if I'll ever feel that again. Maybe I don't need to.

Maybe this is all I'll ever want.

34

CHARLOTTE

My good mood is short-lived. I barely make it through the front door of my apartment before I realize something is wrong. The faint scent of cigarette smoke hits me first, cutting through the sanitized nothingness of my space. I lock the door behind me and slide off my heels, setting them quietly by the wall. My senses are sharp now, all traces of post-coital peace gone. Someone is here.

The glow from the city barely filters through the drawn curtains, leaving the apartment draped in shadow. I hear the faint creak of leather and then his voice.

“Welcome home.”

My stomach tightens.

I flip on the nearest light. He’s sitting in my armchair, legs crossed, his elbow resting casually on the armrest as if he owns the place. The sight of him is infuriating, but what sets my teeth on edge is the closed door to Hayley’s bedroom down the hall. My daughter, asleep, utterly unaware that a man like this is sitting less than twenty feet away.

“This is a new low, even for you,” I say. “Breaking into my home?”

He shrugs, flicking ash from his cigarette into the glass tray he’s brought with him—from where, I don’t know. The casual disrespect of it makes my skin crawl.

“Your security’s too good for anyone but me. Consider it a compliment.”

“Put that out,” I snap, nodding at the cigarette. “Now.”

He raises an eyebrow but obliges, stubbing it out with an exaggerated twist. “Happy?”

“Not remotely,” I cross my arms. “What do you want, Carlo?”

He doesn’t answer immediately, leaning back in the chair as if he has all the time in the world. His silence feels deliberate, a power play I’ve seen a hundred times before. But I’m not in the mood for games tonight.

“I’ve been getting texts,” I say, cutting into the quiet. “And I think I’m being followed. Is it you?”

Carlo’s eyes narrow, just slightly. “Paranoia doesn’t suit you, Charlotte.”

“Don’t patronize me.” I step closer, keeping my voice low. The last thing I want is to wake Hayley. “If you’re playing some kind of game, I need to know.”

He leans back in the chair, exhaling a slow stream of smoke despite having extinguished the cigarette. The faint lingering smell is a reminder of his intrusion, his audacity. “You’re slipping.”

My blood runs cold. “Excuse me?”

“I’ve seen it before,” he says, his tone maddeningly calm. “Agents who burn too brightly, too fast. You need a break. A week at the beach, maybe. Clear your head.”

I stare at him, searching his face for the telltale signs of deceit. But Carlo’s

good—too good. If he’s lying, I can’t see it.

“A non-working assassin is a dead assassin,” I say. “You know that.”

“Then prove me wrong.” He rolls a fresh cigarette between his fingers and then places it between his lips, the unlit end bobbing as he speaks. “Shouldn’t be too hard. I’ve got a job for you.”

I don’t like the way he says it, the casual way he dismisses my concerns. But I stay silent, letting him continue.

“There’s a yacht party,” he says, pulling a sleek tablet from his jacket and placing it on the coffee table. The screen lights up, displaying a dossier. “Your target will be there. High-profile, dangerous. This one needs precision, and it needs to be public.”

Public. The word feels like a slap. “You’re joking.”

“I never joke about work.”

I pick up the tablet and scroll through the details. My chest tightens when I see Sophie’s name. “I don’t want her involved in this.”

“She’s ready,” he says.

“She’s not,” I snap, shoving the tablet back onto the table. The screen flickers as it spins. “And you know it. Besides, this is a terrible way to handle this job.”

“It’s not your call,” Carlo says, his voice hardening. “The agency agrees. We need to send a message. It’s how it has to happen.”

“And if I don’t agree?”

His eyes lock on mine, cold and unyielding. “You know the answer to that.”

I’ve seen this before. The setup. The trap. Two birds, one stone. My stomach churns, but I keep my expression blank. If Carlo senses hesitation, I’m as good as dead.

“You’re asking me to risk everything.” My words are steady, but the question is about to get me in a lot of trouble. “For what?”

His lips curl into a smile that doesn’t reach his eyes. “To twist fate. Rewrite the course of the future. Take out a few bad actors before they get their hands any dirtier than they already are.”

I don’t respond, but he takes my silence as permission to continue.

“Think about it,” he says, leaning forward. “What if Hitler had been a successful artist? What if the Columbine kids had gotten laid? What if Manson had been loved as a child?” He pauses, his smile widening. “Sometimes all it takes is one move. One act to change the trajectory of everything.”

His words hang in the air, heavy and twisted, like the smoke he left to poison my lungs. The way he manipulates—the calm arrogance of it—makes my skin crawl. Every word feels like a hook, trying to drag me into his twisted logic. I want to wipe that smug smile off his face, throw his tablet at the wall, scream that I see right through him, and put a bullet in his head. But I don’t. I’ve played this game long enough to know better.

“Fine.” I force the word out, hating how it feels as it rolls off my tongue. “I’ll do it.”

Carlo stands, smoothing the front of his jacket. “Good. Details will come through in the morning.”

He picks up his tablet and moves to the door, pausing just before he steps out. “Get some rest, Charlotte. You’ll need it.”

The door clicks shut behind him, leaving me alone. I stare at his stubbed-out cigarette, my mind racing. Carlo’s right about one thing: this isn’t just a job. It’s a warning. A test. And if I fail, it won’t just be my life on the line.

I glance toward Hayley’s door, a faint sense of dread curling in my chest. But I suppose that’s what they want. Two birds, one stone.

35

CHARLOTTE

It's highly probable that this time tomorrow, I will be dead. That leaves me with twenty-four hours, if I'm lucky, to tie up a lifetime's worth of loose ends. There's not a moment to waste, which is why I'm sitting at the dining table, double-checking the arrangements I've made for my daughters.

Turns out, planning your own death is a lot like packing for a one-way trip—agonizing over what to leave behind, what to bring, and who will have to sort through the mess you couldn't be bothered to handle.

I've always known this was part of the job. Death isn't just a possibility; it's a guarantee. What surprises me isn't the prospect of it, but how much I still have to do. How much I've let myself believe I had time.

I shouldn't be surprised.

In the last nine years alone, my agency has lost twelve operatives—seven of them weren't accidents. They were inside jobs. I should know. I took care of six of them.

This work doesn't offer safety nets or fairness. There are no consolation prizes. I've never fooled myself into thinking otherwise. But even now, as I sit here with the knowledge that my life might end within hours, I'm not afraid. What gnaws at me is leaving unfinished business. That, and the idea that my girls might never know why I chose this life over them.

The irony isn't lost on me: the world I inhabit isn't just dark; it's pitch-black. And yet, here I am, flipping through pages of legal documents, my last attempt to make sure Hayley and Sophie are cared for, should my luck finally run out, which it will. Eventually.

The vibration of my phone drags me out of my thoughts. Another notification. Another video. Another reason to remind me why I'm doing this. Balancing my laptop on my knees, I power it on, slip in my earbuds, and click play.

The video starts at what looks like a Hollywood party. The scene is decadent—expensive champagne, designer drugs, and a sense of invincibility so thick it's nauseating.

The camera wades through the crowd, capturing faces that even I recognize. Actors. Musicians. Power players who've built their lives on the illusion of control.

The camera pans to a young woman, barely out of her teens, if that. She's cornered by a group of men, her movements jerky, her voice slurring. She's smiling, but it's the kind of smile that doesn't reach her eyes. It's survival mode.

They're touching her now. Laughing. One of the men pulls her closer. The scene devolves quickly—hands everywhere, her feeble attempts to push them away ignored. Someone blocks the camera's view for a moment, and when it clears, the girl is crying. Her clothing is torn, her legs unsteady. No one in the room does a thing to stop it. In fact, the onlookers cheer. One man pulls out his phone to film.

And then I see him.

He's not just part of the crowd; he's directing it. A man with a face so famous, it's on billboards throughout this city. Evan Rourke. I remember him from a charity event I worked a few years back. He gave some speech about giving back to the community,

his smile flawless under the lights.

He's not smiling now. His expression is predatory, watching as the men close in on the girl.

Bile rises in my throat, but I force it down. I watch until the very end. The camera shakes as the girl is dragged out of the room, barely conscious. The screen goes dark.

I sit back, my breath steady but my chest tight. The faces from that room flash behind my eyes like a sickening slideshow. I know what I'm supposed to do with this information. I know the path forward.

Evan Rourke . He'll be on the yacht tomorrow night. That much I know for certain. But what about the others?

I glance at the clock. The hours are slipping away. Somewhere in this city, Rourke is living his last moments without knowing it. That thought should bring me satisfaction, but instead, all I feel is hollow.

This feels like a trap. I know this is a trap. But what am I going to do about it? Running won't work. Not this time.

Eventually, my gaze drifts to the framed photo—the one of Michael, still smiling like the world hadn't yet shown its teeth. He would've known what to do, and for the first time in years, I let myself miss him.

For the first time, I almost wish I hadn't made that call. Even though it was the right choice, even though I know it was never going to work between us—not after everything. Family is a choice, not a guarantee. If someone betrays you, blood relation doesn't make it better. It just makes it personal. Still, there's a part of me that wishes he were here.

But wishes are for children, and I stopped believing in those a long time ago.

36

SOPHIE

“ I told you, I can’t tonight,” I say, glancing up at Malik from where I’m sitting on the edge of my bed. My laptop’s open, and I’m pretending to type something important, but his stare is drilling into me.

He doesn’t respond at first, just leans against the doorframe, his arms crossed. His stance is casual, but there’s something too still about it. Too sharp. “You’ve been saying that a lot lately.”

I raise an eyebrow. “Well, I’ve been busy.”

“Yeah, busy going to parties.” His voice has that edge again, the one that makes my stomach twist. The accusation is clear; he’s not even attempting to mask it.

I pause, fingers hovering over the keyboard. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

He steps into the room without waiting for an invitation, his posture loose but his eyes pinning me in place. “It means you’ve been out every other night. Rooftops, private events, parties in the Hamptons. You think I don’t notice?”

I look up, trying to keep my voice flat, but I know it sounds off. “So what if I have? It’s almost Christmas.”

Malik shakes his head, his expression darkening. “This has nothing to do with

Christmas...you're not just hanging out, Sophie. And I think we both know it."

I stand, shutting my laptop with more force than I intended. "What are you trying to say, exactly?"

My voice is too high-pitched, but I don't care. I need him to stop staring at me like that, to stop digging.

His gaze narrows, his words are clipped. "Lily works for an escort service. And you're always with her. You've been going to the same kinds of places. So, you tell me. What am I supposed to think?"

I freeze. The words don't even register for a second, and all I can do is stare at him. My throat tightens. It feels like I'm choking on all the lies I haven't told yet.

"You think I'm...you think I'm sleeping with people for money?" My voice cracks on the last word. It feels like a punch to the gut, but it's the truth. And it burns. Because I haven't been sleeping with them. I've been murdering them.

Malik doesn't flinch, just stares, his eyes unwavering. "You tell me."

I can't tell him.

His gaze doesn't leave mine, digging deeper, waiting for something—anything. "Because I don't know what's going on with you. Maybe I never did."

"You're right," I say, anger rising in me. "You don't know anything." I want to scream, to lash out. But I don't know what to say. I don't know how to fix this.

"Then explain it to me," he challenges, his voice rising. "Because from where I'm standing, it's not looking very good."

I laugh, bitter and hollow. “You have no idea what you’re talking about.”

His eyes narrow, his voice cutting through the air. “Don’t I? You’ve been lying to me, Sophie. About something. I know it.”

I press my lips together, but the words come out weak. “I haven’t been lying.”

He steps closer. “Then tell me the truth. What’s really going on? Why all the secrecy? The parties? Why don’t you ever invite me? You hardly answer my texts.”

“I don’t owe you an explanation.”

“You’re right,” he says, his voice suddenly calm, almost too calm. “You don’t. But if you’re not going to be honest with me, then maybe this—whatever this is—shouldn’t keep going.”

The words land like a punch, and my chest tightens. I stand there, watching him. “Fine.” The word comes out flat, colder than I intend. “Maybe it shouldn’t.”

He stares at me for a long moment, his expression unreadable. Then, slowly, he nods—each movement deliberate. Without another word, he turns to the door.

“Good luck, Sophie.”

The door clicks shut behind him, but he doesn’t look back, and the silence that follows is deafening. I sit back down on the bed, feeling like I might throw up.

Killing him would have felt better than just letting him walk out.

I stare at the door for what feels like forever, thinking he’s going to come back, thinking that he’s going to want the last word. He always wants the last word. But, of

course, this time he doesn't.

Mom's voice echoes in my mind, her cold, matter-of-fact tone cutting through the chaos in my head. Relationships and double lives don't mix.

She was right. Of course, she was right. She's always right.

I take a deep breath, trying to steady myself, trying to push thoughts of him away. But they don't go.

They never do.

37

ANONYMOUS

She really was that stupid. And now, instead of coming up with a proper, logical, something-that-might-actually-work plan, she's at the neighbor's house getting laid. Needless to say, her priorities have always been a little fucked.

It makes no sense, and knowing her, it makes complete sense.

She doesn't care about keeping things "clean" anymore, given she thinks she's about to die, and her head's always clearer after sex.

Little does she know.

She'll wake up in the morning, feeling the familiar, soothing ache in her body that she deludes herself into thinking only he can give her, and she'll believe it's all fine. That everything's back to some semblance of normal. She'll think it's a release, something she needed, when really, it's just a distraction.

But what happens when the distraction wears off?

She won't have any of the answers then, will she? No, she'll be left wondering why she let herself get caught up in something so fucking pointless when she had bigger things to deal with. Things she was too stubborn to address. Things that, in the end, will get her killed.

And in the meantime, her youngest is busy with her own little scheme. Cute, really. I'm sure Charlotte has no idea, but Hayley's been researching how to poison that boy back in Texas. Trying to figure out the most effective way for his girlfriend to slip him something without making it too obvious. You know, just your typical teenage rebellion, the kind that keeps mothers on their toes.

Honestly? I can't help but laugh. Because Hayley should know better. Her mother's rule has always been: Poison is for cowards.

If you can't look someone in the eye while ending them, you're in the wrong line of work. A lesson Charlotte's tried to hammer into both her daughters, though Hayley's still not getting it. You can't hide behind poison and call it skill. Charlotte would never stoop to something so...clinical. But Hayley, with all her angst and "trying to do the right thing," just doesn't get it. If you can't even bring yourself to face your target, what the hell are you doing?

So, when she inevitably fucks up—because, let's be honest, she will—Charlotte will probably give her the talk about her "form" and how poison is for the weak, making sure to remind her that the real art is in watching the life drain out of someone's eyes as they realize they've been played. Dark, sure. But Charlotte's always had a flair for drama.

Still, Hayley should've known better than to try something that chicken shit. She'll learn soon enough. Doing things half-assed gets you nowhere. I just hope she doesn't end up in prison first.

And when Charlotte finally figures out that she's fucked up, that she's been playing in the wrong game—when she realizes it's too late to change anything—she'll know it was me all along.

Then, when her world collapses, I'll be there to pick up the pieces.

38

CHARLOTTE

I stand in front of the mirror, adjusting the hem of my dress, making sure the black silk clings to my body just right. The fabric is cool against my skin, the deep neckline designed to draw attention without being too obvious. It's understated luxury, just the way I like it. Subtle, but impossible to ignore.

I reach for my favorite pair of heels, the ones I wear when I need luck, when I need to remind myself who I am. If I'm going to die, these are the shoes I'd like to make the trip in. They fit like a second skin.

As I slide them on, I catch a glimpse of my reflection again. The woman staring back at me is always calculated, always controlled—but tonight, there's something different. Something darker, maybe. Time will tell.

This is the kind of job that pulls at the edges of your soul, making you wonder if you've gone too far. But I've learned not to indulge those thoughts.

I pause, staring into my own eyes. They're cold, unfeeling. Ready.

The buzz of my phone on the dresser breaks the silence. I step over and check the message. It's from Carlo, the man who never lets me forget that my life is never entirely my own. He doesn't waste words.

The target is arriving at 9 p.m. sharp. You know the plan. Keep it clean.

I read it twice, then once more for good measure. A public hit. Never ideal. Public kills are messy. You have to send a message, but there's always the risk—witnesses, cameras, the whole damn spectacle. Then there's the added complication—the things the agency and Carlo aren't telling me. Like what's really going on at these parties, why this hit was ordered.

But why would he tell me? Those are the details that never make it to the press—the dirt swept under the rug with enough money to keep it there.

Not that the agency cares about the details, the press, or what gets buried. They want results. They always want results.

I slip the phone into my clutch, my mind already shifting into the mode I know too well. A job is a job, no matter how personal or ugly it is. And this one—this one has a certain poetic edge: A target like this, at a party like this, thinking he's untouchable. No one is. Not even the rich and famous.

I step back from the mirror, appraising my reflection one last time. The dress. The heels. The flawless look of understated elegance. I pull my hair into a sleek ponytail, the motion deliberate, sharp, as if I'm preparing for battle. There's a clarity in my movements, a cold precision to everything I do tonight.

The target is never the most interesting thing at a party like this. It's all the faces around him—the ones who think they're safe, the ones who think they can get away with whatever they want. Most likely it's a trap. The agency's simple but effective way to dispose of me. Either way, a message will be sent. I will not die in vain.

When I arrive at the venue, I'll be just another guest in the crowd, and they'll never see me coming.

Sophie's sitting on the edge of my bed, flipping through her phone like she doesn't

realize the world is about to shift. She's been distant lately, quieter, and I can feel the weight of her thoughts when she thinks I'm not paying attention. I won't ask her what's wrong. She has her secrets, just like I have mine. But this? This is different. She's sad—distracted—and unfortunately, I can't leave her behind tonight.

Even though I should.

This job—the one in the Hamptons—it's either a test or a trap. It's always one or the other. And Carlo's backed me into a corner. I've failed to follow Rule #9: Always have an exit strategy. Men, houses, jobs—doesn't matter. Know where the back door is and be ready to run.

Which is why Sophie has to come with me.

Carlo's made it clear he expects her to be involved, to learn. And maybe for once, we're on the same page. Sophie needs to know what to do when she's trapped, or tested. It's one lesson I can't afford for her to miss.

I look at her now, seated on my bed with sad eyes, her long hair falling in messy waves around her face, absorbed in whatever's on her screen.

I have to trust her. I have to believe she can handle it.

I finally break the silence. "You seem distracted."

Her eyes narrow, defiance flashing in them. It's a trait she gets from me—the same stubborn streak that's kept me alive in this business.

"You look nice," she says. "But when are you going to tell me what's going on? You look like you've been chewing on glass."

I don't have the chance to answer because Hayley, her face flushed with frustration, storms in like a hurricane. Her eyes dart around before settling on me, arms crossed, lips pursed in that all-too-familiar teenage pout.

"You're leaving without me again?"

I don't let the question throw me. "Yes. "

She steps forward, anger rising in her eyes. "You take Sophie, but never me. What's the real reason? I know there's a reason. And I know you're lying about whatever it is."

I don't even flinch, still adjusting my dress in the mirror. "You're underage, Hayley. It's not the kind of event for you."

She doesn't accept that. Her lips curl into a sneer. "Not my kind of event? That's your excuse?" She moves closer, pushing back the strands of hair that have fallen in her face, a clear sign of her frustration. "You never take me anywhere. What's so wrong with me?"

I turn to face her, meeting her gaze in the mirror. She's upset, I can see it in the set of her shoulders, but I don't have the time or patience to coddle her right now.

"You're underage. It's a party for adults. You're not coming." I keep my tone firm, no room for argument.

Her face tightens with frustration. "I'm not a little kid, Mom. I can handle myself. You always treat me like I'm too young, but I'm not. Anyway, I doubt they're going to card me. You know I can look older when I want to."

I step toward her, my heels clicking sharply against the floor, cutting through the

tension in the air. “This isn’t a debate, Hayley.”

She glares at me, the anger in her eyes clear, but she doesn’t fight me any further. Instead, she shakes her head in disgust, spinning on her heel. “Whatever.”

The sound of the door slamming behind her barely registers. I check the mirror one last time. There’s no room for distractions. No room for guilt. Just the job. Just tonight.

Time to go.

39

SOPHIE

There's something Mom isn't telling me. A lot of somethings, I'm sure. But this something is important.

The party isn't scheduled for a few hours, but I've learned the hard way that arriving late is a mistake. You don't show up fashionably late when you're about to kill someone. You show up early, but not too early, you observe, you blend in. And you wait for the right moment.

We're in the back of a black car, the driver wordlessly navigating the winding streets of the Hamptons, when I start going through the details in my mind. The yacht party. The elite guests. The men who think they can do whatever they want, especially when it comes to women.

They won't talk about it publicly, but the rumors are there. Sexual assault cases. Quiet settlements. But not even that, usually. Usually, no one talks. These people, they make sure of that. They have tactics that would make the old school mafia blush.

But not me. Not anymore. I've seen enough. A handful of rich men who prey on those around them—young people who get swept into their world, only to be tossed aside when they're no longer useful.

I've attended enough parties and done my research. Months spent gathering intel have shown me how people are called in to clean up their messes, how victims are

erased while the men remain protected. It's the same dance, time and again. But this time, Mom and I have been tasked with sending a clear message. If no one else will stop these men, we will. Those with the wherewithal and deep pockets are ensuring it. The people who think they're above it all, who believe they can control, manipulate, and hurt with impunity—someone wants them reminded that their actions have consequences.

I adjust the silver bracelet on my wrist, feeling its cool weight against my skin. It's a simple thing, a reminder of Malik and the life I've chosen, one that does not—cannot—include him. The life that's always moving, always on the edge of something. Tonight is no different.

Mom thinks I'm sad. She keeps referencing it, dancing around emotions as though they're contagious. But I'm not sad. I'm pissed .

I told her that, and she said, “Good, let it fuel you.”

What choice do I have?

The car pulls up to the dock where the yacht is anchored, the enormous vessel lit up like a floating city, the kind of place where multi-million-dollar deals happen and money flows freely like water. I can feel the tension in the air as I step out onto the pier. I don't even need to look at the other guests to know that some of them are just as dangerous as my target. The world they inhabit is one of silence, where power is wielded without hesitation and consequences rarely follow.

We make our way up the gangway and onto the yacht. It's almost an absurd display of wealth—gold and marble, art on every wall, every surface gleaming under the soft lighting. I almost laugh at the opulence. I've been in more luxurious places, but none of them have felt this hollow, this fake.

The first guests are already arriving, stepping out of sleek black cars, adjusting their designer clothes, greeting each other with the false warmth that people in this world always use to cover their true intentions. They're all here for one thing: power. To network, to show off, to claim another notch on their belt.

We slip past them, blending in, Mom's eyes scanning the crowd, looking for one person. He's not here yet, but he will be. The dossier Mom gave me was clear enough. A high-profile man with a long history of abuses and a long list of people willing to turn a blind eye.

Later, when I spot him, he's exactly what I expected—cocky, self-assured, surrounded by sycophants who laugh at his every word. It's disgusting, really. How they enable him, how they feed into his delusion that he's untouchable.

But I know better.

Tonight, he's about to learn how wrong he is.

As I move into position, the crowd at the entrance shifts, parting abruptly. And there he is—Malik. His presence slices through the opulent facade like a knife. I freeze, my heart suddenly erratic. Mom's eyes flash with anger, but there's something colder behind them. She's not surprised. She expected this.

I didn't know it until this second. But now, everything she said to me in the car suddenly clicks into place.

People will always act out of self-interest, driven by their motivations. Your job is to figure out whether those motivations align with your own. And when they don't, make a quick exit. Do not pass go. Do not collect \$200. You will waste your one wild and precious life. Wish them every happiness and move on.

Malik smiles, gives a casual wave, and strides straight toward me .

“Malik.” My voice comes out tight. “What are you doing here?”

He smirks. “Seems like a good place to meet people.”

40

ANONYMOUS

She doesn't scream. I'll give her that much. The wine glass in her hand shatters against the floor, dark red spreading across the pale wood like a crime scene. Her eyes stay locked on me—wide, disbelieving. Terrified, yes, but not of me. Not yet.

“What the fuck!” she says, her posture fragile, as though the air itself might collapse around her if she moves too quickly. “You were supposed to be?”

“Dead.” I cut her off. “Yeah, well, surprise.”

Her hands shake, but she doesn't move. Doesn't run. Smart. That's always been her: the kind of woman who freezes when the world starts crumbling. Just long enough to think. Just long enough to fight back. But tonight, she's not fighting. Not yet.

“I need you to sit down,” I say, stepping closer. “We need to talk.”

“I can't imagine what we'd have to talk about.” Her voice hardens, but her body betrays her—feet inching backward, calculating, weighing her odds. She knows I have every reason to kill her. She knows what she's done. I know what she's done. But that's not what she's really afraid of. It's that soon everyone else is going to know, too.

“Charlotte,” I say, handing her a fresh glass of wine. “Sit down.”

She doesn't move, but her eyes narrow. The fire's coming back. Good. I want her angry. Anger is easier to deal with than fear. Anger is useful. Anger will cause her to slip up.

Her lips part, but no words come out. The silence between us stretches, taut and brittle, like a rope pulled too tight. Neither of us wants to be the first to let go.

"I need you to listen," I continue, moving forward cautiously, like approaching a wounded animal. "Because I don't have time to ease you into this, and frankly, neither do you."

She stiffens. "I don't want to hear a damn thing you have to say."

"Actually, you do."

"Actually, I don't. You used me. Lied to me. Manipulated me."

I exhale slowly, my words hanging in the air like smoke. "Maybe. But not in the way you think."

I can see the wheels turning. She's replaying every moment of the last three years of her life. Starting with the one where she first believed I was dead. "You were in the van," she says, her voice wavering. "I saw?—"

"You saw what you were supposed to see," I interrupt, my voice steady, deliberate. "You saw what I wanted you to see."

Her breath hitches, and for a split second, I can almost see her unraveling. Then the mask slips back into place. "This is really not what I was expecting."

I glance around the interior of the boat, contemplating the mess she's made of

everything. “Tell me about it.”

Always one to move quickly, she’s shifted from disbelief to Oh, fuck.

“So what now?”

I’ll never understand why it takes so long for her to come back around to reason.

“Now, you sit down.”

“None of this makes any sense,” she says, but finally, she takes a seat.

“It would if you’d shut up and listen.”

She gives me that signature death stare, the one I’m very familiar with, and I have to say I’ve missed it. “J.C. Clements. J.C. Warren—that was his real name.”

“I’m aware.”

“Well, that was just the first lie he fed you. There were more. A lot more.”

“You act like this is news to me. He abducted and tortured me. I didn’t figure honesty was his best quality.”

“It is going to be news to you, Charlotte. All the ‘evidence’ you never bothered to question, because it confirmed what you wanted to believe—that should definitely have been news to you.”

I let the weight of what I’ve said settle between us.

Her eyes narrow, and I can almost hear the cogs turning behind them. But there’s no hiding from the truth. Not now.

“You’re saying Warren lied about everything?” she asks, her voice a mix of disbelief and something darker.

“That’s exactly what I’m saying. I’m saying you fell right into his hands.”

Her expression falters, the ground beneath her shifting. I know it’s hitting her, slowly, piece by piece. But it’s not enough yet. It’s not enough to make her see everything.

“You’ve been played, Charlotte.”

“You’re lying.” She gulps down half of the wine in her glass. “You?—”

41

ANONYMOUS

I reach into my pocket, pull out a flash drive, and toss it onto the table between us. “It’s all there. Emails, bank records, surveillance footage. Everything he used to make you think I was some kind of monster.”

Her gaze flickers to the drive, but she doesn’t reach for it. “You expect me to believe you were a saint?”

“No. I expect you to believe I was doing my job.”

Her laugh is hollow, almost a bark. “Your job? What job, Michael? Pretending to be an architect? You watched me kill for you. You let me believe?—”

“I didn’t let you believe anything,” I interrupt, leaning forward slightly. “I didn’t have a choice. You wanted what you wanted. I let you have it, but I always tried to keep you safe.”

“Safe,” she repeats, her voice heavy with disdain as she glances away. “Is that what you call it? Letting me think my husband was a pedophile? Letting me think Sophie was—” Her voice breaks, and she stops, staring out at the deck.

“Safety would have been you questioning the evidence—but you didn’t, did you? ”

She doesn’t answer, but her silence speaks volumes. I press on.

I sigh, my gaze dropping for a moment before meeting hers again. “J.C. Warren lied to you. Everything he showed you—every piece of evidence, every recording—was fabricated. How easily you fell right into his trap, just like you fell into this one.”

She laughs, but it’s a bitter, hollow sound. “So, you’re saying he made it all up? The accounts? The trafficking connections? The lists of girls? All lies?”

“Not all,” I admit, holding her stare. “My job was to infiltrate trafficking networks, Charlotte. To get close enough to tear them apart from the inside. And I did. For years. But Warren had made some investments of his own. He saw an opportunity to ensure I didn’t disturb those investments. And when that didn’t work, he came for you.”

Her face twists, and I can see the cracks forming. “So, what? You’re some kind of hero now?”

“No,” I say, refilling her glass. “I mean, I wouldn’t go that far.”

She looks away. “None of this matters. You lied to me.”

“You gave me no choice. People are who they are, Charlotte. I wasn’t the only one. I was thinking of our children.”

Her head snaps back to me at the mention of the girls, her eyes blazing. “Your lies are so on point. You’ve practiced this speech, yes?”

“I’m not the one who put them at risk. That was all you, sweetheart. The moment you believed Warren’s lies. The moment you decided I was the enemy.”

She doesn’t respond, but I can see the words cutting through her defenses, leaving marks she’ll feel long after I’m gone. Good. She spends so much time running from

the slightest hint of emotion. She needs to feel this. She needs to see what a fool she has been.

“But I didn’t come back to beg for your forgiveness.” I let the words hang in the air, heavy and sharp. “I came back because...” I gesture toward the dead man lying at her feet. “It looks like you need me.”

Her eyes flick to the man on the floor, then back to me. “I really don’t.”

“You really do. You’ve walked right into a trap. And I think that handler of yours is right—you need a vacation. What’s going to happen next is for the best...”

“I don’t need you to tell me what I need.”

“You don’t have a choice,” I say simply. “Because without me, everything you’ve built—everything you care about—will burn.”

Her breath catches, and for a moment, I see the vulnerability she tries so hard to hide. But then it’s gone, replaced by the cold, calculating woman I know too well.

“You don’t know me as well as you think,” she says finally.

I can’t help but smile. “Oh, Charlotte. I know you better than you know yourself.”

We sit there in silence for a beat, the weight of everything unsaid hanging heavy between us. She doesn’t tell me to leave. She doesn’t tell me to stay. But then, it’s there—the shift in her expression. Something has clicked.

“Wait a minute. What did you just say?”

I raise an eyebrow, feigning confusion. “I’m sorry?”

“No, Michael. You said it was going to be for the best...”

“Oh, right. That.”

“What did you mean?” She swallows hard, as if bracing for something she doesn’t want to hear. “What’s going to happen next?”

42

SOPHIE

“M om? Dad? ”

Malik stands next to me, his eyes darting between my parents and the lifeless body on the floor. “Wait, I thought your dad was dead.”

He’s staring at everything—at me, at my family—as if I’ve somehow pulled off the greatest con of the century. Like everything I’ve told him has been an elaborate performance. And honestly, with how this is, I don’t blame him.

“He is. He was ,” I say, my eyes still trained on the dead man. He doesn’t even look like a real person anymore, just a limp, bloodied sack of flesh crumpled in the middle of the room.

Dad, unfazed, steps forward and opens his arms to hug me. “Sophie.”

I take a quick step back. I know this is the point where I’m supposed to freak out, seeing my dad alive—but we have bigger, more pressing matters right now.

“Look—” I start, rubbing my temples, my head spinning in a way I really don’t want to deal with right now. “I don’t know what the fuck is going on, but we have a problem.”

My parents exchange a brief glance, some silent communication passing between

them. Like they're debating whether or not they need to give me the rundown about why my dad is here alive, and not dead as they've allowed me to believe for the past three years, or if they can get away with pretending everything's fine.

I shift my gaze back to Malik, who looks like he's about to lose consciousness. His face is pale, his mouth hanging slightly open, and I swear I can see his brain trying to process everything at once.

"Your father took care of it," Mom says, and there's something about her tone that suggests she's just talking about picking up the dry cleaning or getting the car washed.

Malik blinks, jerking his gaze away from the corpse. "So, your dad is alive and, uh, he just killed someone?" His voice cracks as it climbs several pitches. "No big deal?"

I roll my eyes. This is nothing. This is Tuesday for my family. But I can't explain that to Malik right now without going into way more detail than I have time for at this moment.

I glance at my parents, both of them acting like none of this is unusual. Like they haven't spent the last three years letting me believe my father was dead, only to pop up again, alive and well. Like I didn't just spend three years mourning a man who didn't die, but who was instead... doing this shit? Killing people. Hiding out. Whatever.

"Your mother ordered a hit on me," Dad says, like he's reading my mind. "But we've worked it out and now everything is fine."

Mom cuts her eyes to him. "We haven't worked anything out."

"I don't have time for this," I say, and I almost feel like I'm talking to myself at this

point. “The reason I’m here is because we have another problem. Hayley’s on the boat.”

My parents blink at me like I’ve just dropped a bomb, which, to be fair, I basically have. They exchange another look—this one more meaningful, like they both know the exact level of chaos this is going to cause.

“What the hell is she doing here?” Dad asks, staring at Mom. His voice is calm, but I can see the hint of frustration behind his eyes. He never liked Hayley’s rebellious streak, and now it’s going to bite us all in the ass.

“She followed me. She followed us ,” I say, “and now she’s on the lower deck with a bunch of people she shouldn’t be with. Drunk. Being...Hayley.”

I try not to roll my eyes. Of course, Hayley’s already causing a scene. She can’t just show up and be normal. She has to ruin everything.

“She shouldn’t be drinking,” Malik says, looking from my mom to my dad to me, like this is the worst of our problems. “She’s underage,” he adds. I have to suppress another eye roll at his overstatement of the obvious.

“Drama queen,” I say. “It’s what she does.”

“Hayley’s not exactly the type to hold her liquor,” Mom says. She seems blasé, like this is just another Tuesday, too. “Go get her, Sophie. Make her listen. Before she makes more of a scene.”

“That’s what I tried to do,” I say, throwing my hands up. “I tried to get her to come with me, but she started shouting.”

Dad shrugs. “What did you expect? She’s like your mother.” My mother slowly turns

her head to stare at him, and if looks could kill, he'd be dead for real this time.

Malik gapes at him. He doesn't say anything, but I can see exactly what he's thinking: What in the fuck did I get myself into with this family?

I look at my parents, but I know they've already moved on. They're not even concerned. This isn't some big inconvenience. It's not even a family emergency.

"Fine," Mom snaps. "I'll go."

Malik just stares at me, probably wondering if this is his life now. If he's really about to step into a world where killing people, family drama, and drunken sisters causing scenes are just part of the deal. I wouldn't blame him if he ran out the door right now.

But he doesn't. Instead, he clears his throat. "So...what's the plan after that?"

"I have an SUV waiting at the dock," Dad says, glancing at Mom. "Meet us there."

"There are a thousand black SUVs at the dock, Michael," Mom points out.

Dad gives a quick, exaggerated shrug. "I'll stick out my hand and wave."

"Can I get a ride back to my dorm?" Malik asks, like he really thinks they're going to just let him go back to his life and hope for the best.

"You're not going back to your dorm," Dad says, and I see Malik stiffen. "We're taking a little vacation. All of us."

"I have finals," Malik protests.

Dad shakes his head. "Not anymore you don't."

43

ANONYMOUS

She's not the same as she was three years ago, the last time I saw her. Not properly saw her, anyway. There are new lines around her eyes, her laugh lines deeper than I remember—not that she's done much laughing—and her spine's straighter now. I guess that's what happens when you get older. You carry yourself differently—more guarded, more careful, like you're waiting for the next blow, the next hit. Or maybe she's just tired. Tired of the job, tired of parenting, tired of everything.

That's why we're here.

I'm saving her from herself.

The hum of the train beneath me is steady, almost reassuring. It's familiar. The girls and our new bonus kid are in the back sleeping. It's peaceful. She hasn't said a word in hours, her eyes fixed on the blur of snow outside the window, but I can feel the tension in the air. She knows what's coming.

The mountains close in, the snow falling harder now, swallowing the landscape in a thick, suffocating haze. No more detours. No more second chances.

The cabin smells faintly of blood, that metallic tang still hanging in the air. But she doesn't notice. She's too busy calculating her escape, planning her next move. I see it in the way her fingers twitch, the way her eyes dart toward the emergency exit. She's wondering if there's a way out, if she could make it if she jumped.

But I've sealed every exit. Every last one.

This is it. The final act. The end of the line.

And as I watch her, I don't feel the bitterness I thought I would. No, I feel something else. Something I can't quite name.

Alive.

Because I know this is what she needs. She's been running for too long, and now it's time to stop.

And I've never been more certain of anything in my life. What she needs isn't freedom. It's a vacation. A long one.

And then, it hits me. I could end this now. I could stop the train, pull the emergency brake, and let her go. Let her think she's won. Let her think she's free. But that's not why I'm here, is it?

No. I'm here because she needs a little rest, but I need something from her. Something I lost three years ago, before she betrayed me, ordered the hit, and left me for dead in a shallow grave.

I didn't die. Not really. But something in me did. And now, I'm here to take back what's mine. To finish what she started.

Revenge. That's what I wanted back then. But what I really wanted—what I still want—is her . Our family.

The realization hit me on that boat, cold and sharp, like a slap to the face: I'm still in love with her. After all this time, after everything. I should hate her, shouldn't I? But

I don't. Not really. I hate what she did to me. I hate the distance she's put between us. But when I close my eyes, I can still see her—the way she used to look at me, the way she made me feel like I would burn the world down just to see her smile.

It's twisted. It's insane.

And yet, here I am, going through all this trouble for her. You really don't want to know what it takes to commandeer a train all to yourself.

I didn't even kill that neighbor, that fuck buddy of hers—even though I could've. Should've. Even though I wanted to. It wasn't easy taking the high road, but she needs to see I'm a changed man.

So, now there's only one thing to do. Something I'm good at when it comes to her—wait. Wait for her to figure out the truth. Wait for her to finally understand what we both already know.

That we're not done.

44

SOPHIE

The train jerks hard—nothing like the steady sway I’ve grown used to. This feels wrong. The sudden shift sends a jolt through my whole body, the kind that makes my stomach drop, like I’m falling. My fingers scramble to grip the seat, but the whole car shakes, tilting to one side. The growl of the engine vibrates through my bones, low and violent, filling my ears, and the air in the car turns thick, suffocating.

I barely have time to process it when the train jerks again, even harder this time. The metal screeches like it’s being torn apart. My feet slip beneath me, and I crash into the seat in front of me, feeling the rough, jagged edge of the fabric scrape against my cheek. My pulse beats fiercely in my ears, the noise drowning out everything else.

At least until Dad’s voice cuts through the chaos, booming from the front of the car, sharp and commanding. “Hold on!”

I can barely react before it happens again. The floor tilts beneath me, too fast, like the whole damn train is tipping over. I grab at the back of the seat, but it doesn’t help. The world outside the windows is a blur of dark trees and a black sky, speeding by so fast it makes my head spin. I can’t focus on anything. I’m still stuck on how we got here.

One minute, we’re on a boat, talking about Hayley causing a scene, then we’re driving through the night in some black SUV, my parents acting like they were on a weekend getaway, ignoring everything. The next moment, we were on a chartered

flight—a quiet, cramped plane, headed to God knows where. Dad said it was a surprise, and in a way, I guess it was, because now, this. The train. Speeding through the dark like we're in some bad dream, all by ourselves.

Mom and Dad gave me the rundown, which basically felt like a nightmare—having to sit there and listen to them spill their guts when all I really care about is that Dad is alive. I'm used to the lies when it comes to my family; not much surprises me anymore. But that didn't stop them from droning on and on about it, and I felt terrible for Malik. What an introduction to my family that was. He doesn't seem overly upset, though; afterward, he commented he felt like he just got a minor in marital counseling. I couldn't help but agree. It's all so dramatic...

Three years ago, Mom was kidnapped by some psychopath named J.C. Warren. Hayley and I remember bits of it, but not much, because Mom's gone a lot with her job anyway, and my parents kept the details about the abduction to themselves. Apparently, Warren was obsessed with her, they met on a flight or something and then he became a regular client. Dad tells it differently. He says Warren went after Mom because Dad was interfering in his business dealings. I just remember hushed whispers behind closed doors and getting to take this really fun vacation after Mom got back. Until it wasn't fun, and we got the news that Dad had been on a golf excursion when the van he was riding in was shot up and set on fire.

Well, it turns out, Mom had ordered a hit on him because J.C. Warren fed her a bunch of lies—lies which she believed. And so, for the past three years, Dad has been hiding out, plotting his revenge, until he decided that revenge was maybe not the route he wanted to take. Time will tell, he says.

I try to make sense of it, but it's all happening too fast, and like Malik said, it'll make you crazy if you let it.

I'm still trying to get my bearings when Malik grabs my arm, his face wide-eyed in

panic. “What the hell?—”

Before he can finish, there’s a sound—a crash, sharp and deafening—that rips through everything. It’s the kind of noise that makes my blood run cold, like it’s coming from everywhere at once.

The lights flicker above us, and then they go out completely. For a moment, everything is just...darkness.

I hear Mom say to Dad, “What the fuck?”

He responds, “This wasn’t supposed to happen yet.”

“What wasn’t supposed to happen, Michael?”

I see Dad’s phone light up. “The derailment. We were supposed to have disembarked first.”

“Derailment?” Mom demands. “Are you seriously looking at a map right now?”

“This is not good,” Dad snaps into the darkness. I should be surprised they’re arguing at a time like this, but I’m not. Dad’s voice is closer now, but he turns to Mom when he speaks again. “Of course I’m looking at a map. Do you really think I’d derail a train with my entire family on it?”

Mom says, “No one else knows we’re here.”

“The people who matter know. The people you’re running from know, I can assure you of that.”

I can’t breathe. My chest tightens. I try to stand, but the floor is uneven beneath me,

shifting with every movement. The air is thick, too hot now, almost like it's pressing in from all sides. I hear the scream of metal twisting, groaning under pressure, and the whole train seems to lurch violently again. I grab Malik's hand, my fingers digging into his skin.

"Malik," I say, my voice shaking. "I think we are going to die."

I hear him inhale, his breath unsteady, and for a second, he doesn't say anything.

"Just in case it's not clear," I tell him. "I wasn't sleeping with people for money."

He looks over at me. "I know."

"I was killing them."

"Yes," he says. "I can see that now."

"But I did—I do care about you."

"I know."

I squeeze his hand. "Are your parents going to miss you?"

"No," he says. "I don't think so."

"Seriously?" I shift in my seat. "Why not?"

"Let's just say they are not good people."

"They can't be worse than my parents."

He snorts. “They can. They are.”

“Really?”

“Yes, Sophie. You were the first good thing to happen to me in a long time.”

“Wow.” My brows raise, and I’m thinking I really hope we live through this, or at least long enough for me to get the full story. “Worse than my family? That’s really saying something.”

“It’s okay,” he says. “We don’t have to talk.”

And so we don’t. For several long moments, there’s nothing but the rumbling sound of the train—and something else, something worse, starting to fill the air. It smells wrong—like smoke, thick and pungent.

“Fire,” he says, the word coming out too slowly, like he’s still trying to process it. “The train’s on fire.”

I don’t have time to think about that. There’s a terrible sound, like glass breaking, and then the train lurches again, a violent twist that sends me sprawling. I feel the heat before I even see the smoke, and when I look down, the floor is already starting to glow, faint orange flickers creeping in from under the door.

“Get up!” Malik pulls me to my feet, dragging me toward the emergency exit. I’m not sure how he’s managing to move so fast, but his grip is firm, his hands urgent.

I don’t have time to question it. There’s no time to think. My legs are shaky beneath me as we stumble toward the door. The air is thick, too thick. My lungs are filling with smoke. I’m suffocating, and I know—we are probably not going to make it out of here alive.

He reaches for the door, pulling it open. The rush of air hits me, frigid, but carrying the sharp, acrid scent of smoke.

“Jump,” he orders.

“Jump?” I echo.

“Yes, jump,” he says, already making his way to the edge of the wreckage, his face set. “We’re not waiting for the cops or the cleanup crew to show up. We’re getting out of here. Now.”

“It’s a long way down.”

“Being burned alive is not a good way to die,” he says, and then he turns to face me with a rare seriousness in his eyes. “Don’t think, just do.”

I look down and then back at him. “You’re right. We have no choice.”

He nods, and for once, I see him take a deep breath, bracing for what comes next. He thinks I’m going to hesitate. My heart is beating in my throat, but I’m not.

We take a step toward the edge, and without a second thought, we jump.

The ground rushes up to meet me faster than I expect, and everything is a blur—my body hitting the earth with a thud that knocks the breath out of me. I scramble to my feet, gasping for air, my legs shaking.

The train is behind us, a looming dark figure in the distance. The fire is real now, the smoke rising in thick, black plumes, and the sound of the roaring flames fills the night.

Malik's standing with his hands on his hips, looking back at the burning train. He doesn't say anything, but his face is tight, his jaw clenched. He's breathing hard, eyes scanning the smoke-filled air like he's waiting for something else to happen.

But there's nothing else. Not yet.

"Come on," he says finally, his voice low, urgent. "We can't stay here."

I don't argue. I nod and follow him, my feet moving on their own, pushing me forward. We don't stop.

But then, we do.

45

HAYLEY

I can't stop shaking.

Everything around me is chaos, loud and terrifying. The train's shaking, the fire's crackling, and all I can hear is the sound of my parents shouting, their voices muffled by the ringing in my ears. But it's not the noise that's making me freeze; it's the sight of it.

The wreckage. The twisted metal. The way the train's engine keeps running, even though it shouldn't be. The fire's everywhere. I can't breathe.

My hands are gripping the edge of the seat, and I don't even know if I'm still on the damn train. Everything's blurry, spinning, and I'm dizzy from all the smoke, the heat, the shock.

And then, there's the face. A flash of it. The conductor—his body is half out of the window, and he's not moving. His neck is twisted at an impossible angle. My stomach turns, but I can't look away. I don't want to look away.

I need to focus. But it's like my body's refusing to move, refusing to do what I tell it to. It's not fear. It's something else. Something cold, like I'm already dead inside, like none of this is real .

I glance around. I don't know where Sophie is, or Malik, or anyone. At first, I see my

parents scrambling, running, but they're not running fast enough. Then they're gone; I can't see them anymore. The fire's spreading. The smoke's getting thicker.

This is a nightmare. It has to be.

I grip the seat harder. I need to find them. I need to find my sister.

The air feels heavy, like it's suffocating me. I can't get enough of it, and I can't think straight. But I have to move. I have to do something. They can't be dead. They can't.

I push myself off the floor, my legs barely holding me up. I stumble into the aisle, and I see Mom and Dad are struggling to get out. They're running toward the back, but they're running into more fire, into more destruction. They're running straight into it like it'll save them. Like it won't burn them alive.

My heart's pounding so loud in my chest, I can barely hear my own thoughts. But then I hear something else. A scream.

It's Sophie. It has to be.

I turn around, my eyes darting toward the back of the train. That's where she was sitting. That's where she was?—

The train jerks again, harder this time. The floor beneath me shifts, and suddenly, I'm falling.

I crash into something—someone—and for a second, everything stops. The world freezes.

It's Sophie.

She's there, but she's not okay. She's gasping for air, her face pale and bloodshot, eyes wide. She's shaking, too.

"Hayley," she mouths, like she's trying to make sure I'm real.

"I'm here," I say, but no sound comes out. Everything else is too loud. "We need to get out of here."

She doesn't respond, but she reaches for me, pulling me toward the emergency exit. My hands are trembling, and she can barely hold me up, but that doesn't stop her from trying. The fire's getting closer. The heat's suffocating. There's no time to waste.

We don't speak as we stumble toward the door. We don't have time for words.

I hear someone shout—Dad, maybe. But I can't tell who it is. The train's groaning, creaking, like it's about to collapse. I don't think we're going to make it.

But then, Malik's there, and somehow, he's pulling us out of the wreckage. He's not even breathing hard. He just... moves. Fast. Like he's done this before.

He's not looking at us. He's looking ahead, calculating, planning. I don't know what's going on in his head, but I don't question it. Not now.

He shoves me toward the door, a hard grip on my arm. "Go," he says. "Now."

And before I can even process it, he's pushing me out. The wind's cold, the night's freezing, and then the ground's gone. I'm falling, falling, but I don't scream. I don't make a sound.

I land hard, the shock of it knocking the air out of me. But I don't stop. I don't look

back. I just get up, run, and keep running.

I don't look for anyone. I don't know if they're behind me or not. But I know one thing for sure.

I'm not dead.

Not yet.

46

HAYLEY

M om is always saying “be careful what you wish for,” and it turns out she’s right. After surviving the train derailment by the skin of our teeth, we ended up here in this goddamn mountain house. It was pure hell—metal twisted into sick shapes, flames everywhere, and screams that still echo in my sleep. I remember clinging to Sophie as Malik dragged us out, the heat scorching our skin and the acrid smell of burning fuel making me gag.

The world spun out of control in minutes, and somehow, against all odds, we made it out alive. But the trauma? It lingers like a bad hangover, haunting us as we fled to this remote house. Now, we’re stuck here, trying to make sense of the nightmare we escaped and grappling with the situation that dragged us here in the first place.

I hate the mountains. They’re too quiet, too cold, and way too far from anything resembling normal. It’s like being in a giant snow globe, where there’s no escape, and every day is the same. The house is huge, but it feels empty—more like a showpiece than an actual home. Everything’s too polished, too perfect, and I can’t stand it. Nothing about this trip feels like fun. Hell, nothing about this trip feels like a family vacation. It’s more like forced detention.

It’s almost Christmas, or at least it’s supposed to be. I can’t really tell anymore. The whole idea of holidays feels like a foreign concept when you’re stuck here with them . No carolers, no twinkling lights, no pine-scented candles to make you forget that your family is a fucking mess.

The only sounds are the crackling of the fire and the occasional thud from someone moving around upstairs. I can't decide if it's better when they're all in the same room or if it's worse. At least when we're in separate rooms, I can pretend like I'm not being suffocated by all their secrets.

Dad's pacing in front of the fireplace, the same tired look on his face that he's had since we got here. I swear he's been saying "We need to regroup" for the past three days, like it's a fucking mantra. Like that's going to make everything magically okay. But whatever.

I can't get a read on him anymore. He's always been a little bit of a mystery to me, but now? It's like there's some kind of wall between us, and I'm not even sure what's behind it.

He brought in a "trauma counselor" to speak with Sophie and me about everything. This woman—I don't know who she was, but I doubt she was really a therapist—sat us down and tried to explain everything away. Dad's faked death. Mom being kidnapped three years ago. A bunch of random stuff—traumatic events—that are somehow supposed to explain how we ended up here. Like it isn't as clear as day to anyone who has been halfway paying attention.

We're here because my parents make a living killing people. They say it's all on the up and up—for good reason—but if that were the case, then why are we hiding out?

I asked this and all of a sudden I'm the one who's ungrateful. They went on and on about how I don't appreciate anything they do for me, how I don't appreciate this lifestyle they work so hard to afford for us.

Talk about gaslighting.

After that, I could see why Dad brought in the therapist, even if she was speaking to

the wrong family members. Dad must think I'm an idiot, as if I haven't heard him say a thousand times, "It starts at the top. It starts with leadership."

"Sophie," Dad says, pulling her aside in that low, calm voice of his that never really fits with how the rest of us are freaking out. "We need to talk about next steps."

47

HAYLEY

Sophie looks up at Dad, her brow furrowed. She's been quiet since we arrived—quiet in that way that makes me nervous, probably because she's been sucked into whatever dark pit Charlotte and Michael have been swimming in for years. And I hate the way she's been looking at me lately, like she's seeing someone she doesn't recognize.

“You're going to do what you do best,” Dad continues, his voice smooth, like we're talking about a trip to the store, not something far more dangerous. “We'll get in touch with the right people. We'll fix it.”

I can feel the coldness between them, but I don't have time to focus on that right now. I just want to get the hell out of here.

“I'm not staying here forever,” I say. “I'm an extrovert. I need people. When can I have my phone?”

“Not anytime soon,” Mom says.

Dad's eyes snap to mine. “And like I told you the last ten times you asked, we don't have a choice, Hayley. We are here until it's safe. Got it?” He pauses, the muscles in his jaw tightening. “You could be in London right now, but you messed that up too, didn't you? ”

“I hate cold weather,” I say. “Send me somewhere warm. I promise to behave.”

“No dice,” he says. “We need to lay low right now. Your mother’s life, your sister’s—those people will never let them walk away alive. We can’t risk anything until we’ve dismantled their entire operation, so if I were you, I’d get comfortable. It could take a while.” He gestures around the house. “Consider yourself lucky—I can think of far worse places to hide out.”

Dismantle the operation? What the hell does that even mean? I don’t even know how he expects to pull that off, or who the hell he’s talking to on the phone, but he’s always on the phone.

Not that I’m surprised. I’ve learned one thing about Dad over the years: when he talks like that, when he gets that look in his eyes, something’s already been planned. He’s not waiting around for anyone’s approval.

“What’s the plan then?” I ask, hoping he’s not just going to tell me to shut up again and let them handle it. And it must be my lucky day, because he doesn’t.

Dad exhales, leaning against the mantelpiece. “I know a guy,” he says, as if that explains everything. “He’s going to take care of it. We’re just hanging out here until the dust settles, easy peasy.”

“Yeah,” I drawl. “Easy peasy.” As if we’re not in the middle of nowhere with frigid temperatures, as if he hasn’t taken my phone, leaving me with nothing. “Couldn’t we at least hide out at the beach?”

“Too much sand,” Dad says. “Besides, this place is remote. No curious onlookers. No vacationers asking questions. We need peace and quiet, Hayley. We can’t risk someone recognizing us. There’s too much at stake.”

I want to ask more, to demand details, but the fire crackles and pops, and somehow I don't have the energy. There's a tightness in my chest that feels like it's been there for days. Weeks, even. The idea of my parents and Sophie running around, setting up deals and plans —things they try to keep me in the dark about—it makes my head spin. This is all too much for me to grasp right now. I want to run, to disappear, to jet back to Texas, but I know I can't. I'm stuck here in this giant house with nothing to do. No phone. No friends. No boyfriend.

My life is basically over.

Sophie, the golden child, finally speaks, her voice soft but clear, like she's reading my mind. "I just want to go to school. I want to live a normal life..."

Dad's face softens for a second, but only for a second. He's trying to sell this like it's just another task to check off the list. "I know. So we do what we have to do. We wait this out, and then we're done. Then you're done. We're getting you out. You'll become someone new—start over. Pretend your mother never dragged you into any of this."

Sophie nods, but she's not convinced. Neither am I.

I want to scream. I want to ask why the hell we can't just be normal. But I know that's not how it works. That's not how they work. They're too deep in this mess now to just walk away.

Dad clears his throat and stands up straighter, his face going cold again, that iron mask he wears slipping back into place. "Everything is being taken care of," he says, looking at Mom. "Our new identities, all the paperwork—it should be ready in a few weeks..."

He glances at the clock. "For now though, we're on vacation. Might as well enjoy it."

I don't trust it. I don't trust any of this.

But here I am, stuck in the mountains, with them.

And no one's going to let me out until they've finished their business .

48

SOPHIE

“M y God,” I say, looking back at the house. “They’re either fucking or fighting.”

Malik doesn’t even blink. “There are worse things.”

“Like what?” Hayley shoots back. “My parents are disgusting.”

“Like poverty.” Malik’s gun is steady in his hands as he aims. “Your parents give you a good life.”

Hayley rolls her eyes, like it's too much effort to argue. “Whatever,” she says, watching as he hits the target dead center. “Who asked you, anyway?”

Speaking of bonding, Dad decided the way to “fix” everything is to have us all do ridiculous shit together. He keeps coming up with these outlandish ideas. Two days ago, it was snowmobiles. Today it’s guns, yesterday it was firewalking.

Yeah. Firewalking.

We’re in the mountains, miles from the nearest hospital, with literally no one around, and Dad thinks it’s a good idea to have us walk barefoot over hot coals, like that’s gonna somehow make us feel like a family again. Of course, Malik’s into it. He’s all in, like somehow he can’t believe his luck, like this is the family he’s always wanted.

He still refuses to talk to me about his parents. But that's fine. There's not a lot to do here, so I figure it won't be long before he cracks.

Hayley's kind of half-interested in Dad's family bonding experiments, but I can tell she's only going along with it because it's one of those moments where she has to be a part of the "team." Mom and Dad had a bit of an argument over his latest internet purchase, but they "made up" and now she's not saying anything. It's easier for her to keep quiet and let Dad do what Dad does. But it's me—I'm the one who's just sitting there, watching them, waiting for something to make sense.

And then Dad tells Hayley he needs to discuss something important with her, and I find myself drawn into their conversation.

"Hayley," he says, like he's about to explain some grand plan. "There are a few things we need to get straight."

She doesn't look up right away. She knows what this is about. His "important" conversations always seem to come with a hidden agenda. Then he looks at me, his eyes narrow, and I already know: I'm about to hear something that will make my skin crawl.

"I've taken care of it," he says, looking at my sister with an expression more serious than I've seen on him in a while.

I don't ask what "it" is. I don't care. He's said enough cryptic shit to make me wary of any vague pronouncements. But I let him keep going.

"I've hired someone," he tells her. "They're going to scare the hell out of Elliot. He's not going to bother Zoe, not again. But listen—it's not your problem anymore, Hayley. And your mother and I, we need everything you've been doing to stop. It has to stop. Do you understand?"

Hayley just stares at him. There's a moment of silence, just enough for me to absorb what he's saying. It's sickening, in a way. At first, it seems she's relieved that he's solving problems the only way he knows how—through intimidation, through threats, through violence.

“You need to move on,” Dad says, voice hardening. “This isn't healthy—and I think you know it. It's going to get you in a lot of trouble, Hayley.”

She does not take what he's said lightly. She throws one of her signature temper tantrums. She tells him that nothing ever feels like "her concern" anymore. She says she doesn't care about Elliot, not really. But that she's not relieved. For once in her life she wanted something for herself. She wanted to handle something herself.

But instead, he's fixed it for her, like always, and now she just feels empty. Like something's wrong with her—like something's missing. She's stuck here, in this stupid house in the middle of nowhere, with nothing to show for it but this weird, hollow feeling in her chest.

Dad gives me one of his forced smiles, the kind he thinks is comforting but is actually just hollow. He doesn't take her seriously, which I think is a mistake. He simply pats her head and says, “It's going to be okay, Hayley.”

I can feel the tension thickening the air between us, a silent storm brewing that none of us can ignore. Hayley stands there, her jaw clenched, eyes darting away from Dad's empty reassurances. It's like watching a fragile vase teeter on the edge of a shelf, waiting to shatter. Everyone else seems lost in their own thoughts, the absurdity of Dad's bonding activities barely registering amid the underlying discord.

He walks out but the moment stretches on, heavy and suffocating, making the large house feel claustrophobic. I survey the room, noticing the uneasy glances exchanged between Malik and Mom, each of us silently acknowledging the strained dynamics at

play .

“Don’t worry,” Mom says. “I’m sure your dad has something good up his sleeve—something fun.”

Finally, Hayley can’t hold it in any longer. She lets out a bitter laugh, the sound sharp and filled with resentment. “Right. Because that’s what this family needs,” Hayley says, rolling her eyes. “Fun.” She looks right at me. “And you—I hate you.”

I just shrug. “I don’t know what you want from me. I didn’t ask for any of this.”

“No, you didn’t. But you’re the one who gets to have everything handed to you, aren’t you? You’re the reason we’re stuck here.”

There’s a sudden, sharp noise—a crack from the window, a gust of cold wind cutting through the cracks. And then I see it.

A flamethrower.

It’s Dad, of course. Of course. He’s standing in the middle of the clearing, holding this enormous contraption like it’s the most normal thing in the world.

I suck in a breath. “What the hell is he doing now?”

“He’s built a bonfire,” Mom says. “Took him all day.”

Malik moves to the window. “It’s very impressive.”

Mom nods. “Michael does not do things half-assed.”

And just like that, it’s like the energy in the room shifts again. Like it’s suddenly a

warning to everyone, not just me. A chill settles in my bones, and it's not from the weather.

Dad flicks the switch. Flames roar from the flamethrower, casting monstrous shadows that dance on the walls.

“Might as well go indulge him,” Mom says. “He’s gone to all this trouble.”

We head outside, gathering around the fire. The temperature drops, and darkness presses in. I watch the flames grow, a silent dread sinking into my gut. Maybe, just maybe, everything’s about to burn.

49

CHARLOTTE

Three weeks later

I sit at the kitchen island, the scent of fresh coffee drifting in the air. The cold air presses against the windows, a sharp contrast to the warmth inside, reminding me that even in Texas, January can be unforgiving. For a second, it almost feels normal. Almost like everything that came before—the agency, the killings, the endless calculations—was some kind of fever dream.

But it wasn't. And it never will be. There's no going back from that life, no wiping it away like some chalkboard you can just erase. Still, we've made it here, back to Texas. Not to our old life, but to a different one, with new identities and a new home in a different city.

Michael disagrees with me about wiping the slate clean; he says everything that's happened is water under the bridge, but I'm not so sure .

Either way, all I care about right now is the cup of coffee in my near future. I'm going to need it to get through today.

I glance over at Michael, who's leaning against the counter, the sleeves of his worn flannel shirt rolled up. He's studying the blueprints spread across the table, his brow furrowed as he makes notes in the margins. He's a perfectionist, always has been. It's why he's so good at what he does.

"I don't know why you're so worried," I say, breaking the silence. The stillness of our new life hangs around us, a quiet that feels strangely satisfying, like the calm after a storm—after everything's been set right—or at least as right as it can get.

Michael looks up, a half-smile forming on his lips. "I'm not worried. I'm just not a fan of loose ends."

There's just one loose end to take care of—two, if you ask my husband, but I'm not. And I won't lie, it feels good. "I'm aware."

I tilt my head and study him closely. "But there's something you have yet to answer, and I'm not sure why..."

"What's that?"

"Why you waited three years to come back."

He opens his mouth to speak and then closes it, before opening it again. "Someday I'll tell you that story. But not today."

"I—"

The phone rings. Michael picks it up without hesitation, his voice steady and businesslike as he drifts into the other room. We've dismantled the agency. But now we're rebuilding. Our own. It's taking a lot of his time, which is good, keeps him from thinking about that other loose end—my old neighbor, back in New York. I don't know why he's so consumed with him. I'm not. For the first time in a long time, I'm almost happy.

The rest of the family is scattered throughout the house. Sophie's upstairs packing, preparing for her new life in Florida. We made sure she picked a school far enough

away for her to find a new sense of normalcy, but close enough that I can get there in a day if I need to.

I can hear her voice drifting downstairs now, her tone light, laughter breaking through the walls as Malik joins her. He's laughing at something she's said, adjusting reasonably well for someone who has just had his entire life upended.

He says he doesn't mind. Says his family is into some dark stuff in South Africa—slave trade stuff. He says he wants no part of it, that it's better if his family believes he's dead. Michael's done a fair amount of digging; he's aware of the details. Me? I worry whether we can trust him. Michael says time will tell.

"You sure you're ready for tonight?" Michael asks, pulling me back into the present. There's a hint of anticipation in his eyes, but mostly concern.

"Of course," I say, my eyes scanning the blueprints again.

The door opens behind me, and when I turn, Sophie is leaning against the doorway, her hair pulled back in a messy ponytail, that signature grin playing across her face. Malik stands behind her, hands stuffed into his pockets.

"We're all packed," Malik says, tossing a glance at Michael's blueprints.

"That's the guy's house," Sophie says. "Insane, right?"

"So it's all set then?" Hayley asks, storming into the room, a touch of impatience in her voice. She's still so angry. Michael chalks it up to hormones, but I know better. She wants in. He and I have gone round and round about it. We both agree she has real talent, but she's a loose cannon. In my opinion, her "psychopathic tendencies," as that quack therapist Michael brought in referred to them, just need to be harnessed. She needs training—a bit of mentorship. He'd say discipline. And maybe he's right.

She needs a bit of that too .

“Did you hear me?” she huffs. “I asked if we’re all set.”

“Everything but the last few details,” Michael answers. He pushes away from the counter and stretches. “But we’ve got the rest of the afternoon to make sure it all falls into place.”

50

CHARLOTTE

The driver drops me a block from his home. The humid Florida night clings to me, the heat amplified by the mix of sand and concrete. Even in the dark, the street hums with life—laughter drifting from a nearby porch, the gentle sound of waves crashing in the distance.

I walk the final stretch in heels that weren't made for uneven pavement, the rhythmic click of my steps blending with the ambient noises of the neighborhood. Risky? Sure. But time isn't on my side. I promised Michael I wouldn't take long.

The house looms ahead, nestled among its pristine, multimillion-dollar neighbors. The soft glow of porch lights contrasts with the harsh, distant glare of streetlamps. The place is deceptively understated, a quiet facade hiding the man inside. No gate, no hedge—but the cameras perched above the porch and angled at the door don't miss a thing, which is good because he's so rarely here.

I smile at one, tilting my head like I'm posing. But it's pointless, really. I know they've been disabled. The porch is spotless, and as I reach the top step, the door swings open. He's waiting.

The figure standing in the doorway is tall, slender, with dark hair falling just short of his collar. His face is familiar, but not in a comforting way. It's a face that haunts the back of my mind, a face I haven't seen in a long time.

“Well, well,” he says, voice low, a sly smile playing at the corners of his mouth. “I didn't think you'd show.”

I study him carefully, my hand never leaving the inside of my coat where I know my gun is waiting. He's more relaxed now, but still the same—still someone I should've killed a long time ago. But I wasn't ready then. I am now.

He leans casually in the doorway, wearing a ball cap as if he's trying to blend in, though it does little to hide the sharpness of his jawline—the kind that suggests he's mastered control while pretending to be above it.

“You're late,” he says, his eyes sweeping over me in one slow, calculating glance.

I brush past him, the scent of leather and expensive cologne hitting me as I step inside. “You're observant.”

The entryway is vast, a space that feels both imposing and inviting. Polished tile floors gleam under the soft, ambient light. There's no warmth here, no comfort—just sleek surfaces and sharp angles. His world is one of control, and it's evident in every detail of the room.

I pause for just a second, conscious of the need to remain anonymous. The last thing I need is for him to recognize me. The makeup's heavier tonight, the wig—unnaturally long and dark—covering most of my face. The dark sunglasses perched on the bridge of my nose, in spite of being inside now, help conceal my identity, and the loose, shapeless clothes do their part in hiding my figure.

But even with the layers, I can feel his gaze on me, like he's trying to piece me together. I know him too well. If I slip even a fraction, he'll spot the deception. And I'll be dead before I can make it out that door.

The living room is a study in understated luxury. A large sectional takes up one side of the room, its leather so smooth it almost shines under the overhead light. Everything is arranged with precision, but it feels...hollow. No family photos. No clutter. Just objects carefully placed to say something about the man who lives here—someone who has a knack for making chaos seem composed.

“You know, I expected you to come in a little more... dressed up,” he says, breaking the silence. His voice is smooth, like silk, but with an edge to it—like he’s always in control of the situation. “A little more...enticing.”

I shrug, trying not to let his words hit me. “I’m here to do business, not entertain you.”

He chuckles, low and dark, and motions for me to sit on the couch. “Business is entertainment for people like us. Let’s not pretend otherwise.”

I take a seat, crossing my legs, but keep my back straight. I don’t trust the couch—it’s too comfortable, too inviting, and I know what happens when you get too comfortable in a place like this.

51

CHARLOTTE

Carlo steps around the room, moving with purpose. He takes a tumbler off the bar cart near the corner. When he turns around, I have removed the wig and the glasses and the gun from my coat.

He looks at me like he's seen a ghost, and in a way he has. "Well, well," he says. "Look what the cat dragged in. Should I be worried?"

"You were always a coward, Carlo."

He laughs, a sound too dry, too hollow to be real. "It does not surprise me that you're alive. But I didn't think you'd come back."

"What can I say? I missed you."

"You've got a funny way of saying goodbye," Carlo continues, his eyes narrowing, though there's an edge of nervousness creeping in. "But if you're looking for a fight, Charlotte?—"

"I'm not looking for anything."

He places the tumbler back on the cart and steps forward, overconfident. "I think you've made a mistake coming here."

“Get on your knees,” I say. My words are sharp, calculated. Cold. It’s the same way I’ve always done this—never hesitating. Never second-guessing.

He doesn’t move. “I’m not dying on my knees, Charlotte. Come on, you know me better than that.”

“In my mind,” I say, “I pictured you on your knees. Indulge me, Carlo. Torture has never really been my thing. But I’m not above it.”

“You’re a funny girl.”

“There is nothing funny about what I’m going to do to you, trust me.”

A smile tugs at the corner of his lips. “You think you can just walk away from this life? So you kill me. Then what?”

I step closer, gun still trained on him. “I’m not walking away from anything,” I say. “I’m taking it with me.”

He glares at me, but I can see the cracks beginning to form in his composure. His hands twitch toward his waistband, but I’m faster. The shot rings out before he can react, and his body jerks forward, crashing to the floor with a sickening thud. I put two more bullets in him for good measure, and I don’t look back as I exit the house.

I rework the wig and the glasses and step into the humid darkness once more. The car’s waiting for me, just as I expected.

“Michael,” I say, as I slip into the backseat. My hands tremble slightly from the adrenaline, but I breathe steadily.

He gives me the once-over. “Everything good?”

“It’s perfect.” I remove the wig and shake out my hair. “Not as dramatic as I would have liked, but that’s Carlo.”

“ Was Carlo.” He glances at the driver and then back at me. “What now?”

“I’m hungry. Let’s grab something and go to the beach.”

“Too much sand,” he says, and then, “I’m kidding. Whatever you want.”

I glance out the window as the car pulls away from the curb. The tightness in my chest that feels like it’s been there for months—years, even—releases.

He studies me closely. “You sure you’re okay?”

“Never been better. It’s done.”

As the sprawling estates outside the window grow distant, I breathe a sigh of relief. It’s over.

For now.

52

CHARLOTTE

Nine months later

I stop in the lobby and head straight to the restroom to change and freshen up. Shaking out the short blonde wig, carefully folded and tucked into my oversized tote bag, I slip it into place, adjusting it just so. I touch up my lipstick, double-check my reflection in the mirror, and swipe on another coat of mascara. Still not satisfied, I make the effort to slip the false eyelashes into place, closing my eyes and squeezing them shut before opening them slowly. I check my appearance one last time. The transformation is striking. I don't look like myself at all.

When Hayley steps out of the stall, her eyes widen in surprise. Mine do too. She's wearing the same bold makeup—heavy black eyeliner, vivid red lipstick, and a skirt that's far too short. But it's the look in her eyes that steals my breath. She doesn't just look older; she looks like me .

“Should we go over it again?” I ask, glancing at her in the mirror.

“No,” she says firmly, a slight smirk on her lips. “I told you a thousand times. I got it.”

We arrive at Gideon Adler's wedding reception in a hotel ballroom on the Las Vegas Strip. The venue is a vast, glittering space, its high ceilings adorned with crystal chandeliers that catch the light in a thousand dazzling ways. The floor is polished

marble, reflecting the neon glow from the city's lights that flood through the massive windows, casting a colorful hue over the entire room. It's an extravagant affair, far from any notion of understated luxury—perfect for blending in, if you know how.

We're not on the guest list, but that's a detail we can easily finesse. No one will ask, but if they did, I'd tell a convincing story about representing a company with ties to the Adlers' family business. The Adlers are well-known power players, their influence woven into the fabric of the city, and their associates are too wrapped up in the spectacle to ask probing questions. A few polite smiles, and that'd be that.

Hayley and I settle into the rhythm of the event, moving through the crowd with practiced ease. The guests, decked out in designer attire, circulate through the ballroom, some making small talk, others eyeing the open bar. We take in the layout of the venue—the towering floral arrangements, the gleaming silver trays of hors d'oeuvres, and the string quartet playing softly in the background.

As we make our rounds, we're careful to observe the key players, making mental notes of who's who in this glittering world. But all of it is just window dressing. The real prize is Gideon Adler, and when the time is right, we have plans with him.

At dinner, as the third course is served, Gideon excuses himself to take a call. Even at his own wedding, business calls. But I know it's not business that's on his mind—it's something far more personal—and far more satisfying to me.

Later, we meet in the men's room. It's stark and modern, with sleek black tiles and gold accents that shimmer under the harsh overhead lighting. Sometimes the wealthy have taste; more often than not, they don't. I close the door quietly behind me and press my back against it, taking a steadying breath before pulling my gloves from my small clutch.

Gideon Adler finishes his call and turns around, his expression a mix of curiosity and

recognition.

“They said I might be expecting you,” he says, eyeing me closely. “Charlotte, right?”

Our gazes lock. “You tell me.”

“The female assassin.”

“An assassin is just an assassin.”

“At any rate,” he continues, “I suppose you haven’t come here to make introductions.”

“Your assumption would be correct.”

“In that case,” he says, his tone flat, “let’s not waste any time.” His eyes narrow, sizing me up. He’s got a bit of fight in him.

“You’re not scared to die?”

“Does it matter, my darling Charlotte?”

“I am not your darling.”

“You are the last person I will see alive. Humor me.”

“No.”

He moves in, casually eyeing me. “So, what’s it gonna be? Sit, kneel, or just stand here like this? How do you want me?”

“As you are is fine.”

“Okay,” he says with a lazy grin, placing his hands behind his head as if he's under arrest—like he's not about to die. “I am ready.”

I am angry that he is making a mockery of my work. It is rude, after I've come so far, all the way to this shitty city, that he is removing all of the satisfaction. He knows exactly what he is doing.

Taking a step forward, I open my switchblade.

“To answer your question,” he stammers, a slight tremor in his voice, “I am scared to die. Everyone is.”

“Not everyone.”

“Do you want to argue your point, or do we get this over with? I've got two law degrees, dearest Charlotte. We could be here a while.”

“It's rare I kill such an overachiever.”

“Really?”

“No,” I say, a flicker of a smile tugging at my lips. “That was a lie.”

Page 54

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 2:26 am

I check my watch, feigning regret. “I’m terribly sorry, but you’re right. I don’t have time for chitchat. It’s almost time. I’m a sucker for wedding cake.”

“My new bride is going to be very disappointed.”

“This is what? Number three? Surely, she’s aware of your track record when it comes to cutting and running.”

“Number four, actually.”

My bottom lip juts out. “Impressive.”

“What can I say? Like you, I’m a sucker for wedding cake.”

“I’m sorry you’ll be missing this one. It looks very good. They can be so dry sometimes.”

“You are not so bad, Charlotte. I mean, if you have to be the last person I see. It really could be worse.”

“I get that a lot,” I say. He swings at me, and I duck just in time. Without missing a beat, I lift the knife above my head and drive it into his eye. For all the lives he’s ruined. For all the footage he’s traded. And because I can.

He screams and then swings again, but his reflexes are slower this time, sluggish—thanks to the little something Hayley slipped into his drink. “This is worse than I thought it would be,” he chokes out as I twist the blade deeper.

“Interesting,” I say, “it’s exactly as I imagined it.” Then I slide the knife free and slit his throat.

As his body crumples to the floor, the silence in the room feels deafening, almost too loud. I wipe the blade clean, slipping it back into my clutch, my pulse steady—controlled, as though nothing has happened. When we exit the elevator and round the corner to our hotel room, I’m not surprised to see a familiar face waiting for us, though I wish I were. He leans against the wall, arms crossed, his expression one of practiced irritation.

“It was supposed to be quick and easy,” he says with a sigh, his voice laced with annoyance. “Clean. But leave it to you to take it to a whole new level. I’ve been waiting here forever.”

I offer a nonchalant shrug. “It was a great party. The cake was to die for.”

He eyes me, the familiar frustration flaring in his gaze. He wasn’t supposed to be in Vegas, but he’s the overbearing, protective type. Safe to say, we haven’t quite sorted that out yet.

Finally, he shakes his head. “You always did love a crowd.”

My stomach tightens at the words. Henry used to say that. Carlo said it just once.

“Dad?” Hayley says, her voice full of surprise. “I didn’t know you were going to be here.”

He smiles a little, the warmth never quite reaching his eyes. “You know how much I love this place.”

She rolls her eyes. “You hate Vegas.”

“Not today I don’t.”

She rolls her eyes again. “Can we go now? You said you just needed to grab something and then we could leave.”

He turns his gaze to me, raising an eyebrow. “She’s been this way the whole time?”

“She’s mad I made her toss the dress and the shoes.”

Michael’s lips curl into a smile. “Your mother is right. When the job is done, so are your clothes.”

Hayley stares at her fingernails, picking at a piece of chipped polish, a slight scowl on her face. “They had not one drop of blood on them, those shoes. They were perfect.”

“There are more shoes in your future, Hayley. Don’t worry.”

She looks up at me expectantly. “I want to go shopping. You promised.”

“Later.”

“Can I at least go look around?” she asks, pointing toward the elevators.

“No,” I say firmly. “In a minute, we’ll go.”

“Seriously?” Hayley whines. “Why can’t I just go?”

Michael looks at me for a long moment, then gives me a small nod. “She’ll be fine. Let her go.”

“She has a knack for finding trouble, you know that.”

“Like her mother.”

“Not entirely unlike her father.”

Michael smiles, but there’s something a little darker in his eyes. “It is a problem...holding on too tight.”

“You’re one to talk.”

I slide the keycard into the door and open it. Hayley reluctantly follows us in, but I can see the restlessness in her. I don’t have to look to know her mind is already on something else.

“I think I will sleep tonight,” I say to Michael. “Finally.”

He looks at me knowingly. “I doubt it.”

“You’re right. Probably not.”

Hayley cuts in before I can say anything else. “So, this list,” she starts, a mischievous glint in her eyes. “The one Mom’s always talking about—the one that guy was on. Can I see it?”

“The kill list,” I clarify.

“That’s the one,” she says, sounding almost too casual. “I mean, you’re always saying to plan ahead...”

Michael glances between us, eyebrows raised. “Why does she want to see it?”

I meet his gaze, a flicker of something passing between us. “Mom says I get to handle the next one.”

I can feel Michael's eyes on me, sharp and disapproving. "I did not say that."

"Yes, you did," Hayley fires back, crossing her arms defiantly. "In the cab, on the way back. You said it. You said it'll be my first kill."

"I said maybe it would be your first kill," I correct her, though I'm not entirely sure why I bother.

With enough training and maturity, Hayley could be really great. But right now, she's still very much a loose cannon. Michael says I appease her, and to some extent, he's right. The main reason we've managed to keep our cover intact over the years is because we exercise caution. Unfortunately, Hayley tends to throw all of that caution out the window, and I still haven't quite figured out what to do about it.

"Well, when do we decide?" Hayley presses, her voice rising with impatience.

"Later."

"Okay, but hypothetically?" She plops down on the bed, staring up at the ceiling, her expression distant as she lets out a long, wistful sigh. "I have so many ideas..."

I glance at Michael, knowing exactly what he's thinking. I can feel the weight of his disapproval, but I also know what I have to say. The only thing that makes any sense.

"We'll just have to see."