



My Silver Fox Savior

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Description: He's everything I ever wanted. Yet loving him could ruin my life.

When I was a kid, Landon Cross was my hero. He took on Mom's case pro bono so that we could stay together. I never forgot about him.

He was an inspiration to me.

Ten years later, he's in my life again, more mature, silver in his hair, but just as tall, muscular, intense, and most definitely just as handsome.

We meet during work, so I have to stay focused. I'm a social worker, and my case is becoming dangerous. Worse, my bosses know Landon and tell me he's bad news. But when he reveals that he only has months left to live, I can't stop myself, and neither can he.

Will we come to our senses before time runs out? Or will I have to sacrifice everything for my knight in shining armor?

* My Silver Fox Savior is a steamy age gap romance with a HEA, no cheating, and no cliffhanger.

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CHAPTER ONE

LANDON

Doctor Franklin is a young man. He can't be older than thirty. Maybe that makes me pessimistic, thinking of myself as old when I'm only ten years his senior. Yet, with the spark in his eyes and the eager way he leans forward, the difference seems significant.

After a pause, he seems to remind himself he should behave seriously. "I wish I had better news, Mr. Cross," he says, his office far too bright and airy for the weight in his words. "But during your routine health check, we found some anomalies. This warranted further investigation and ..."

I sit forward, resting my forearms on my knees and staring the younger man in the eye. "Just tell me."

"Your test results show a high likelihood of an advanced and extremely rare form of cancer," he says, again seeming a little too animated and even excited about it. "Given this type of cancer, it tends to progress rapidly. Treatment options are limited. I will refer you to an oncologist immediately, but I must be honest," he says, pausing dramatically. "We're likely looking at months, not years."

"Oh, right," I say, feeling numb, knowing there's lots I should probably be experiencing. "I see."

Doctor Franklin sucks in a breath through gritted teeth. Maybe he thinks he showed

far too much naked and obvious excitement about this rare form. I can hear him bragging to his colleagues about the find . “I’m going to arrange the oncologist referral now. How does tomorrow work?”

Suddenly, my chest feels tight. My throat feels like it’s closing as I breathe heavily. I don’t even know why I do it, but I lie. “Uh, no. I can’t do it tomorrow. I’ve got an important appearance in court.”

“The next appointment isn’t until ... next week; that’ll be five days.”

“That’s fine.” I wave a hand, standing up. My head feels loose on my shoulders, rocking from side to side, but I’m sure I’m not standing in Doctor Franklin’s office. Instead, I’m headbanging like some reject at a metal concert. It’s all, well, in my head. “Thank you.”

When I offer my hand, he takes it quickly. “Are you sure you wouldn’t like to discuss this further? I can go over some details with you.”

Months, not years .

“No, it’s fine. Thank you, Doctor.”

“We’ll call you with the appointment details,” he yells after me.

I turn my back and walk quickly away from him. The receptionist looks up in shock when I burst through the waiting room door. Other patients are looking at me, too, their faces tight with fear and imagined pain. Look at that guy in the slick suit. I wonder what news he just got.

I’m halfway across the lot when I get a video call from my mother. Leaning against my car, I answer it. Mom and Dad are sitting on their sunny Maltese balcony,

suntanned and happy like they always are when they call me.

“Did you get your health check?” Mom asks right away.

“You’d think a man would get some freedom from his parents at forty.”

“We moved to a different continent to get away from you , son,” Dad says jokingly. Then, he shows his seriousness, too. “But did you?”

“He wouldn’t not go,” Mom says under her breath.

“I went.”

“And?” they say together, leaning forward ... together.

I started getting these twice-yearly health checks when my older brother, Charley, passed away from a heart attack. It was an event that rocked all of us. It came suddenly, leaving us feeling like we were walking around a ghost town, trying to piece together some semblance of our previous world.

“It was fine,” I tell them, another lie.

“Oh, good,” Dad says.

“I knew it would be. Look at him!”

Yet Charley seemed healthy, too. That was one thing that made Mom and Dad so health-conscious after he passed away. I remember standing at his grave, tears stinging my eyes, Mom’s hand latched onto mine as she wept and begged that I start taking precautions.

In a way, she was right. I've learned about this rare form of cancer now.

Months, not years . More than anything, I'm worried about Mom and Dad. Charley's passing almost broke them. I'm all they have left.

"Shall we talk about something more cheerful?" Dad says. "What about your latest case? I saw something about a lawsuit on the news?"

Ethan, my best friend, and I run a divorce law firm for the rich and powerful on the East Coast. Usually, I can talk about this all day, but after the doctor's news, it feels oddly shallow. "Slander," I murmur. "Ethan thinks we might make a dent if we go the public-favor route."

"They made such a lovely couple ... " Mom sighs.

"I'm thinking of doing more pro bono work," I announce.

"Oh, really?" Mom perks up.

"Yeah."

"Keep the resumé up to scratch, huh?" Dad says shrewdly.

"Not for the resumé," I say. "Just ... to give something back. To do some good."

Before I'm gone . Months, not years. It bounces around and around my head.

"Just don't let it interfere with your job too much," Dad advises. "You've built one of the biggest, most successful practices on the East Coast."

"I know," I say, nodding.

“Listen, sweetie, we have to go,” Mom says. “We love you lots. Okay?”

“Love you, Mom. Love you, Dad.”

Dad chuckles, making mwah-mwah-mwah kissing noises and waving his hand. I get into my car, resting my forehead against the wheel. I know I’ll soon have to tell them the truth after the meeting with the oncologist, maybe when I’ve heard the specifics.

The specifics were the worst part last time with Charley. Hearing about all the ways his body twisted and conspired to shut him down, hearing about the misfires and malfunctions.

Taking out my phone, I navigate to the pro bono website I’ve used. I’m immediately met with a message when I try to log in. I hear, “ Hello, returning user. It has been over four years since your last log-in. Since then, we have updated our system. Please click this link to make a new account.”

It’s been four years since I last did pro bono work. I guess life can race ahead, mine and Ethan’s work taking us from one high-profile case to the next. There are always more marriages to help peel apart, sometimes frictionlessly, sometimes with fire.

After making an account, I scroll through the entries for the city.

“Months, not years,” I whisper, struggling to make sense of it or even begin to process it.

Mom and Dad don’t deserve to lose another child.

I keep scrolling, thinking maybe, at least, I can do some good before the end.

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CHAPTER TWO

LILY

When I started working as a junior social worker three months ago, I was stunned by how hectic the main office was. When I first walked in, I was sure I'd accidentally wandered into a newsroom or a stock exchange. People walked back and forth, snapping information at each other. People exchanged hurried notes. There were stacks of paper everywhere. Everybody looked tired and worn down.

Now, it doesn't shock me. I arrive for work with the same determination I've felt since first winning a scholarship out of high school. The competition required me to write a letter explaining how I wanted to help people, an interview, a test case, and now this—my reward.

I'm twenty-two years old and ready to make the world a better place despite what my boss, Carter Weston, says daily. Today, he's leaning back in his office chair, his feet resting on his desk. He's in his mid-forties, but this job—or maybe just life—has aged him more than that. His hair has crept back. His face is rough—almost leathery—and his expression always seems resigned but never angry, more like accepting of how cruel the world can be.

“We’re going to have to split today,” he mutters, glancing up from the sheaf of papers he has propped on his chest.

“Okay ...”

I glance across the busy room to the director's office. Technically, I'm not supposed to head out into the field without Carter beside me. However, with our absurd caseload, Carter sometimes sends me to jobs alone, and then I'll fill in the paperwork as though he was there. He signs it, and we move on. So far, it's meant helping more people.

Though, it also means risking my job. It's a danger, for sure. On my first day, when Carter opened the files for his nine active cases and told me to choose one to ignore, I learned how cold this business really is.

"As long as we're safe," I mutter.

"Safe," he repeats with a humorless laugh. Sitting forward, he puts the papers down, staring at me with bloodshot eyes. "We're safer than the three brothers trapped for an entire day with their violent, drug-addicted?—"

"I don't need the emotional blackmail, Carter," I hiss. "I'm here to help people. Otherwise, I would've told you to go to hell months ago."

He sighs, nodding. "You're right. I'm sorry. It's just this job ..."

"Try to think about the good we're doing. That's what I try to do."

"For every good thing, there are ten or twenty bad ones."

"If you think like that, you'll never be happy."

"I've worked here for nearly twenty years, Lily. Believe me, I stopped trying to be happy a long time ago."

I shake my head. I think I may even make a tsking sound, which I've tried to stop

myself from doing because it makes me come off as thinking I'm better than people, as prissy .

"I don't agree with that," I say. "I think if you come to work and do your best and manage to help some people, there's no reason to let it eat away at you all the time."

"So you haven't had any nightmares? Or days off stolen by memories of this place?"

"I just don't see the benefit in going on about it," I snap. "Anyway ... " I lower my voice. "Why the split today?"

"I've whittled the cases down to two that need help. One is a girl whose mother has allowed her to hang out in some dive bar across the street. A few of the neighbors have contacted us. The other is a kid whose uncle keeps him in the same enclosure as a large dog; a relative informed us about it. It's the only way we would've heard since it's on the city's outskirts. I'm taking the dog."

He gives me one of his looks. It doesn't take much to decode it. He's basically telling me—without saying it—that there's a chance he goes out to this place and the dog mauls him. Or the psycho uncle beats him up. He's giving me a look that says, You've got the easy job.

"Where's the file?" I ask bluntly.

The bitter truth is there are never any easy jobs in this profession.

CHAPTER THREE

LONDON

“We can always find the time,” Ethan says, giving me a searching look across our shared office. We’ve shared an office since we started the agency, a promise we made a decade ago that we’d always be equals. He’s tall, on the bulky, muscular side, with full dark black hair slicked back and a gold watch winking at his wrist. “What sort of pro bono work are you thinking?”

“A couple of parents in an apartment block in The Row want to sue a local gang for noise complaints.”

“Noise complaints?” Ethan says doubtfully.

“There’s more to it. The gang has been trying to draw kids to their bar. God knows why, but we know it can’t be good. If they can get the bar closed down for noise, maybe they’ll move on.”

Ethan nods. “Find another bar, find some more kids ...”

I grit my teeth. “Don’t start that crap.”

He fiddles with his watch. “It’s not crap, Landon. It’s just a fact that these sorts of people will always find somewhere to pull their stunts. If you get this bar shut down ...”

“Then where does it end?” I growl, sitting up and thinking, months, not years . “If doing good has no meaning, then we should just sit here waiting for the next starlet to decide to leave her husband.”

“Ah, so our entire business is a joke. People need divorce lawyers, dammit.”

“I never said it was a joke. I’m not putting down our business; I’m not putting this stuff down either.”

He raises his hands. “All right. Jeez.” After a pause, he says, “Are you okay, Landon? You’ve been in a bad mood all morning.”

“I’m fine,” I grunt.

I don’t tell him the doctor’s office tried calling me on the way to work. I let it go to voicemail. Mr. Cross, we’re calling to arrange an appointment with the oncologist. That will mean hearing in more detail about how the years of my life have suddenly squashed into months. It’ll just mean medical terms and elaborate explanations to explain why this pro bono case might be my last.

“If it doesn’t interfere with our work, I can do any damn thing I want.”

“I know that’s what we agreed,” Ethan says. “It’s just been so long since you wanted to do any pro bono.”

I turn to my laptop to the parents’ public message calling for legal help. I don’t want to think about the fact that Ethan is right. I haven’t mentioned pro bono work in almost half a decade. I used to do it all the time, but then it was like ...

What? Did I become too comfortable? Did I let this high-paying job, my deluxe gym membership, and the skiing trips get to my head?

“These people need help,” I snap.

“Then there’s nothing more to talk about. Good luck.”

I grind my teeth from side to side. It’s almost like something in me wants to fight—eager for it. I feel like something is boiling in me. Maybe it’s the goddamn tumor. Perhaps it’s the final act closing in, every second suddenly vital, every moment suddenly infused with meaning.

When I’m gone, will I care how many divorce settlements I won?

As I drive to The Row, the rundown apartment blocks that have existed here since the seventies, somehow, I can hear Charley talking to me from the backseat. “You always wanted to help people, ever since you were a kid.” But when a man has the chance to build a million-dollar business, he makes it work. He finds ways to justify it. I give a lot of money to charity.

I stop outside the rundown apartment block. The brown facade faded over time, and chips, cuts, and marks cover the front door. The bar sits directly across the street, and the roads here are narrower than the rest of the city. In other areas, there would be laws against the bar being this close, but not here, probably owing to some obscure bylaw or exception going back decades.

It’s called The Bear and has a symbol of a snoring bear at the corner of the sign. The door itself is thick and speakeasy-like, almost warning people away. It’s quiet at this time of day, but the blackened windows make it seem like bad things are happening there.

Climbing from my car, I’m about to head into the apartment building when I spot her. She’s leaning against the trunk of her car, her hands on her knees, taking slow breaths as she looks at the ground. There’s something about her pose that seems familiar.

When she stands up, my breath catches. She's ... beautiful. I feel stunned. It's a new and unusual experience for me, a woman striking me this hard. She's got luscious brown hair tied up in a no-bullshit bun. Her shirt is buttoned up but shows the shape of her hips and chest, and she has a professional black skirt hugging her thick legs. More than how smoking hot and curvy she is, though, it's her aura . She just seems good, like a person I want to get to know more about. I can't remember the last time I ever felt like this. I thought my job was supposed to have ruined relationships for me.

She sees me looking, causing me to look away instinctively. I don't want to get caught leering like some creep. When she walks over to me, I know she saw me watching her. I'm probably about to get a speech about staring at women, and it's not like I can blame her.

"Luh-Landon?" she says, like she's unsure. Her voice is damn sweet to listen to.

"Yeah," I say, looking down at her. Up close, she seems even more gorgeous, her cheeks ever so slightly blushing red, her eyes, though young, hardened, and alert. "Do I know you?"

"You probably don't remember me," she murmurs, "but you saved my life."

CHAPTER FOUR

LILY

I expect him to tell me I've got it wrong. Since I was a kid and this knight in shining armor rode into my life, I've wondered if I dreamed of him. Whenever I thought about how he handled things, his efficiency, calm, and determination to do the right thing always made me want to do the same thing.

"I'm sorry?" he says, his kind eyes at odds with his careful, guarded exterior.

He's tall and broad-shouldered, his slick silver suit hugging his powerful frame. His arms fill the suit jacket. His eyes are empathetic, dark blue, and searching, as though he's interested in everything and everyone. His hair is black with threads of silver in it, highlighting his experience.

I'm sure it's him.

"Is your name Landon?" I ask, feeling like a douche now.

"Yes," he says, putting me out of my misery, "but considering I saved your life, you've got me at a loss ..."

"You probably won't remember me," I murmur. "When I was a kid, my parents were getting divorced. My mom was going through a bad spot with ..." I hesitate, then remember he knows and saw it and continue, "... her addiction, but she was way better than my dad. He wasn't exactly loving, remember?"

Maybe it's the desperation in the question, how badly I need him to understand so I don't need to explain Dad's rants and the way he would break things, and how sometimes his violence wouldn't stay relegated to objects. Finally, Landon's kind eyes snap open in realization.

"Lia?" he says.

"Lily," I quickly correct, "but yeah."

"You lived ... here, right?" He looks up and down The Row.

"We did, yeah." I nod. "You took on Mom's case. You stopped me from going into care. You gave her a second chance."

"When was this?" he says, a soft smile touching his lips. "It must've been ... ten years ago?"

"Yep. I was twelve. I never learned your surname then, and Mom doesn't like talking about when she was like that."

"Like that," meaning completely dependent on pills.

"Is she doing better now?" he asks.

"Much, thank you. I think you gave her a wake-up call."

He looks down at my feet and then back at my face, the corner of his lips twitching. Something tells me he's comparing how I looked as a kid to how I look now. I was frumpy and bigger back then. I'm not exactly thin now, but I feel like I've grown into my curves. Surely, he's not doing that. I was twelve the last time he saw me. Just because I had a crush on him, it doesn't mean he'd ever think twice about me .

“Do you still live around here?” he asks after a pause.

“No, when Mom got clean, she moved us out. I’m here for work. I’m a social worker now. You inspired me. When I saw how you handled the system back then—not to mention Dad—and without asking for a fee, it meant a lot to me ...”

I trail off, realizing I sound like the biggest dork who has ever lived. His lip does that twitching thing again as if he sees me as somebody he can show a polite interest in but nothing else. I’ve got to remember that while he was a huge inspiration for me , I’m probably just one memory in dozens, if not hundreds of cases.

“You’re here alone?” he asks after a pause, those kind eyes turning searching. “Handling a case?”

I stand up straighter. Am I nuts, or did his gaze flit to my chest? Yes, that’s nuts . No, he’s not checking me out . “Yes, I am.”

“You’re a senior social worker already?”

“I’m doing my internship,” I tell him.

He frowns and moves closer to me, almost like he thinks we’ll be overheard. I don’t even care about the reason when I can savor his cologne, his presence. How many times have I remembered tall and intense Landon since he disappeared from my life?

“You’re here alone,” he says, his tone getting tight. “While you’re on your internship ? Somebody’s fucked up.”

“Or maybe somebody realizes I can handle it,” I hiss. “They also realize that there’s only so many resources available in this city.”

When his lip twitches again, I almost want to slap him. It's the confused emotions it triggers in me. One moment, it's like he thinks I'm cute and that it's quaint and silly that a woman like me would handle this alone. The next, it's like he's fiercely proud, and I care much more than I should.

"What if it gets dangerous? This sort of work can, sometimes."

"You're here alone." When he laughs, I snap, "What? You don't need to be afraid, but I do?"

"I don't want to offend you, Lily ..."

"Maybe I'm not very easily offended."

"Then yes, I think I could handle myself better if something went wrong. I also think the sky is blue."

There's not much I can say to this, so I go the sarcastic route. "Actually, it's pretty gray today."

His laugh seems more genuine now, less mocking.

"Why are you here?" I ask. "Is it about the bar?"

He nods. "Noise complaints from some parents. They want to use the noise as a reason to shut the bar down."

I debate if I should tell him. Landon is even better at reading me now than he was when I was a kid. Back then, when he helped my mom, he could tell I was trying to protect my dad; he could tell I was terrified of revealing the truth about Mom's addiction. He could read it all, which made revealing it so much easier.

“What’s wrong?” he asks, leaning down even more.

He’s standing directly over me, emphasizing just how big he is.

“I’m here because a mother lets her kid hang out at the bar. The mother denied it to my face. I could tell she was out of it, just like...” My mom , but there’s no need to add that part. Landon’s being here brings back all those memories. “The daughter, Grace, said her friends like to go to the bar because they let them play video games and give them snacks.” I shiver. “It doesn’t take a genius to figure out they’re trying to make them feel comfortable ... but for what?”

“Jesus,” he whispers. His expression gets that severe and strong-minded look I remember so well from when I was a kid. It was an expression that’s stuck with me, one that loudly proclaims, I will not let bad things happen if I can stop them .

“I don’t know what to do. All those kids belong in care, but ...”

He reads me again. When he speaks, a tingle dances over my skin. It’s because he’s bringing all these buried memories to the surface. His voice takes me back to that time. “Just because care wasn’t right for you, it doesn’t mean it has no place,” he says.

“I know,” I sigh. “I need to speak with my boss and determine the best course of action. I can’t believe that bar is right there.”

He looks across the street, his jaw tight as he nods. He seems ready to tear the bar to pieces with his bare hands. “Some politician probably got some payment one day to sign some piece of paper that makes it okay. What, why are you smiling?”

Crap. I didn’t even realize I was!

“Am I?” I stutter.

“Grinning like a girl on Christmas morning.”

“More like smiling like a woman appreciating that somebody else cares about how corrupt this city can be!”

He narrows his eyes, furthering my obsession with watching all the different things he does with them, where he looks, and the thoughts they hint at. He’s my knight in shining armor , I once told Maddie, my best friend. She’ll freak when she finds out I’ve found him again.

“Yeah, it’s bad,” Landon says. “Some folk might even say it’s not worth trying.”

“I can’t understand that at all,” I snap.

“No?”

“You wouldn’t be here if you could either,” I tell him.

He smirks, making me want to snap at him again. Something about him calling me “girl ” really pissed me off. A silence stretches between us. It’s not awkward, exactly, but it’s not comfortable either. It’s like we’re ... well ... precisely what we are—two acquaintances with a few shared experiences but nothing more.

“Well, good luck,” I say because I can’t take the silence anymore.

“And you,” he murmurs.

I turn away, telling myself I’ve got no reason to feel disappointed. I don’t know what I expected. I shouldn’t even be thinking about anything. I shouldn’t be wishing he

was taking an interest in me. I shouldn't wonder what it would feel like to have his powerful savior's arms wrapped around me.

It's weird, especially considering I was twelve the last time I saw him, and he's almost twice my age. Yet when he calls my name, I can't stop a giant, relieved smile from spreading across my face.

CHAPTER FIVE

LANDON

“Lily!”

I say her name like it means something. When she turns to face me, she looks at me as though this moment has significance, too. We stand on a grimy street, the sunlight hidden behind gray clouds, yet excitement runs through me. Months, not years ...

Usually, I’m sure I could beat down this feeling. I’d be able to fight this ache deep in my gut and ignore how my gaze moves to her wide hips, thick legs, and the ferocious, capable glint in her eyes. I should be able to ignore it even better now, knowing this can lead nowhere.

“Yeah?” she murmurs, licking her lips.

“Give me your number,” I say, proving it’s been a long time since I’ve done anything like this. I’m so blunt. “Since we’re working in the same area, maybe we can help each other. I know you’re technically not allowed, but since you’re not supposed to be here alone anyway ...”

“Yeah, that’s a good idea. Do you want to take mine and then text me?”

When I take out my cell, I’m sure I notice her waiting eagerly, her mouth slightly open, her eyes fixated on me. I wonder if she knows, or suspects, that I wasn’t going to make this about work when I called her name. I was going to ask her on a date flat-

out. If my diagnosis has unhinged me slightly, it hasn't made me completely insane. Yet.

"Okay, great," she says once I've texted her my number. "Let me know if ... you want to talk or anything."

She turns away again, leaving me to struggle with not staring at her skirt, hugging the thickness of her ass. I try to be a gentleman, not to objectify, but goddamn, it's like she's trying to drive me toward obsession. The movement of her ass from side to side takes my fantasies to savage places.

At her car, she looks over her shoulder. I quickly raise my hand in what I hope is a civilized way. She's a young woman I knew briefly when she was a kid. I inspired her; I helped her. That's all. I can't let this cancer crap make me act like a fool.

After she's driven away, I take out my cell and call the parent I'm here to meet. When he tells me he's at the store and he'll be five minutes, I decide to wander over to The Bear. Booze and maybe blood stain the surrounding sidewalk. The door has a piece of duct tape on it that could be covering a bullet hole.

I almost jump when the door opens a crack.

"Can I help you?" a low, urgent voice snaps.

"Just looking at your fine establishment."

"It's not mine," the voice grunts, the person hidden in shadow. "Owner's not here, and you don't want to be snooping around if he decides to visit, believe me."

"Is that so?" I say. "I suppose I should be scared ..."

I'm not usually this confrontational. Months, not years . "Be scared. Be brave. Just don't be here at the wrong time, buddy. This is a fair warning."

"And this is a fair warning; nobody will threaten me. I don't give a fuck who your bosses are. They can be the biggest motherfuckers in the city, but I won't let them scare me or, worse, scare innocent kids. You hear that?"

"Who the fuck are you, guy?" the man snaps.

"Landon Cross," I say with too much confidence, as though I think the doctor's diagnosis has already come true, as though I think I don't have to worry about my own life. "If your employers have a problem with me looking around, tell them to search me up. I'm easy to find."

"Maybe I'll do that, Landon Cross."

He slams the door, leaving me to wonder if I've just made a mistake. I probably shouldn't have to wonder , considering that when I did pro bono work in dangerous neighborhoods, I'd always be careful not to trigger people if I didn't need to. I probably didn't need to take a stand there.

Ever since the doctor's appointment, everything is closer to the surface, my emotions burning in a way they haven't in years. But is that the diagnosis or Lily?

Mr. Thompson is a soft-featured man, around sixty if I had to guess, with lines around his eyes and a comb-over showing his head's baldness under the electric light. We sit in the kitchen on two small, rickety stools, his son playing an old retro game on the old TV in the adjoined living room.

"When my wife left, I knew I had to do the right thing," he says, looking down into his cup of thick black coffee. "I knew I had to be here for my boy and always will be.

I had a child late in life, and I'm not up to doing what I should and would have, once."

"What's that, sir?" I ask.

"Burning The Bear to the ground," he hisses, a flash of protectiveness coming into his otherwise soft features. "They play music all night long. When we call the cops, sometimes they don't even show up. When they do, they turn the music down and then turn it back up when the cops leave. That's even without the clubs."

"Clubs?" I say.

"The kids around here all hang out a lot. They're more old-fashioned in that way. I suppose it's because they don't all have cell phones or iPads. The owners of The Bear will send some of the older kids around The Row, spreading the word about how fun it is in The Bear. They've been luring kids there for weeks."

"To do what?" I growl.

"Nothing ... yet. They give them candy and let them play video games. There's no way they're doing it innocently. Is there?" He shudders. "Worse, when the cops turn up and we know for a fact there are kids in there, they must hide them because the cops never find them. If they had, they would've shut the place down, right?"

"Right," I say, my blood turning cold. "This is beyond fucked."

"We're thinking a noise complaint is our only way," he says. "Get them shut down, sue them, but we can't afford?—"

"Don't mention money, sir," I cut in. "This has nothing to do with that. No matter what happens, I'm going to fight this. I'm going to fix this. You're a good man. You

won't let your boy get involved in this mess. Unfortunately, not everybody feels the same as you, but I'm going to remove the option. I'm going to get The Bear shut down. I swear."

Mr. Thompson flinches, then blinks at me in shock. It's clear he didn't expect such an emotional and heartfelt declaration, and honestly, I didn't plan to give one. With my timeline suddenly short, I can't let this happen. If I'm going to leave early, I want to have a legacy: something good, something decent.

"Bless you, Mr. Cross," he says, wiping his cheek as a tear falls. "God bless you."

I should tell him I can't make any promises. I should try to salvage this situation, but fuck that. If I'm going without a choice before I planned, I'm committing to this. I will make this little corner of the city better before I move on.

Once I finish with Mr. Thompson, I call my assistant with a list of tasks: research the owners of The Bear, delve into police records for any history of criminality, and check if there have been any previous noise complaints or any reports of violence.

If all else fails and these freaks keep trying to lure kids into their bar, and if the doc tells me my months have turned into weeks and then days and this issue still isn't settled, maybe I'll burn the place to the ground myself.

Sitting in my car after calling my assistant, I look down at my cell phone. I've opened a text to Lily. Usually, I think about things. If there's one thing that defines me and has defined my entire life, it's that. If it weren't for the doctor whispering months, not years, on repeat in my head, I'd pause and debate.

My heart is drumming too hard. This impulse is coming too strongly from desire : not logic, not evidence-backed decisions, just desire.

Lily, it's Landon. Let's grab a bite to eat sometime.

I send the message, then childishly shove my phone into the glove compartment and start the car. She's probably going to reject my ass, and I can't blame her. It'll most likely be weird for her to go on a date with somebody she thinks of as a childhood hero, and I can't blame her.

When I hear the vibrating sound from the glove compartment, I have to pull over and check my phone. If I don't, I'll probably crash the car, being distracted.

Sure, Landon. That's a good idea. If we combine our perspectives and knowledge bases, we'll be able to figure out what to do far easier. Two heads are better than one, and all that.

I laugh humorlessly, even bitterly. Of course, she thinks I'm talking about meeting for work. A young woman with her mind on her job, meeting her hero from when she was a kid, won't assume automatically that I want to sink my hands into her sweet hips. No, definitely not that.

CHAPTER SIX

LILY

M addie sits cross-legged on the beanbag chair, her fingers drumming on her knee. She's wearing denim shorts and a loose-fitting tank top that shows her athletic build. Her hair is a bright blond, styled perfectly in ringlets around her shoulders, a by-product of her job at the salon.

"I seriously think he was asking you on a date," she says.

I roll my eyes. "He just asked to grab a bite."

"Yeah, and then you replied, Sure, let's meet for work, and he hasn't responded in hours. He was probably over the moon, excited about finally meeting the lady of his dreams. Now he's in his own personal Shakespearean tragedy, probably talking to a skull, wondering why you rejected him."

"Ha ha," I grunt sarcastically. "I seriously doubt it, Maddie."

"Yeah? Why's that?"

Before I can answer, Mom pops her head into my bedroom door. Seeing Landon has reminded me of what she was like ten years ago, beanpole-thin with her hair falling out from self-abuse and stress. Now, she's back to her natural full figure and round, happy face.

“You girls want some cocoa?”

“Sure, Mom,” I say with a smile. “Thanks.”

Maddie gives me a look when Mom leaves us. “I take it you haven’t told her?”

I shrug. “What would the point be?”

Maddie shrugs. “I guess she might be interested. It’s a pretty cool coincidence. Did you tell Landon that he was the one who inspired you to want to go into social work?”

“Yeah, I did, but it came out super dorky. I’m pretty sure it made him uncomfortable. Do you think it was a mistake?”

“Well, if you’re not happy with how it came out, you’ve got another chance to discuss it ...”

“I don’t know,” I mutter. “He hasn’t texted back.”

“Because he’s heartbroken and offended.”

“Please, Maddie.”

She frowns at the change in my tone. “I’m sorry. I went too far.”

“It’s fine,” I mutter. “It’s just ...”

What if she’s right and, now that I’ve rejected him once, he wants nothing to do with me? Yet if that’s the case, I shouldn’t care. If he’s that shallow, it should mean nothing to me anyway.

“He was my hero,” I whisper. “For years in high school, when I was busting my ass to win that scholarship, I’d often think about him. In college, when I thought I would miss a deadline, I’d remember how in control he seemed when Mom had her meltdowns with him and was screaming at him, telling him he had to save her family. He was just ice-cold and calm.”

“He sounds like a good man,” Maddie says.

“He spends his life helping others for free. He’s probably the best man I’ve ever met.”

“Sounds like hus—Sorry.”

Sounds like husband material , she was about to say, clearly, but stops herself. I grin and playfully flip her the bird. We’re so close. We can do stuff like this, and know we could only ever mean it as a joke; she flips me off right back.

I laugh, rolling my eyes. “See, Maddie? This is why I love you so much. No matter what, you can always make me laugh.”

“That’s all you,” she replies. “If I had your job, I don’t think I’d ever smile again.”

“This is what I’m always arguing with Carter about. He thinks the misery of our work has to make us miserable. I think the more depressing one part of your life is, the harder you have to work to make the rest bright and happy. It should be a break , but he tortures himself with it.”

“He’s been doing it for almost twenty years,” Maddie says softly.

The unspoken message is clear. Maybe, once that much time has passed with me on the job, I’ll be just as bad as him. I shrug, picking up my cell phone and checking

it—still nothing. Maybe Maddie was right. Perhaps he meant this to be a date.

Or, more likely, he's busy and hasn't had time to respond yet.

That night, sleep comes far slower than it usually does. I roll from one side of the bed to the other, trying to resist the urge to check my cell phone. The whole reason I put my cell on silent was so that I wouldn't have to think about my unanswered message.

When I fail and recheck it—probably for the tenth time—and see no messages, I roll over, pushing my face into the pillow. My memory is alive with the fallout when I was a kid. I remember Mom rushing me to the closet, talking with more energy than I was accustomed to.

“I haven't been the best mom, but I will get us safe, baby. I'm going to get us away from him. I've found somebody who can help ...”

I remember sitting in my bedroom with the door cracked as Landon spoke to Dad calmly and fearlessly, a manner people rarely used with him. I remember watching Landon in awe, waiting for him to cringe away from Dad like everybody did, but Landon just watched him steadily.

Then my memory judders ahead to the more recent. I see Landon standing in his stylish suit earlier today. I remember the humanity in his eyes and how his arms bulged in his jacket, his powerful form like he was getting ready to burst from his clothes.

In my mind, he reaches out and brushes his hand down my arm. Then he takes my hand and pulls me toward him, his body trembling all over as he guides me right against him. He pushes his body against mine, letting me feel the solid outline of his manhood against my belly.

“You’re so fucking perfect,” I imagine him growling in that mature, husky voice. “You’re so sexy, so beautiful ...”

He’s even more handsome now than he was ten years ago. He didn’t have flecks of silver in his hair then. He didn’t have an aura of pure command and control.

Now, I imagine him lifting me up. We’re not outside anymore. The fantasy has taken us into a bright bedroom, the sunlight kissing off the silk sheets. He lays me on the sheets and leans down atop me, letting me drag my hands over his muscled back as I dig my fingernails into him.

“Forget about the rest of the world,” he says in my mind. “Forget about the past. Forget about how awkward this could be. Let’s live in the moment. Me. You. This heat. I know you feel it, too.”

I slide my hand between my legs, unable to ignore that hot feeling any longer. My clit aches as I stroke my fingers up and down and around, letting the sizzling the pleasure fuel the images dancing in my mind. I imagine Landon sliding his hand up my leg, staring down at me with that fixed expression, completely consumed with this moment, with me .

“You’re so, so perfect ...”

Something about imagining him calling me perfect heats me even more. Maybe it’s the fact I can imagine him talking about my body, yes, the lust I inspire in him, but also me , as a person, the path I’ve chosen. He’s my hero, my knight in shining armor.

My breath comes quicker as I rub my clit with more urgency. In the fantasy, he’s slipping his finger inside, groaning when he realizes how wet I am. I twitch my hips in time with the motion of his hand, chasing the pleasure, chasing the release. He

growls like he can sense how close I'm getting.

"Come, Lily," I imagine his snarling. "Come for me. Come hard. Come, come, come ..."

I bite down on the pillow, squeezing my legs together as the orgasm pulses. My head feels light as it thrums through me. I roll onto my back, gasping as I stare up at the ceiling, sure I can see stars glimmering across my vision—stars of lust, stars of hope, stars of impossibility.

Maybe Maddie thinks I'm silly for answering his text with something about work, but it makes the most sense. Even if my wild fantasy of Landon wanting me was true, would it be good for me? Would it be the best thing for my career? Would it be the best thing for my life?

Dad was almost twenty years older than Mom, and look how that worked out.

"I didn't stand a chance," she told me once. "He was so much more experienced. He'd seen so much more of the world ..."

After going into the bathroom to clean myself up, I promise to keep Mom's words, the importance of staying focused on my career, and the fact there are so many years between us at the forefront of my mind.

CHAPTER SEVEN

LANDON

“What’s all this?” Ethan asks the following day when he walks into the office to find me intently studying a noticeboard I’ve covered in printouts.

“The Bear is owned by a man who has never owned any previous businesses, has a clean police record, and has never been in any other trouble. Except he’s a childhood friend of Damon O’Connell’s.”

“Right ...” Ethan puts his briefcase on his desk and prepares for the day. “The Bear is that bar?”

“Damon O’Connell is the patriarch of an Irish mob family,” I go on.

“The mob?” Ethan says, his tone suddenly taut. “That pro bono work has mob connections?”

“Damon O’Connell,” I say, ignoring the disgust in his voice, “has been seen in public with two separate cartel leaders, both of whom have been known to dabble in using children either as drug mules or ... worse.”

I can’t say the second bit, and Ethan doesn’t need me to. He steeples his fingers and stares at me coldly across the office. “You realize we’ve got a day full of meetings booked from ...” He checks his gold watch. “Now until seven p.m.”

“Yeah,” I grunt. Not years, months . The doctor’s office called me again this morning, but I let it go to voicemail. I’ll have to face this at some point, just not right now. “So what?”

“So ... is your head in the game? I don’t need to use the M-word with you, do I?”

He says it in his usual bantering way. For a couple of years, that has been our catchphrase. Whenever we’re working late nights or frantically trying to get our next task done, we’ll look at each other and say, “Millions, brother, millions ...” That’s what we’re dealing with these days, but it seems so hollow suddenly. Or maybe it always did, and this news dragged my true feelings out. Still, I’ve got a responsibility. I can’t leave him in the lurch.

I force a smirk on my face. “Nah, no need. Let’s do this.”

He smiles, clearly relieved.

I take out my phone and shoot off a quick text. What are you doing tonight? I won’t be able to meet until around 8, but I have some news about The Bear.

Her reply comes quickly. That makes me even more confident she’s got no clue about the romantic angle—the desire that initially triggered my texting. If this were even a bit romantic, surely she’d wait before texting me back as petty revenge for me leaving her on read for so long.

Instead, she writes, News about The Bear? I can’t wait to hear it!

And I can’t wait to see her. I’ve got months, not years. Months to follow my desire. Months finally to seize what I want instead of thinking, “ There’s always tomorrow. ” Not for me anymore.

I can pick you up, I reply.

“You sure you’re good?” Ethan asks me toward the end of the day as we’re both getting ready to leave.

“I’m fine,” I grunt. “We did everything we needed to.”

“I know.” He sighs. “Two years we’ve been working on that settlement. We finally get the all-clear today and then nothing.”

The phrase all-clear brings to mind my other news.

“You know we can talk,” he says as he packs things into his briefcase. “If something’s wrong ...”

“I’m fine,” I tell him. “Really. Let me know if I seem off in meetings, and I’ll make adjustments.”

He sighs again. I’m purposefully looking down at my desk so he doesn’t read me, but I can feel him staring at me from across the office. I can sense all the things he probably wants to say. I’m not usually the most cheerful guy around, but I’m never a buzzkill. I’m always able to hide any bad moods which grip me.

“Okay, brother,” he says. “Well ... see you tomorrow.”

Walking out to the parking lot, I listen to my latest voicemail. “Mr. Cross, it’s of the utmost importance that we schedule this specialist appointment as soon as possible.”

I end the voicemail, gritting my teeth. I don’t want to learn all the different ways my body has turned against me. I don’t want to hear the case the cancer is making against my life. Tomorrow, I promise myself. I’ll call and make arrangements tomorrow, do

the mature thing, and make a reasonable choice.

But now, I want to see Lily.

As I drive through the city, I don't overthink this desire. It's difficult to remember her as the small, shy girl she was anyway. Mostly, I can recall the desperate look in her eyes, the way she stared at me with saucer-wide eyes as if I was the only person who could save her. She had that glint of determination even back then.

I pull up outside her new apartment building in a superior area of the city. After shooting her a text letting her know I'm here, I lean back and compose myself. I have to remember that this is a business meeting, sharing info. Two warriors in the fight against the darkness this city can inflict on people.

When I spot her walking across the street, an alarm goes off in my head. Now-or-never-now-or-never . I push the thought as far down as I can get it. It's that damn C-word. It's that damn doctor. He has me feeling on edge, like I have to act now. Yet even if I did, where would it lead? What would it mean? So much for not overthinking.

I climb out of the car and walk to the passenger side, trying not to take too much notice of her outfit. She's wearing a casual dress with a light sweater over her shoulders. Her hair is down today, framing her face in an endearing, beautiful, impossible-not-to-note way.

"Thank you," she murmurs when I open the door for her.

"No problem ..."

As I return to the driver's seat, I try not to notice her bare legs, the thickness, how perfect they look. I want to grab them, massage them slowly, and make her feel every

subtle movement until she's gasping and moaning right on the edge of a release.

"It's not far," I tell her. "I've got my files in the back."

I'm looking at the road, so it's difficult to be sure, but I think I see her shoulders slump out of the corner of my eye, almost like she's disappointed I'm making this about work right away. "Oh ... good."

"How did your mom react when you told her you'd run into me?"

"I didn't," Lily murmurs. "Honestly, she hates talking about before she got clean. I think she feels as if everything was her fault. It doesn't matter if I tell her she's wrong. She was a good mom despite everything. He was the problem."

"That's a mature perspective," I say, "but I shouldn't be surprised. You thought the same back then. You were determined to stay with your mom."

"I knew she was a good person in a bad place, that's all."

"That's one hell of an insight for a girl in your spot," I tell her.

"Yeah, well, maybe I've always been a genius." She laughs, then says, "That was a joke, but clearly not very funny."

She's talking about the fact I didn't laugh. As we stop at a red light, I turn to her with a smirk. Her hands are resting on her legs, almost like she's trying to draw attention to her flawless shape.

"Maybe I don't see it as a joke."

She rolls her eyes. "So I'm a genius, then, am I, Mr. Cross?"

“See, you remembered my surname. You must have a next-level intellect.”

“Ha ha ,” she says, slapping my arm. She quickly snatches her hand back when we make contact, and then the light changes, so I’m forced to focus on the road.

The moment seems to hold more meaning. The warmth and sensation of her touch lingers on my arm, sizzling through my body. Months, not years ... “Months” is so vague. It could be as few as two. I may only have sixty days to take the chances I never took before, to stop being so reserved and cautious, always making intelligent decisions, weighing the pros and cons.

“Have you had a busy day?” she asks.

“Yeah, meetings, meetings, and more meetings.”

“It must be tough working with so many depressing cases, huh?”

I glance at her when I hear the hitch in her voice. She looks back at me with compassion in her eyes, with true meaning in her expression. That’s when it hits me. She thinks I do this charity-style work all the time. She thinks it’s my main job. I hope I’ve got it wrong, but I don’t think I have. Even worse, I don’t correct her.

“Coming from you, that means a lot,” I say.

“I argue with my boss about this,” she replies. “I always tell him we shouldn’t have to be miserable. If we build a wall between work and our home life, we should be able to stay sane. He thinks I’m just green.”

“Hmm,” I mutter.

“What do you think?” She’s so bubbly, so animated. It’s so damn attractive. I think I

finally understand when people describe others as magnetic .

“I think it can wear on a person,” I say. “Sometimes, a person has to choose their own sanity.” That’s the excuse I’ve given myself repeatedly for letting the pro bono work slide. “It also depends on the person. Not everybody is built like you.”

“Like me?”

“Naturally optimistic. With a natural desire to do right. Forgiving. Caring. Determined.”

I need to chill. Months, not years ...

“You can tell all that about me, can you?”

“I saw it ten years ago, Lily,” I say. “Now, I can just see that nothing’s changed.”

Her smile is all the reward a man could ever want. She turns away, looking out the window, almost embarrassed by the praise. “Yeah, yeah ...”

“No need to act surprised. You must hear that all the time.”

“I just try to focus on one task, then the next, then the next. Any big-picture stuff always makes my head spin.”

“Your boyfriend probably lets you know plenty.” I throw the word “boyfriend” out before I can think twice about it.

“Oh, boyfriend? No time for that.”

I nod. “Yeah, you must be really busy.”

“Beyond busy. I’ve got no time for boyfriends or to even think about boyfriends.”

This is where I should receive her hint—well, not even a hint —loud and clear, but I don’t. All I can think of is that our lives are short. If we don’t think we have time for something or somebody, we should make time.

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CHAPTER EIGHT

LILY

“Damon O’Connell,” I repeat, looking down at the photo of the red-haired man wearing a checkered shirt. “So, he’s the person who owns the bar?”

“Basically, yes,” Landon replies. “Technically, it’s his childhood friend, but yeah, it might as well be Damon.”

We’re sitting in the corner booth of a midscale restaurant. It’s a family-friendly place, further convincing me he didn’t intend this to be romantic. The only slipup I made was when I playfully touched his arm. I never do things like that.

“If this isn’t romantic,” Maddie whispers in my mind, “why did he ask if you have a boyfriend?”

I can’t let myself think about that. It could lead to silly, delusional fantasies. As the host leads us to our table, I spot three women checking Landon out. Two of them do it subtly, at least, but the third twists around in her chair so she can get a better look at him. He has serious options.

“So that bar is an Irish mob place when you clear away all the other details? That’s what it is, essentially?”

He nods, looking down at me with those soulful, serious eyes. I never understood when people say they got lost in their lover’s eyes. Yet with Landon, I can imagine

it—just staring, disappearing, forgetting.

“Yeah, and if the parents’ reports are true, then clearly, these bastards have a reason for wanting to make the kids comfortable there. Once they’ve attracted enough ...” He shudders, biting down. “If there were any real justice, I’d be able to burn the place down right now and face no consequences.”

“We have to work inside the system. Otherwise, it’s chaos.”

“Wise words,” he says with dark sarcasm.

“They’re your words,” I say.

“Mine?” he says huskily, moving his finger around the edge of his glass.

“When I was a kid, that’s what you told me. I wished something bad on Dad. That’s what you said: We have to work inside the system. It stuck with me.”

It did more than stick with me. It fueled me to want to become a social worker. It made me believe, on a deep and fundamental level, that I could make the world a better place by participating in society.

“I used to be very optimistic, didn’t I?”

“You must still be. Otherwise, why do any of this?”

He stares at me for a few moments. He looks almost pissed. It’s like he’s emanating resentment. “This is the first pro bono case I’ve worked on in almost five years,” he says.

“Oh,” I mutter, my head spinning unfairly. I just assumed he did this often. “Why?”

“Why?” he repeats, drumming his fingers on the table. “Why? My buddy and I started a divorce agency. I’ve been busy.”

“Divorce?” I say in shock.

I need to get a handle on my outraged, surprised, and naïve tone of voice. I’m speaking as though he is obligated always to be the same because I saw him as my knight as a kid. I’m talking like a mad woman, essentially.

“I know. It’s not exactly selfless. We saw a gap in the market. We had some contacts, and we took our chance. Now, we’re the top agency in the city. We deal with some of the richest and most well-known cases.”

“It’s an honest living,” I mutter.

He snorts. “Come on. Be honest.”

“What?”

He tilts his head at me as if it’s obvious. “You’re not very good at hiding what you’re thinking ...”

“Do we have any other information on the bar? Any known visitors or anything that might be useful.”

“Lily.”

It’s just my name, but he says it in a demanding way, a way that jolts me from my civilized attempt to smooth over the awkwardness. I meet his gaze again, finding him staring at me with an unflinching expression.

“Why does what I think matter?”

“Because it does,” he grunts. “So let’s hear it.”

“What I think is that if we can stop The Bear from ruining this neighborhood, we’ll be doing a good thing.”

“Hmm, sure,” he says, “but that’s not all you’re thinking.”

I fold my arms, staring up at him. I have tried to be civilized. Is it my fault if he’s forcing me to reveal the truth? Maybe this will be for the best in a messed-up way. It’ll create a rift between us. It can kill this crush of mine once and for all.

“Okay, fine ... I thought you would’ve turned your passion for doing the right thing into your job. It never occurred to me you’d do anything else. That you’re a divorce lawyer seems completely at odds with the person I knew or thought I knew when I was a kid. I know how naive that sounds. Don’t worry; people often tell me my head is in the clouds.”

He smirks. “Not this person. I think you’re right.”

“If I’m right, then why ...”

“Why work as a divorce lawyer?” When I nod, he says, “Because I’ve made every decision in my life based on logic. When I was a kid, I wanted to be a cop, not a lawyer, but I had a logical discussion with my father, and we realized that law school would be the better option. As a young man, I logically had the freedom to experiment with various types of work, but soon, I had to commit. So, I chose the logical option of making the best income and involving the least danger. The least stress. The best return on my effort.”

He's speaking ruefully, staring off into space as though reliving every decision that's led here.

"I didn't mean to judge," I say.

"I asked," he replies. "I'm glad you told me the truth."

"Why the change if it's been so long since pro bono work? Why this case?"

He stares meaningfully at me. His smolder contains so much. It's like there are whole essays and explanations he wants to offer me. Then he picks up his glass and takes a sip.

"I searched online on the message board I used back in the day. This seemed like a worthy case. I hate bastards who hurt kids."

"But why did you suddenly get the urge to do pro bono work?"

"Why not?" He shrugs, looking down at the table. I'm almost sure he's hiding something. "Sometimes, I guess, a man just gets the urge to do the right thing."

"Yeah, I get that. When I talked to that mom, she was clearly on something. Now that she's denied letting her kid go to the bar, there's not much we can do except wait for more complaints. I probably won't even be allowed back there until then."

"But you want to help," he says.

"Of course."

"Then we should keep working together. Or, at least, I can keep you in the loop."

“I can help ,” I say. “Like you said. I don’t want just to be kept in the loop. Anything I can do, I’ll do.”

“I’m still figuring out what anybody can do,” he replies. “These bastards are being clever about hiding the kids when the cops come. Either that or the cops are in on it, but let’s assume they’re not. That means these bastards have trained the kids and have scared them into keeping quiet. This means they’ll probably go quietly when the mob wants to act on them, whatever that means.”

“It can’t end well,” I mutter, an icy shiver moving through me. “Those poor kids. Why can’t people just leave kids alone? That’s all I’ve ever wanted. If you have to be evil, sadistic, fine, but not with kids.”

“I know.” He hesitates, then stands up. “Excuse me for a moment.”

As he walks across the restaurant, I can’t resist the urge to watch him or notice the way other women turn to look at him. It’s like they can’t help it, as if there’s some force tugging their gazes in his direction. Maybe it’s how he has his shirt rolled up, showing thick, muscled forearms, demonstrating that despite his white-collar work, he’s more than capable with his hands.

Or maybe I’m projecting my fantasies on the whole restaurant.

CHAPTER NINE

LANDON

I n the bathroom, I splash cold water on my face, hoping to jolt some sanity back into my system. When Lily talked passionately about protecting kids, all I wanted to do was lean over, grab her, and kiss her. The urge is still there now. I splash more water on my face.

Now or never ... Months, not years ...

She looked so damn disappointed when I told her I'm a divorce lawyer. I never thought one look from a woman could have me rethinking all my life's choices, but Lily did it.

Finally, I leave the bathroom, part of me hoping in some twisted way that she's run out on me. Maybe she's sensed this uncharacteristic attraction in me. Perhaps she can feel how badly I want her on a physical level and how interested I am in every other way, too.

"So, what else about The Bear?" she murmurs, offering me a tight smile when I sit down.

"So far, the mob connection is all I have," I reply. "It hasn't brought me any closer to being able to stop this crap. If anything, it's more like a warning. I should stop."

"Are you going to?" she asks. "It would be the logical thing to do, right?"

It's the word I used with her to describe the path my life has taken. That was the truth. Dad's always been logical, and I followed him without thinking. Also, the extra money from my business has gone to charity. Logic, logic, logic ...

"Fuck no," I say, causing her to smile brightly. It feels like a gift. "Maybe they've got the law in their pocket. Maybe it's dangerous, but I've spent too many years sleepwalking through life. Not anymore."

"A-freaking-men!" she beams, picking up her glass and raising it on a toast.

I raise mine, too.

Soon, it's time to leave. I've given her all the information about The Bear that I can. We walk together across the lot toward my car. Seeing it through her eyes, the sleek vehicle with tinted windows and custom silver rims seems gaudy, almost offensive. She's struggling to help families, and here I am, decked out like a pimp.

She says nothing when I hold the door open for her. I can feel the heat of her body. It's like some part of her is calling to me, tempting me. That sounds like voodoo crap— some part of her . However, I feel it all the same. Maybe it's how suddenly real and meaningful life seems.

"What are you thinking about?" she asks after a few minutes without talking.

I can't tell her the truth. I can't tell that all I can image is what it would be like to lean into her, those moments before the kiss when it's all anticipation and heat. I can't tell her I was imagining squeezing her bare leg, watching her thick creaminess turn red with lust for me.

"The future," I say. The last thing I should think of since there's only one way it ends now. "And the past, and how, often, people take time for granted. It should sound

very intellectual and insightful, but it's just a cliché."

"Clichés exist for a reason," she says softly. "Often, they're true."

Yeah, like the cliché of a man sleepwalking through life with no idea what he's missing until a medical emergency finally snaps him back to reality.

"I didn't realize it when I was young, even after Charley."

"Charley?" she asks.

"My older brother. He died of a sudden heart attack five years ago."

"I'm so sorry, Landon."

"It's fine. No, it's not fine, but I've processed and dealt with it. Even that didn't make me realize how precious time truly is. It should have, but it didn't."

I'm sure she can sense there's something I want to say or do. Every time I glance at her, she's got a patient look on her face that makes me want to reveal my news suddenly. It's proof of what an effective social worker she will be. No, she is because, internship or not, she's already doing the job.

"Time is precious," she murmurs, clearly waiting for me to go on.

Instead, I keep driving. She sighs softly and looks out the window. I need to give myself time to process how I feel about this woman and pull the experience of seeing her again apart so that I can analyze the pieces. How much has changed because of her, and how much has changed because of the cancer?

The question, even asked silently to myself, seems gross and unfair to Lily, as if her

personality isn't enough, as if this hunger could be due to a health scare. Still, knowing I've only got a little while left ...

Pulling up outside her apartment, I turn, draping my arm over the back of her chair. She sits forward, looking up at me. I swear, her eyes are actually sparkling, giving her an angelic look.

"Thanks for the drink," she murmurs.

Stop , I tell myself. Think .

Yet I do neither. Instead, I reach forward and brush strands of hair from her face. Her mouth falls open. My heart is pounding harder than it has in years as I lean down toward her.

"Lily," I whisper. Months, not years, months, not ...

"What are you doing?" She leans back so quickly that the back of her head hits the window. "Was this a date?"

"I ..." I stop. "You're so beautiful."

"I don't—" She cuts herself off, shaking her head. "I can't ..."

I quickly lean away. She looks so young, her confused tone adding to the effect. No, not effect . She is almost twenty years younger than me. She might seem mature, but she has nearly half the life experience.

"I'm sorry," I say.

"Don't apologize ," she hisses, almost as if the apology, not the near kiss itself, is the

worst part.

I open my mouth to reply—though I’m not sure what I will say—but she pushes the door open and climbs out before I can. She hurries across the street, not looking back, leaving me thinking maybe it’s for the best. Not feeling that ... The only feeling I have is roaring at me to go after her.

Instead, I use... logic. I watch her leave. She wasn’t prepared for that. She thought she was reconnecting with a kind older man from her youth, not somebody with end-of-life thoughts messing with his head.

I sit in the car across the street for far too long. Minutes pass with me sitting here, watching the apartment, as though she’s going to emerge and tell me she’s realized her mistake. “I want you just like you want me ...”

During the ride back, I try to reason it out. I’ve gone years feeling no attraction to anybody. Even when I was younger and did have girlfriends, it was never like this. There was never this urgency, this go now feeling. What’s more likely? Is Lily the most remarkable woman I’ve ever met, or am I going crazy because of the diagnosis?

I know it’s more likely to be the latter, but the former feels so undeniable. She seems so special, so interesting. I don’t want to get carried away, but I can’t put this down to just the illness.

Maybe it’s time to speak with somebody who can give me perspective. I call Ethan.

“Yo,” he says, answering. “Late call ... is something wrong?”

“I need to explain some stuff to you,” I say. “I need you to agree not to ask any questions or make any comments until I finish. It’s going to be tough, E.”

“Okay ...”

“I mean it,” I growl. “Let me lay out all the evidence. Let me present the case. Then make your judgment.”

“Okay, Landon. Shit. This must be serious.”

To Ethan’s credit, he doesn’t interrupt me as I start to explain. He lets me tell him about the doctor, then running into Lily, then the not-really-a-date, and the near kiss.

When I’m done, he says, “You need to see that oncologist. The rest of this matters. I’m not saying it doesn’t, but that is the number one priority.”

“I know,” I grunt.

“Do you, Landon?” he says in an angry tone. “Then stop dodging your doctor’s calls. That needed to be arranged the second you got your first diagnosis.”

“I know,” I repeat, quieter this time.

“I can come with you,” he replies. “I know you don’t like doctors.”

“I’ve never said that.”

“You’ve never needed to,” he says. “Remember when you had that throat infection? You couldn’t speak, looked half dead, and you still wouldn’t go in. Hell, I’m surprised you even went in for this. The symptoms must’ve been a bitch.”

“It was for my parents,” I admit. “Ever since Charley, I’ve been getting health checks twice a year. They’ve all been A-OK until now.”

“That makes more sense,” he murmurs. “So you’ll call your doctor?”

“Yes.”

“I mean it, brother. Tomorrow, first thing. I’m going to be bugging you about this. You need a plan of attack.”

“He said months ,” I tell Ethan. “ Months, not years ... All that’s left is working out how uncomfortable these last few months will be.”

“Then face it,” Ethan growls. “If the truth is ugly, look at it. You owe it to yourself, your parents, and hell, to me—to everybody in your life.”

“I’ll call them tomorrow,” I say, “but I wanted advice about the other thing, too.”

“About your crush?”

I laugh with a heavy sense of irony. “Yeah, if you want to call it that. Makes me sound like a kid, but still ...”

“She didn’t seem interested?”

“She backed off pretty fast when I tried to kiss her.”

“Crap, I don’t know.” Ethan sounds genuinely lost, something rare for him. “You know who you’re asking, right?”

I have to laugh again. Ethan isn’t exactly the serious relationship type. “Yeah, but the fact is, E, you’re the best friend I’ve got.”

“You know me. I’m all about the apps. I have been ever since they came out. By the

time I try to kiss a woman, I normally know whether she's interested. That's why I'm always telling your old-fashioned ass to get on them, too."

"I hate those goddamn things. They take all the humanity out of it."

"No offense, but it's not like you've been going the in-person route instead."

He's right, but I don't care. Usually, I can ignore stuff like that, but it's different with Lily. Or is it the illness? No, that feels false, unfair to her somehow. "I'm busy. Working."

"Amen to that," he says.

"Listen, I gotta go."

I hang up. Ever since this crap with the doctor, everything feels more important. As I drive, my memories skip back to those early days when Dad was building his business. Charley and I were watching and listening more than they ever knew. There was always that voice in my head saying our lives could fall apart. Bills were going to drag us down.

So, I had to use logic. Make money. Maybe, somewhere along the way, I forgot who I was.

CHAPTER TEN

LILY

“Should we get a dog?” Mom muses, looking out the front window of our first-floor apartment. There’s a park across the street, not precisely the most upscale or well-maintained, but it’s much better than the scenes we used to experience. Mom likes to look at it. It reminds her of how far we’ve come.

I look up, jolted from my thoughts. The date from last night—meeting or the near kiss—keeps replaying in my head. I should be thinking about searching for this Damon character somehow, trying to figure out how to make this situation okay.

“Oh, that’s funny,” Mom murmurs.

“I don’t think our apartment allows dogs, Mom.”

“Oh, no, look, that man.”

I join her at the window. I always feel a warm swell of happiness when I see how full-bodied she’s become since getting clean. She was always so sinewy before, her shape sculpted by her need, but not anymore.

Looking across the street, I see a tall man leaning against the swing in the park. He’s wearing a muddy, off-green long coat that looks almost like a costume. His hair is dark red, but it’s not easy to be sure from here.

“I think he’s staring at us,” Mom says.

“He’s probably just waiting for someone.”

An icy shiver runs over me all the same. It is like he’s looking. It’s in his posture and how everything is directed toward us. I get the distinct feeling of something ugly slithering through me. It’s a childhood memory punch right to the gut. In our lives before, there would always be creeps hanging around.

“Lily,” Mom says, voice tight with panic.

My heartbeat flutters faster. He’s swaggering across the street. A gasp escapes me when he gets even closer. It’s the red-haired man from the photograph last night. He has a fresh scar on his chin like a small piece of him chipped away, but it’s definitely him.

“Don’t be rude,” he says when Mom moves to close the window.

Mom stops, but I reach past her, about to grab the handle. He casually opens his jacket, flashing the handle of a pistol. My hand freezes.

“Don’t make me be rude, either, darling,” he says, with a slight Irish lilt. “I’m merely here to have a discussion with you. I don’t see anything uncivilized in that.”

“We want nothing to do with you ... Damon.”

He flashes a smile, which makes me feel like I’ve just lost a game I didn’t even know I was playing. “You’ve just disproved your point there, missy. If you want nothing to do with me, you wouldn’t know my name now, would you?”

“Who are you?” Mom hisses. “My daughter has done nothing wrong!”

“Easy there. I don’t want to hurt anyone. I only want to talk. Ma’am, why don’t you give me and Lily here a moment?”

He phrases it like a question, but his tone makes it something else. He stares right at me, an obvious challenge in his expression. He’s daring me to tell him no. He’s daring me to escalate.

“It’s okay, Mom,” I say, touching her arm supportively. “It’s a work thing. I know how it seems.”

She turns, lowering her voice. “Should I call 911?”

I shake my head, thinking of what I learned at The Row; the police often ignore things where Damon and his cronies are concerned. “Just let me speak with him,” I say.

“I’m staying right over there .”

“Look,” Damon says, holding his hands up. “Nice and civilized, I said, remember?” He leans forward, almost like he’s about to pop his head through the window and into the apartment. “You need to back off, little lady. There’s no reason to pay more attention to this job than the other twenty you’ve got on your desk. You need to listen and listen good. I’m not trying to get anything from you. I have no desire to hurt you, steal from you, or do anything wrong. I’m asking you to tell your boss this case is a no-go, then move on to another. You’ve got more cases, right? Right ?”

He snaps impatiently at the end. I’ve been watching, adrenalin pumping in me, but it has nowhere to go. “Yes, lots.”

“Well, there you go.”

“That doesn’t make what you’re doing right.”

The anger that grips him is terrifying. It moves across his features visibly. It’s like a monster in him is trying to tear its way out. “I’ve been very polite and clear, haven’t I? You’re not confused by what I’m telling you.”

“I understand what you’ve said,” I tell him.

He makes a tsk noise. “Don’t get cute with me, darling. I’ve come down here personally as a courtesy. How often do you imagine a man like me handles these matters personally? The fact is, in my world at least, I’m considered something of a humanitarian.”

I instinctively laugh—big mistake. His hand flies to his hip. My laughter dies. I need to be smarter about this. It would be a stupid thing to make him angry.

“What’s funny about that?” he asks.

“Nothing.”

“It’s the truth,” he goes on. “I’ve got friends who would’ve preferred to come down here and do, let’s say, interesting things to you and your mother, but I’m old school. I don’t like to exacerbate things. You know what exacerbate means?”

“To make things worse.”

“You really are a smart cookie, Lily. I’m sure I’m never going to see you again.”

He turns and swaggers away. Only when he’s out of sight does the full effect of what just happened hit me. I fall against the kitchen counter and slide down to the cold floor, my entire body shuddering as I relive the moments he flashed the gun, that

monster-like rage on his face.

“Lily,” Mom moans, sitting right on the floor with me and bringing me into her arms.

“You poor thing. You brave girl. Who was that?”

“I’m investigating this case at work that involves this bar,” I say. “And he-he-he ...”

I can’t even finish the sentence. Tears come instead, choking me and making me feel weak. This isn’t the sort of person I usually am at work. I harden myself, but work stuff has never been this dangerous. It’s never visited me at home before.

“What did he want?” Mom asks, desperate to get through to me any way she can.

“For me to let him lure more kids into his bar. To let him get as many as possible under his spell before ...”

“Before what?”

I shake my head. She doesn’t need to know all the evil details. She doesn’t need to visualize all the sickness that will take hold of so many people’s lives if this freak is allowed to continue down his dark path. But realistically, can I keep going after him now?

“I need to call my boss,” I say.

“Let me help,” Mom says, grabbing my arm and helping me to stand.

The tears have dried. My cheeks feel tight from the crying. I grab my cell phone and call Carter Weston. He answers after a few rings, the sounds of a bar in the background. I know it’s where he spends a lot of his time when not working. He’ll even go in the mornings—not to drink, he says—but because he likes the noise of

them setting up. “It blocks out the demons ...”

“Yeah?” he says.

“Damon O’Connell just visited me.”

“Who?”

I quickly explain about the bar and the whole situation.

Carter sighs heavily. “He’s right. We’ve got twenty other cases that could use your attention.”

“What?” I yell, almost adding the fuck. “So you think we should just abandon those kids?”

“Kids are being hurt in unimaginable and unspeakable ways all over this city, Lily. What would you have me do? Solve every damn problem? Our job means accepting that we can’t help everyone. The case has gotten dangerous; it’s interfered with your home life. That means we drop it to the bottom of the caseload.”

“But—”

“Or we could report the incident,” Carter growls. “Then the bosses will ask why he visited your apartment, and then I’ll have to tell them you were there alone. That means both our asses. You know you’re not supposed to be handling this crap alone.”

“I know, but?—”

“There are no buts,” he snaps. “Do you think I’m happy about this? Don’t you think I’d help every kid in this city if I could? But we can’t. Not even close. Forget about

this case.”

When he hangs up, I jump to my feet and almost throw my phone at my bedroom wall. My head feels cloudy with the unacceptable state of it all. So scumbags can threaten people, use kids, intimidate parents, and there’s nothing we can do about it because he flashed a gun. It’s a joke.

I don’t throw my cell phone, getting a grip at the last moment. Instead, I scroll to Landon’s number. He probably needs to know what’s happening. After last night, calling him feels difficult, like there’s this mental block inside me.

Why did I stop him from kissing me? Why didn’t I just let it happen?

He’s tall, handsome, and so damn intense, but this isn’t about that.

“Should I make us some coffee?” Mom asks, knocking on my bedroom door.

“Uh, yeah,” I say, deciding to text Landon instead. Something about hearing his voice makes me feel ... That’s it. It makes me feel . I don’t know how to handle that. I never have.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

LANDON

“ N o, sir, Doctor Coleman, our most senior oncologist, is on a short break. She’ll be back next week.”

I sit at my desk, drumming my fingers against it, tapping my foot, feeling like I want to be anywhere else and doing anything else except having this conversation. There’s too much riding on it. It’s not logical to face something like this. I can’t neatly put it on a list. Handle death ...

“Well, I need the best,” I say, knowing I sound like an ass, knowing I’m stalling.

“With all due respect, I think the sooner we book this follow-up?—”

“With all due respect to you, if Doctor Coleman is the best, then I want her. That’s it. Thank you.”

I hang up, actually panting as if I’ve just gone for a run. My head is spinning. My thoughts are crashing like a car collision on repeat. Months, not years ...

Standing up from my desk, I pace the room, looking over at the picture of Damon. He’s sometimes called Damon the Demon on the streets, which is probably a nickname the bastard gave himself. My phone vibrates. I want to ignore it. It’s probably the doctor’s office demanding that I book the appointment, Doctor Coleman or no Doctor Coleman, but it’s Lily.

After I made an ass of myself last night, I didn't expect her to reach out. The world suddenly doesn't seem as dark until I begin reading her text. Damon came to her house and threatened her.

When I call Lily, she rejects it. I'm with my mom.

Are you working today?

Yeah.

Let me give you a ride.

I wait outside her apartment building, looking between her front window and the park. To think that Damon was leaning against that swing, taunting them from across the street, intimidating them. I want to crush his sneering goddamn face in. Who does he think he is?

Taking out my phone, I check my messages, even if I only checked them a few minutes ago. After I offered her a ride, Lily replied, Uh, sure.

Since it's a text, there's no reason for her to include the uh . Maybe I'm looking too much into it, but it's almost like she wants to make me aware that she feels awkward. Why wouldn't she? An older man decided randomly to attempt a kiss after an evening of work. I definitely misjudged. I won't make that mistake again.

Somehow, it's easy to tell myself that before I see her. She walks from her apartment in a tight-fitting black shirt that shows those thick, delicious-as-fuck hips. Her shirt doesn't show any cleavage, but it outlines her shapeliness. Mostly, though, it's the determination on her face as she strides toward me.

She opens the door and climbs in, shooting me a quick look before looking out the

window. “Hey.”

Her perfume is intense. Or maybe it’s just Lily. Months, not years ... I want to reach over and take her hand. Obviously, I’m a madman.

“You’ve had one hell of a morning,” I say as I pull away.

“Yeah.” She intertwines her hands, obviously shaken by the experience. I don’t want to send the wrong message if I offer her comfort. What am I even thinking? I’m going to be gone in not too long. There’s no future for me. “Landon?”

“I’m sorry?” I say, realizing she’s been speaking. I’m a prick. I offered her a ride so we could talk, and here I am, zoning out and thinking about things I shouldn’t when I should be trying to find a way to help her.

“I said, what do you think I should do? Carter thinks I should forget about it.”

“Carter?” I say, the name bringing up memories I’d rather not think about.

“Carter Weston, my boss.”

“Ah,” I say, wondering if I should tell her. It is a surprisingly small city. Or maybe that’s just the world of people who think they’ll make a difference like I once did.

“I’m sorry, Lily, but he’s right.”

“You can’t agree with him. Damon can’t get away with this!” she says emphatically.

“ You need to stop looking into this,” I say. “I won’t let this bastard do a damn thing. I’m going to keep working like I used to before I forgot who the fuck I was. That was before I forgot that helping people was better than sitting on the sidelines and complaining while getting rich from other people’s misery.”

I come to a hard stop at the red light, causing us both to jolt forward. Without thinking, I reach across and touch Lily's hand. It's nothing huge. Just a brush as I say, "I'm sorry."

Then, I quickly move my hand away. There's an electricity to her touch that makes me curious—hungry.

"It's okay ..." She pauses, then asks, "Are you okay, Landon?"

"I'm fine," I grunt.

"It just seems like there's a lot of ... tension going on?" She glances at me, seeming so shy I want to yell. I don't want her to feel shy with me. "Has something happened?"

"No," I growl, thinking months, not years ... "It's just this city, Lily. It's just people and the sick stuff they do—the sick world we live in. Like Damon, swaggering up and threatening you. Who the fuck does he think he is?"

I can't stand to think about it. Lily's trying to live her life, trying to do the good thing, after a tough beginning with an asshole dad and an addicted mom. She's made something of herself, and now this monster wants to take it away. All because she's a good, selfless person.

When she touches my hand, a sliver of the darkness shifts. "Landon, the light."

I pull away, her touch lingering on my hand.

"Forget about this case," I repeat, so she understands.

"I can't do that," she says quietly.

“If you can’t forget, let it go, at least. You have to be safe. You won’t be able to help anyone if ...”

“If what? If Damon blows my brains out?”

“Don’t say that, Lily,” I snap.

She flinches. I keep watching the road. I don’t want to make her flinch. Just the thought of something like that happening to her is enough to send me into a frenzy.

“I’m sorry,” she murmurs.

“It’s fine. I need to focus on this. I won’t be able to do that if I’m worrying about you getting yourself hurt.”

“Isn’t that what you do, Landon? Worry about me?”

I look over. I can’t stop myself from smiling. For a moment, I remember her as a kid, a scared little girl, but always with that spark in her eye, always like she wanted to do better. It’s hard to connect the two when I see the woman before me now. She’s all heat, all sass, curves, tempting lips, and ...

I look away.

She lets out a trembling breath that makes me wonder if she felt everything I did at that moment. This whole “being close to death” thing makes everything seem more significant, though, so maybe not.

“I don’t know how I can just ignore this,” she says.

“It’s easy. Focus on another kid who needs your help. You’re not abandoning them,

Lily. I'm going to handle this."

"But ..."

"Say it," I tell her.

"Are you?" she asks as we glide through traffic. "I don't want to offend you, but you've worked as a divorce lawyer for years, right? And you haven't done any more of this Good Samaritan stuff?"

"What's your point?" I say coldly.

"I don't know."

"You do," I say. "You just don't want to offend me. Trust me, it'll take more than this. Tell me, Lily."

"What if you get a big case at work or something? What if you can't stay on this? What if you lose interest?"

"I won't be able to lose interest in this," I growl, realizing we're pulling up outside her work far too soon as if the city has conspired to get us here as quickly as possible. Usually, the traffic is terrible, but not today. Maybe I'm feeling morbid, but the whole damn world's a joke. "How could I? How could you even think of me losing interest ? No man could look away from this sort of thing."

"Hmm," she murmurs.

"What's hmm ?" I ask.

She looks up at me bravely, her eyes full of sass. Or maybe my thinking of it as sass

is undervaluing it. She looks fierce and ready. She looks like a woman who will put her case across and doesn't care what anyone else says. I see her suddenly as a lawyer or the operator of an entire social work division. She's going places.

"Why are you looking at me like that?" she says brusquely.

"Like what?"

She bites her lip. Fuck . There's nothing staged or rehearsed about it. There's something so hot about how natural it is. "It doesn't matter."

It unquestionably does, but she doesn't want to speak about it. "What were you going to say?" I ask.

She reaches for the door handle. "It doesn't—"

"Yes, it does," I growl. "It does matter."

She flinches again. I need to calm the hell down. It's like death is hovering over my shoulder. It's making me so tense.

"You said you can't lose interest. The thing is, stuff like this has been happening since you stopped helping, Landon. It's not like it just stopped. You worked all those years as a divorce lawyer. There was still stuff going on. There were still little girls with psychos for dads and junkies for moms. They're still waiting for their knight in shining armor."

Am I the knight she's talking about?

"It didn't stop," she goes on.

She angrily pushes the door handle. I watch her go, thinking about running after her and grabbing her arm. It's the sort of impulsive thing a logical man would never do. A natural block in me forever prevents me from overstepping the line like that, but not anymore.

I'm out of the car suddenly, walking after her, taking long strides to catch up with her. She gasps when I take her elbow and turn her toward me. She stares with almost fascinated eyes. She looks curious, too, but something's holding her back. Maybe the fact we're standing outside her workplace.

"What are you doing?" she hisses.

"I'm not the jackass you think I am," I tell her gruffly. "I'm not some selfish asshole."

"I didn't say you were," she says. "Landon, please ...". She gestures at her building.

"I just ... need you to know that."

I turn away, feeling lame and ineffective. I don't even know what I was trying to do there. She's right. There's no way around it. I stopped helping because I stopped caring. Maybe I stopped believing a man like me could feel anything other than cold, hard facts. Perhaps it has something to do with my childhood. I don't know, and I don't care.

I know one thing. I'm not the same now, which has everything to do with Lily.

CHAPTER TWELVE

LILY

I hurry into the building, his touch lingering on my arm like a warm phantom kiss. He was staring down at me like he was going to kiss me again. I swear, the silver in his hair was glistening, shining , as though drawing attention to our age gap. The crazy part is, I think it was hot, somehow, the glint of maturity.

Then I remembered Mom's voice after she sobered up, and I genuinely began listening to her. "Your father knew what he was doing, Lily. An older man knew all the right buttons to push and how to twist me around his finger. It's not an excuse for the mother I've been, but the truth is, I stood no chance against him."

I need to be careful with Landon. I regret that knight in shining armor comment. It was so dorky. It revealed too much of myself. I shouldn't care, but ...

Carter is glaring at me as I walk across the office. His usually resigned expression is uncharacteristically pissed.

"Is something wrong?" I ask.

"Who was that you were just with?"

"Excuse me?" I reply coldly. "Somebody who gave me a ride."

"Who is he to you? That's what I'm asking."

“You’re being weird, Carter,” I say, sitting at my desk.

Carter leans forward, leaning on his desk and staring at me. It’s more like he’s searching inside of me.

“Is there a problem?”

“I don’t know. Is there?”

“Carter, will you just cut the crap?” I tell him.

“That was Landon Cross,” he says after a pause.

“Yeah, so what? Do you know him?” When Carter stares at me, I feel obligated to explain. That isn’t fair, but he’s leaving me no choice and seems serious about it. “He helped me when I was a kid, and he was?—”

Helping me with the bar, but Carter cuts me off.

“Helping people,” Carter grunts. “Yeah, some hero he was, swooping in on the right cases, choosing his moment, getting the right photo ops, and articles in the newspapers. Yes, he’s so selfless, and where is he now? What is he doing? Still helping people?”

I feel my cheeks burning red. There’s no reason for me to care this much, but—“That’s not fair, Carter. He did help me. I would’ve gotten split from my mom if it wasn’t for him. He gave her a chance. He got my dad to back off. He’s a good person.”

“Yeah, when he wants to be,” Carter grunts. “I used to know him. Not much, but everyone in our line of work did. Landon Cross with his slick suits and his habit of

picking cases that make him look good.”

“How is that fair?” I snap. “So you think he should’ve just let the city tear me away from my mom? You think he should’ve let my dad keep harassing us?”

“I’m not saying that,” he says, “but the fact is, we do the work—everybody here, in the trenches, for shit pay, without the photo ops. Sure, he helped, but not as much as anyone in this building. He still got all the praise.”

“He was raising awareness,” I say. “A few journalists interviewed Mom, and maybe there was a photo, but what was the harm? He didn’t make any money off it.”

“Yeah, almost like he had ulterior motives.”

“So what if he wanted to look like the good guy? Is that such a bad thing?”

Carter gets that searching expression. I don’t like it because it feels as if he will find something in me. “You’re defending him pretty enthusiastically. Why was he dropping you off, anyway? You kept in touch after he helped you?”

“No,” I snap. “He’s ...” But hearing Carter’s opinion of Landon stops me from revealing the truth. “We reconnected recently by chance.”

“Reconnected,” Carter says, nodding.

“You can wipe that look off your face. You shouldn’t be taking such an interest in my personal life, anyway.”

“He’s not the person you think he is,” Carter grumbles.

“What does that mean? Do you know something I don’t?”

“Yeah, but I can’t tell you.”

“How convenient.”

“It would breach confidentiality, but if you care so much, ask him about the case with the apple trees. He’ll know what I’m talking about. He plays the nice guy, but there’s a demon in him, Lily. He hides it well, but it’s there.”

“What am I working on today?” I hiss.

“We’ll be together today,” Carter replies. “These solo projects are landing us in trouble. It’s time we played by the rules for a while.”

“I thought this was all about helping people.”

“Yeah, but you can’t help anyone if you’re dead.”

I look down at my desk so that Carter can’t see the rage in my eyes. It’s not fair that I’m being punished for trying to do the right thing. Deep down, I know Carter’s doing this because he wants to keep me safe. Still, it feels wrong, forgetting about that bar and those kids. It feels like a betrayal.

I want to ask Carter about that case, the demons in Landon. I haven’t seen any demon in him: passion and intensity, but nothing bad.

Not yet , a small voice whispers.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

LANDON

When I return to the office, Ethan is sitting in my desk chair, holding my Sig P365. He's unloaded it, the magazine on the table and the chamber open. "What the fuck is this?" he grunts.

"What does it look like?" I snap. "Put it away."

"Why have you got a gun in the office, Landon?" Ethan asks sternly. For all his flashiness, he's a stickler regarding the rules. "What if we'd had a client in, and they'd gone into your desk looking for a pen or something?"

"Then I'd tell them to mind their own goddamn business."

"Listen, I know you've had a scare, but going off the rails won't help."

"I'm not off any rails. The bar I'm looking into has links to the mob and the cartel. Would you rather I didn't protect myself?"

"You shouldn't need to protect yourself," Ethan grunts, putting the gun down. "This crap with the bar and the mob and the cartel ... It's none of your business. Nothing good can come of it, especially if it means bringing weapons into the office. You need to focus on your health."

"I thought I needed to focus on helping people end their marriages?"

“We trained for this. We re trained for this. We specialized. We’ve worked damn hard. I won’t sit here and listen to you put down our—” He stops when the buzzer cuts through the office. “Oh, shit.” He stands suddenly all business again. “That’s Rosita Rubberton.”

“Rubberton?”

He glares. “Don’t you read emails? She’s an heiress from England. She’s divorcing her boy-toy husband and determined not to give him a dime, but she’ll give us plenty. Oh, and she has a crush on you.”

I shift uncomfortably. I can still feel Lily’s heat, still sense her closeness. When she bit her lip, I wanted to grab her so badly, lean in, and press my lips against hers. “What the fuck are you talking about?”

“She mentioned it when booking the meeting. This is all in the email. She’s seen a few of your Good Samaritan articles from back in the day.”

“I hate those things. They always made the work feel cheap.”

“Well, it’s helped us, so don’t hate too hard.” He puts the gun back in the desk drawer, giving me a severe look. “It would help if you flirted with her a little.”

“You’re joking.”

“You’ve flirted with clients in the past,” he points out, walking toward the door.

He’s right, in a sense. I’ve put up a front when necessary, using the logical approach of doing what’s best for the business. Yet it never felt like flirting then because there was nothing behind it, no nugget of truth. This is different. If I flirt with this woman, I’ll feel like I’m betraying Lily.

Christ. What the fuck am I thinking? What does that even mean, betray her?

Ethan leaves the room, walking down the stairs to let the client in. He's already removed my photo of Damon from the wall. Ethan's a chill, nonconfrontational person, so this is a big step for him to take, a definite line in the sand.

"Oh, sweetie, thank you ever so much," the heiress says as Ethan holds the door open for her. "Oh, and this is the famous Landon Cross."

She's around my age, which should make her seem more appropriate for me, but I instantly dislike something about her. I think it's the thin smirk as if I'm here as a gift for her or a piece of personal entertainment.

Technically, I suppose she's not an unattractive woman. She wears a designer dress and looks like she goes to the gym, but she does nothing for me. I note these details with the cold, clinical nature a particular doctor might have while telling a man he has months, not years, to live.

"Landon ..." Ethan walks up next to her, laughing awkwardly. "Are you suddenly mute, bro?"

"Bro ," Rosita says in delight, looking around at our East Coast decor, modern office. At least, that's what Ethan calls it. "This place is so quaint ."

Ethan smiles, then gives me a look. It's mostly the seriousness on his face that makes me snap out of whatever mood I've fallen into. Ethan's a good person, my best friend. He's been there for me every single time I've ever needed him. He was there at the most crucial time; he saved my life.

I won't flirt , but standing here like a jackass isn't helping anyone.

“Rosita,” I say with a forced smile, hoping she can’t tell it’s forced, “it’s so nice to meet you.”

The day goes slowly, with countless meetings. I do my best to play the game with Ethan, but two things are constantly on my mind. The first is Lily and the car ride this morning: her blush, her heat, biting her lip like her sole goal is to drive me nuts.

The second is the bar—Damon, the bastard who threatened an innocent woman just trying to do the right thing. She’s been through enough without dealing with that crap.

As soon as I can leave, I get in my car and drive across the city. I take my gun with me this time, which is a considerable risk. I check my phone more often than I should, thinking of Lily and inventing scenarios where she texts me. What do I think she’s randomly going to say, exactly?

Hey Landon. I was biting my lip earlier because I was thinking about sliding to my knees and kissing the head of your manhood, then opening my mouth and sucking as much of you as I can take. I was biting my lip because I wanted to feel how hard you get when you thrust between my legs and ...

I snap myself out of it. Work needs to be done, and I need to focus.

This time, The Bear is open, with music blasting. I stare at the door as a heavysset man in a leather jacket falls out, stumbling onto the street, snorting, and then spitting on the ground. There’s no reason for a place like this to be so close to where families live, sleep, and try to study.

Usually, logic would keep me in the car, but there’s nothing logical about what that prick Damon did to Lily. There’s nothing logical about the fear and the pain it instilled in her. It’s just wrong—evil. Nobody gets to talk to her like that.

Since I might be dead soon anyway, what harm is there? I push open the car door and hurry across the street, throwing the bar door open. It slams into the wall loud enough for a few people to hear it over the music.

The bar is small and musty, with a low ceiling that almost makes me duck my head. A table in the corner has a bright light shining over a poker game. Two other tables have three or four people sitting at them, all with a bottle of whiskey. Rock music blares from the jukebox.

I see them all staring at me, and I'm sure I'd usually feel fear. These are rough men, clearly capable of violence, thick and stinking of nicotine, and looking at me with that calm, dead expression I remember from the apple tree case. I haven't thought about that in years, but it's the closest I've experienced.

They hate me, and they'd hurt me if they had the chance.

I walk over to the bar and lean against it, nodding to the bartender. The man is old with wispy white-red patches of hair on the sides of his head. "A dr-drink?" he says.

"Is there an issue?"

The man visibly trembles, lowering his voice. "You shouldn't be here. The Bear is mainly for regulars."

"Maybe I'm interested in becoming a regular," I say, letting my voice get a little too loud. "Get me a beer."

"Please, it's on me."

I turn at the sound of his voice, knowing who it will be immediately. He's got the sleazeball tone of voice I knew he'd have and the confidence that he can bully and

blackmail and break anybody he wants. Damon smirks and walks to the bar, resting his elbow against it.

“How are you doing, Landon?”

“Fine, Damon,” I say, staring him right in the eye.

He laughs, shaking his head. “You don’t look fine. You look like a man getting silly ideas in his head.”

“I’ve just heard the ambiance in here is relaxing. Already, I can see the rumors were true.”

“Ha ha ha,” he mocks. “You’re one funny bastard, aren’t you? Listen, fella, this is not a good thing for you to do. What if some of my less courteous friends happened to be here? You need to finish your drink, then get on your way.”

When the barman places my drink down, I ignore it. Instead, I make a show of looking around the bar. I feel ice cold . I’m fueled by what this asshole did to Lily. He had no right to scare her like that. Nobody does.

“Where’s the playroom, then?” I say. “In the back? I’ve heard there are snacks and video games.”

“Those are vicious lies told by petty people who want to tear The Bear down,” Damon says.

“Why the fuck would multiple parents lie about this?”

“Ah, which ones?” he says with a gleam in his eye.

There it is, that self-assured suggestion of violence. Everyone in the bar is turning and staring at us. The music still plays, pumping, so I'm unsure if they can hear us. Yet, they must be able to read my body language. "Which ones" clearly indicates he'd hurt them if he had the chance.

"Now, why would you ask a question like that?" I say playfully.

He keeps smirking with that same gleam in his eye. He's undeniably a man who's gotten away with a lot and is used to walking all over people. It seeps out of his pores, this unearned confidence, this disgusting self-belief. It makes me feel like I did at the apple tree—that feeling again. It's the only time I've felt it. He's making me want to snap.

"Anyway," Damon says, "maybe I've decided you don't need that drink anymore."

"Maybe I still want to see the game room."

"I've already told the whore," he snaps, taking a step closer, his hand twitching. I know he's got a weapon hidden in those jeans or maybe in the fold of his jacket. "Don't make me tell you, too. Go back to your life. Your Good Samaritan days are over." He grins, leaning in. "Do you seriously think I wouldn't look into you? You stopped giving a fuck a long time ago. Unless it's about the girl ..."

He leans even closer, which is a mistake. There should be fear coursing through me, logic telling me to get away from these people. But all I want to do is split his head open for thinking he can hurt innocent people and get away with it.

"Just leave the kids alone," I growl.

"I've seen the photo of you and Lily Brooks." The way he says her full name, savoring it and using it as a threat, makes me sick. He rolls the r in Brooks as though

to make a point, to rub it in—the asshole. “When she was a kid, I mean. It’s some puff piece, and all for what? For your ego? Now you and she are what, partners-in-crime?”

He smirks, leaning even closer. My hands are shaking. In the periphery of my vision, I notice people from the other tables watching, getting ready to react.

“Or is there something else going on, something more ... immoral? It would make sense, considering your job and the general lack of values.”

“You keep her fucking name out of your mouth,” I say, stepping even closer, emphasizing the difference in our height. Not that it means much when he’s got at least a dozen of his buddies in here.

“You seem to have very strong opinions about that,” he says gleefully. “Just remember, I can visit her any damn time I want.”

“If you ever pull a stunt like that again, I’ll put you in the fucking ground.”

His eyes pop open almost in a comic-book way. He looks absurd, almost. It’s clear nobody ever speaks to him like that. “Watch your fucking mouth.”

“You might think you know everything about me,” I growl, “but you haven’t done enough research. Leave. Her. Alone.”

I push past him, my shoulder barging into him. He feels weak and light as he falls to the side, but he feels the need to play the tough guy. “Maybe I’ll pay my not-so-little lady a visit tonight!” He shouts this loudly enough for some of his men to hear, and they laugh like hyenas.

I spin on the spot, staring at him, my hand twitching, ready. He cocks his head and

brings his hand to his hip. “Are you really that fucking stupid?” he yells. “Get back to your office, lawyer man.”

More laughter, even if that is the shittiest insult I’ve ever heard. I’m ready to shoot him for what he did to Lily and his comments about her. Then his men stand up from the tables, some of them producing guns in such a casual way. I know this is business as usual for them. As they aim at me, they look almost bored, dead behind the eyes.

With no other choice, I leave the bar, waiting for the wave of fear, but it doesn’t come. I feel the most alert I have in years, the most carefree, almost. It’s like a weight has been lifted. After all this time, I’ve finally done something good again, but the feeling doesn’t last long.

When I return to my car, I replay what that bastard said about visiting Lily. What if he wasn’t bluffing? What if he hurts her tonight as retaliation? My reaction probably told him all he needed to know about how I feel for her, not that I even know exactly how I feel. There’s just something, which is more than I can usually say.

But what if I can’t keep her safe?

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

LILY

“Y ou don’t need to keep watch,” I tell Mom, leaning against the kitchen wall and watching her with a lump in my throat.

She’s got her back to me, leaning against the kitchen counter. She explains she is doing the dishes, but they’re almost dry now, and she’s still standing there.

“What if he comes back?” she says without facing me.

I wrap my arms around myself, wishing it was my knight in shining armor instead. I don’t even care how corny that is when I say it out loud. I can’t deny it’s what I want—him holding me. It would make the fear so much easier to bear.

“He won’t,” I tell Mom. “I’m doing what he told me to do. Carter won’t even let me work on that case, anyway.”

I can’t keep the bitterness out of my voice. I get his point about more people always needing help, but that doesn’t mean I have to be okay with it. I wish I could do something.

“There’s nothing wrong with standing in my own kitchen.”

“It reminds me of when you started to get clean. You’d stand at the window and wait for Dad to come home. Do you remember?”

Finally, she turns to me, her eyes glistening as though she's on the verge of crying. Or she has been, and now she's getting herself under control. "I had to be sure ... just like I have to be sure now."

"Nobody's coming, Mom," I say. "I promise, okay? Just come here."

I open my arms, offering a hug. She walks toward me reluctantly and lets me bring her into my arms. I cling to her, feeling like the mom, which isn't unusual for us. I had to grow up fast. I had to help where I could, how I could.

"I know you must hate letting the case go," she says, "but your boss is right. It's the best thing to do. You can't stop every bad thing from happening."

"I know, Mom," I say, but there's that same bitterness. "I'll let it go, but you have to let this go, okay? You know how to fixate on stuff."

"You're one to talk," she says teasingly.

I laugh. She's right, but I can't tell her about the person I'm currently fixating on. I can't tell Mom I've spent all day thinking about what happened with Landon this morning, the tension in the car, and how he ran after me. He wants—maybe needs—me to see him as a good person.

Mom finally agrees to go to bed. I should be able to sleep, too, but as I lie here, staring at the ceiling, I just can't. It's the thought of that bar, of Damon. Mostly, it's thinking of Landon being here with me.

The bed would be so much warmer, so much cozier. I can imagine wriggling up next to him and wrapping my arms around his middle, holding on as tight as I can as his solid, mature body tenses against me.

Screw it ...

Rolling onto my back, I reach between my legs and start rubbing my clit softly. It feels so tingly, so sensitive compared to normal, as if I've been waiting all day to sink into this feeling. I imagine stroking my hand up and down Landon's cock so confidently, with so much eagerness. I'd make him hard, and then ...

I let my imagination dance ahead because that's all it can ever be. Suddenly, Landon is naked, his muscles throbbing, standing at the end of my bed. He reaches down and strokes himself as he stares at me, looking completely obsessed.

"Touch your pussy for me," he says in a husky voice. "Touch your clit. Rub it. Make yourself wet for me. Only for me. Yes, Lily, fuck, I want you so badly. I need you. I know you feel the same. I know you want to fight it, but you can't. I'm the older, experienced man who will show you what I want. I know you're scared to trust me, but trust this."

I whimper as I slip my hand lower, rubbing my fingers over my wetness. I can't ever remember being this soaked before. If my mind is conflicted, my body is exactly the opposite. I press down hard on my sex, shifting my hips and imagining Landon thrusting into me.

I don't know how to imagine that exactly, but I try my best. I can feel his heat as he pushes down against me with his muscled body. I imagine running my hands through his hair like I'm tracing the silver streaks with my fingers.

It's oh-so-easy to imagine him looking down at me with that intense expression. He'll stare at me like nobody else exists as if he couldn't even imagine being attracted to anybody except me. "You're going to come on my dick. You're going to cream for me. You're going to do it for me, Lily. For me."

I'm so close to a soul-searing orgasm. My toes are curling all by themselves. I rub just my clit now, everything heating up, my head getting hazy in that perfect way, making it impossible to think about anything else. Only the moment exists, feeling so real.

Then, Mom's voice cuts into my fantasy. Suddenly, I'm lucid. "Mom?" I yell, springing out of bed.

She yells again. "I'm calling the cops!"

I run into the kitchen to find Mom yelling across the street as a man climbs from his car. From his height and how he moves, I can see it's Landon. Seeing him in real life so soon after the fantasy is enough to make the two clash together. It's like any second, he's going to touch me, finishing the orgasm I started.

I snap out of it. "Mom, wait. That's Landon."

"What?" she gasps. "Landon Cross?"

"Yeah!"

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

LONDON

“Thank you, Vivian,” I say as she sets my coffee on the table. It’s almost midnight, but I doubt I’ll get much sleep tonight anyway. Vivian is much healthier than when I last saw her, with a ruddiness in her cheeks that I’m happy to see.

“You’re welcome.” She smiles at me, then at Lily. “Lily, isn’t this exciting?”

“I told you. We were working together on that case.”

Vivian smiles a little manically but seems sober, just understandably shaken up. “I know, but still. Landon in our kitchen after all these years. It’s better than the last one, isn’t it?” She laughs erratically.

“You did the best you could,” I tell her.

I can feel Lily smiling at me, but I’m doing everything I can not to look at her. I saw her when I first arrived, and that was enough for me. She’s wearing PJs—a tank top and shorts, no bra. No fucking bra. I still remember her tits bouncing when she ran into the kitchen, the way my mind instantly went to an image of sliding slickly between them, her thickness massaging my rock-hard ...

“Sorry about the whole cops thing,” Vivian says shakily.

“No, I’m the one who’s sorry,” I tell her. “I should’ve told you I was out there.”

“Does it have ... to do with that man?” she asks with a shudder.

I nod. “Yeah, honestly. I’m probably just paranoid, but I thought being here would be better.”

Vivian shudders again. “So there’s a chance he’ll come back?”

“Like I said, I’m probably just paranoid, but I can stay here all night.”

“Really?” Vivian says eagerly.

“Mom,” Lily cuts in, making my battle not to look at her even more difficult. “We can’t ask him to do that.”

“She didn’t ask,” I say. “I offered.”

“You don’t have to do that, then,” she says with her classic Lily sass.

Finally, I turn to her. It’s a mistake because I’ve got an angle at her tempting cleavage. Fucking hell, her tits are so perfect, round, and creamy, practically begging for me to pull down her shirt. Then, I stop the train of thought and try to derail it.

“I don’t mind,” I say. “I’ll finish my coffee and get back to my car.”

“What? Oh, no, no,” Vivian says passionately. “You can stay in here if you like. The couch has a pull-out mattress.”

“I honestly don’t mind the car,” I say.

Lily sighs, but it comes out as a breathy, lust-filled huff. Or maybe that’s just the savage part of my mind ticking away. “Seriously, you can stay on the couch,” she

says. “It’s not a big deal.”

“You watched over us before, didn’t you?” Vivian says, with that same gratitude in her eyes I remember. “It’s just like old times.”

“He never spent the night before, Mom.”

Vivian looks at her daughter in shock, probably at her sharp tone. “I know that . I was speaking metaphorically.”

“Oh, sorry.”

“Are you sure about this?” I say.

“Absolutely,” Vivian says. “Aren’t we, Lily?”

“Yeah ...”

I look at Lily again. Fuck. She’s biting her lip just like she did in the car earlier. Except, earlier, she wasn’t wearing a tank top that showed those perfect tits. I feel my dick getting hard, my tip pushing against my jeans. Logically, I need to chill, but logic can go to hell.

I don’t sleep, just lying on the bed and staring at the ceiling. Now and then, I’ll stand up and check all the windows, then return to bed. There isn’t any sign of Damon or any of his wannabe thug buddies, but I wouldn’t be able to forgive myself if I left and something happened.

But what about tomorrow? What about the day after? I can’t stay here forever. In my case, even if I wanted to, my time is ticking.

I sit up, almost grabbing my pistol, when I hear the floorboards creak, but it's Lily. The streetlights come through the window, resting on the outline of her body. She creeps into the kitchen, probably thinking I'm asleep.

She hasn't noticed me. I watch her over the divider which separates the living room area from the kitchen. She pours a glass of water and stands there drinking it, the light dappling her tits now. When she sighs, her tits sway for me. Fuck . I can feel my dick twitching as I stare at her.

When she sees me sitting up, she gasps.

"Sorry," I say quickly. "I should've announced myself."

She places her glass down and walks around the kitchen divider. "No, my bad," she says quietly. "I'm the one who was sneaking around."

For a crazy second, I thought she walked out here because she wanted to be closer to me. When she lowers her voice, I know it's because she doesn't want to disturb her mom.

"It's fine," I say, lowering my voice.

"What happened?" she says. "Why do you suddenly think he's going to target us again? Tonight? I backed off."

I run my hand through my hair. "I went to The Bear," I say with a sigh. "I had a run-in with Damon, the prick. It seems he thinks there's a connection between you and me."

"What sort of connection?"

“I got pissed when I heard he threatened you. He thinks it means something. He made some comments about maybe coming by. I couldn’t let that happen.”

“He thinks you care about me?” she asks, walking closer.

She can’t have any clue how profound her effect is on me. It’s like my balls are completely flooded with need, my shaft getting so hard, the come feeling hot as it rushes up my length. Her body is like a goddamn feast, and all just for me.

“I guess so,” I grunt. “He saw the photo of us when you were a kid—that Good Samaritan crap.”

“You don’t like those articles?” she says, moving closer.

She’s almost standing within touching distance now. It’s because she doesn’t want to wake Vivian, but that doesn’t change the fact I can smell her. I can see every blemish on her skin. I can see every gorgeous ripple on her thick thighs.

“No,” I growl. “I did them for my old man. My dad was starting a real estate business abroad with some high-value clients. I guess they enjoyed hearing about his hero American son. I always hated that crap, but Dad was good to me all my life, so what could I say?”

She moves closer again, actually within touching distance now. “Carter thinks you did it because you wanted to make yourself look good.”

“Ah, so he saw me, then.”

“You didn’t mention that you know him ...”

I shrug. “It was a long time ago.”

“He told me to ask you about the apple tree.”

My blood turns to ice. I stand up, causing her to flinch, which is the last thing I want. Yet, the savage part of me notes that it causes her tits to bounce just like they will when I slip inside of her, make her shiver in lust, and pound her hard and all night long.

“He shouldn’t be speaking about that,” I snarl. “Carter likes to blame me for things I had no part in.”

She licks her lips as she stares up at me. It’s like she’s trying to psyche herself up. “Why? What happened?”

“I can’t speak about it,” I snap.

“Why, it’ll break confidentiality?”

“Is that what he told you?” I grunt. “There’s no confidentiality to break. Maybe he didn’t want to tell you the big, bad story of the evil bastard named Landon Cross.”

“You’re not evil,” she says.

I step closer. Damn. That was a mistake. She gasps, but she doesn’t take a step back. Her tits are pressed up against me in the most mouthwatering way possible, squeezed to highlight how plump they are. She purses her lips and looks up at me. It’s like she finally knows the effect she’s having.

“How do you know that?” I snap. “You don’t truly know me, just the Good Samaritan.” You don’t know that I’m going to die. “Maybe I’m not the person you think I am—the person you wish I were.”

“I haven’t said I wish you were anything,” she whispers.

I lean down a hairsbreadth away. I can taste her lips already, somehow. It’s like, just by looking at me, I can feel the lust inside her. Or maybe it’s that flush creeping across her silky smooth skin. Fuck, I’m leaking so much precome. I’m rock-solid and suddenly feeling dizzy. Nothing, nobody else matters. What am I going to do? Worry about the rest of my life?

She stares into my eyes as I move forward. I grab her legs, making her gasp again, each one even sexier than the last, my dick pushing against the inside of my pants. She feels so thick, so perfect, big handfuls of curviness to sink my touch into.

“You don’t want to know about the apple tree,” I tell her. “You don’t need to know anything except that I can keep you and your mom safe, Lily.”

“You always kept us safe,” she whispers.

“This isn’t about then ...” I lean even closer, slight movements, giving her enough time to back out. Maybe I’m giving myself the chance to rethink this, too. “It’s about now .”

Now is the only thing that matters to me. It’s taken having feelings for Lily to understand that, being this close to her. In my life before the diagnosis, I only ever planned for the future, never stopping to remind myself that I’d someday have to live in it.

“Oh my God,” she whispers right before the kiss.

I push heavily against her the moment I taste her lips. It’s like she makes me drunk straightaway. She leans against me with the same pressure, breathing quick, muffled breaths as if she can barely contain herself. I feel the same.

That's why I grab thick, greedy handfuls of her hips and gently spin her around, then lay her on the pullout mattress. She groans and tugs on my shirt, pulling me down on top of her. She feels hot, burning up, and I know her slit is going to feel the same. I can sense how hungry she is for it, for us.

I slide one hand up her belly, under her shirt, finding her braless breast and gliding my thumb over her nipple. She moans, breaking off the kiss without meaning to. When her teeth accidentally bump mine, she begins to speak.

"Don't even think about apologizing," I snarl, massaging her tit with more attention. With my other hand, I slide up her leg toward her pussy. With each inch, I can feel how hot she is, how needy. It adds flames to the fire of my desire.

My balls ache as I tug on her shorts.

"Landon," she whispers.

I look into her eyes and wait for her to go on. "What is it?" I ask, my voice low, gruff. I don't mean for it to be, but it's like there's a goddamn demon in me. The end is so damn close—the end of everything—making me realize how much I've wasted.

I'm not going to waste this moment. I won't waste the connection with Lily. It feels so right.

"Nothing," she says.

"Are you sure?"

"I can tell you after."

The word after gets me going. Because after means we're going to do something first.

More precome bursts hotly out of my end, my briefs sticky with the lust pouring out of me. She lets me pull down her shorts around her ankles.

I collapse at the edge of the mattress like I'm praying. She sits up, looking down at me as I stare at her naked pussy. Her hole is winking at me wetly, her lips glistening with lust, her clit looking ready for so much attention. Her thighs shine with her wetness.

"We have to be quiet," she whispers.

"Hmm."

It's the only noise I can make as I grab her thighs and begin kissing up her leg toward her center. She lies back and starts moaning in the hottest way, with hitches every few breaths like she's going to launch into an orgasm any second. When I kiss her tight hole and taste her tanginess perfection, I almost lose it.

I almost snap and tear off my pants, then drive my dick into her hole without even getting my tip wet with her gorgeous mouth first. I kiss her heat again, then slide my thumb over her horny nub. She squeezes her legs tighter around me.

"That's ... oh ... oh my ... are we really doing this?"

"Tell me to stop," I growl, kissing her hole, making out with her tanginess as I rub her clit.

"I can't," she confesses with a pant.

"You want it."

"Yes."

“Fucking need it.”

“Yes,” she cries.

I move my mouth to her clit, taking it in my mouth and pushing my tongue against her. She damn near loses her mind, her legs squeezing tighter around me. I glance up to see her on her elbows, staring down like she doesn't want to miss a moment. The positioning lets me reach up to massage her tits at the same time as licking her pussy.

Her eyes snap open wildly, her hair across her face in a sexy, wild way. She bites her lip just like in the car when I go nuts on her clit, letting my tongue stroke wildly across her.

I stare into her eyes until she can't take it anymore. She falls back on the bed, and then I smooth my hands around to her ass, indulgently sinking my fingers into her thickness as she gets closer to an orgasm. I can fucking taste how close she is.

When she squeezes her thighs again, I know she's about to let go. My dick aches as she pushes her pussy against me. Her hips move in time with my tongue, my mouth, and my hunger. She bucks against me like she can't stop herself.

Then she moans, sitting up again. “Landon ...”

I stand up, staring down at her body. Fuck . Her perfect, curvy body, her wetness making her glimmer, her eyes shimmering with the intensity of the release.

“Keep rubbing your horny slit,” I snarl.

She cringes at the savagery in my voice, but then her hand moves to her heat. She strokes her fingers over her clit and her entrance.

“Your hole is so fucking wet,” I go on, reaching down and grabbing my waistband.
“So ready.”

She bites her lip, nodding. Her classic Lily blush has spread across her tits, and they’re red in places, too, from where I was massaging her. It’s like her body is eager to be tattooed by my attention, and she wants to wear a brand of me.

When I take out my dick, her eyes snap open widely again. She glances at my head dripping with precome, then looks up into my eyes.

“Landon.”

“Yes?” I say in that same fierce tone.

When she flinches, her tits jiggle around for me. I groan and lean down, taking her nipple in my mouth and sucking. With my other hand, I massage her other tit. She slides her hands through my hair as I suck and then softly bite her nipple.

“Tell me what to do,” she whispers.

I stand up again, trembling all over. “Are you sure?”

“Tell me ...”

“Take the head of my dick in your mouth. Suck it. Swirl your tongue around it and then move your hand up and down.”

She wriggles right to the edge of the bed, looking up at me with an expression that almost makes me blow my load right there. Then she leans forward, opening her mouth, taking a steadying breath that clues me in too late. I realize, or think I do, that she’s so damn nervous.

When she wraps her lips around the tip of my dick and starts stroking my shaft, I can't think. Her touch obliterates any doubts I could ever have. She looks up, raising her eyebrows.

"It's so damn good," I groan.

She nods and sucks me faster, working her hand up and down clumsily. I stare down in awe at the sight of her pretty mouth wrapped around my dick. She strokes me so quickly.

I gently touch the back of her head.

"I need that tight pussy. Fuck, if you keep going ..."

She nods, moaning, then sucks me even deeper . My hand falls away from her head. She's got all the power here. She looks up at me, nodding, and I know what she's saying without any words. With my dick half buried in her mouth, I know what she's trying to tell me.

Come in my mouth .

That's the message in her eyes. I want to tell her no. I want to explain to her that I need to save myself for her perfect pussy. I can do nothing when she keeps bobbing her head and stroking. I can't even speak. Just standing up is enough of a challenge.

My body floods with heat. Time seems to slow down for an eternity, letting me stare down at her as she works my shaft, as her tits bounce, with her thick thighs exposed.

Fuck. Fuck. FUCK.

I've never felt pleasure like this. My seed surges up my shaft, caressing every inch of

me, her hot tongue swirling around my dick. When she tastes my seed, she pulls away.

“Sorry,” she gasps, but her hand is still moving furiously up and down, making my dick feel like I’m burning in the best, horniest sense.

My seed erupts all over her tits. She moans when I take my shaft in my hands.

“Push them ...”

Luckily, she doesn’t need me to go on. She pushes her tits together to take the last of my seed. When it’s all over, my breath comes hard, big, heaving breaths that make me feel like I will fall over. She stands up and finds her shorts quickly.

I pull up my pants. She’s dressed now and goes into the bathroom to take a big sip from the faucet. “Sorry,” she mutters. “I didn’t know how it would taste.”

“It’s fine,” I tell her.

After what we just did, things are way too awkward. I approach her, but she shakes her head like she fears me.

“I can’t believe we just did that,” she says. “That’s not why I came out here.”

“I couldn’t stop,” I groan.

“I didn’t ask you to,” she says, almost like she’s angry. “I didn’t want you to.”

“Are you okay?”

She looks at the hallway and back at me. “It’s not a big deal, but, well ... This isn’t

exactly how I planned on losing my virginity.”

She rushes out her words like the verbal equivalent of tearing off a Band-Aid. I can sense she doesn’t want to make a big deal out of it.

“You deserve more romance for that,” I agree. “Something you can look back on.”

“Did you know? Could you tell?”

“No, not until toward the end. Then I got an idea.”

“Did I seem nervous?”

“You seemed sexy as hell.”

“Sexy as hell,” she repeats under her breath. “Do you want to tell me about the apple tree now? We can trade, right? What we just did for the truth about the apple tree.” She laughs shakily. It’s not a genuine laugh. It’s almost like she’s trying to let out some small pieces of agony, or maybe not so small.

“That wasn’t a trade,” I snap. “That wasn’t for anything.”

“So that’s a no, then?”

I go to move toward her. Again, she shakes her head in that urgent way that makes me feel like a predator. It pisses me off, honestly. It’s not like I’ll charge at her when she doesn’t want me to.

“This isn’t about?—”

“I thought so.”

She rushes toward the hallway.

“Lily, what’s gotten into you?”

She doesn’t answer; she keeps walking. I debate going after her. After what we just did, surely we’ve got enough intimacy for that, but I feel unsure. I was so confident when the heat was pumping through us both.

I sit on the mattress and put my head in my hands. Did I make a terrible mistake? Does she feel like I took advantage of her?

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

LILY

When I text Maddie, telling her what just happened but leaving out the details, she calls me. I didn't expect her to respond until the morning. I only texted her because I needed to get out some of this fight-or-flight feeling.

"You did what?" Maddie whisper-yells down the phone.

"I know," I reply quietly. "I can hardly believe it. I went out there, I guess, maybe to talk with him, hoping he was awake. I don't know, but when it started, the kissing and then ..." I swallow, nerves lighting up my body like some lust-filled instinct is trying to make me relive it. "It felt so natural."

"Then why did you run out on him?" Maddie asks.

"Because he was being too romantic. Saying my first time needed to be memorable and stuff like that."

"And that's a bad thing because ..."

"Dad," I whisper, feeling pathetic for even saying it. If I can't be honest with Maddie, I can't be honest with anyone.

"You think he's tricking you like your dad tricked your mom?" Maddie asks.

“I don’t know what to think, but it could be true. Mom had no idea. Dad swept her off her feet. She couldn’t even imagine Dad would ever turn into the world’s biggest prick, but he did.”

“So you think Mr. Good Samaritan might do the same?” Maddie says, doing a poor job of hiding her doubt.

“I don’t know,” I snap. “It’s not against the laws of physics. It’s not impossible. Women have probably felt more natural with a man than I just did and have been fooled and hurt. Anyway, my boss has warned me away.”

“Your boss can’t tell you who to date.”

“He said there’s a darkness in Landon, a demon. Honestly, I think I just saw it.”

“Wait.” Maddie’s tone turns ultraserious. “You’re not saying ...”

“No,” I cut in quickly. “It was a good demon. He was so passionate. It was like his world was ending, and the only thing he wanted to do before the end was to be with me. That’s the only way I can think to describe it.”

“That sounds magical,” Maddie says with a dreamy sigh.

“Magical, make-believe ... I need to think about this. I’ve got so much work to do. I’ve got so much to focus on. Falling for an older guy was never part of the plan.”

“You’ve fallen for him?” Maddie says.

“No,” I say, wondering if it’s a lie and pondering if I might have fallen for him the moment we reconnected, if that’s even possible. “I’m just saying, if I did fall for him, it would derail my plans.”

“You can be with him and be a social worker, right?”

“Stop being so reasonable,” I say, laughing ruefully.

“Hey, don’t get me wrong,” Maddie replies. “I think you should be careful. Guys will do anything to get laid. I’m not blowing any secrets there. You know the douches I’ve had to deal with. If you think there’s a chance he’s using you, then yeah, take it slow. If he’s not okay with you taking it slow, you know he’s not right for you.”

“I’m not sure about taking it slow,” I mutter. “It might just be better to back off.”

That same fight-or-flight feeling bounces through me.

“Yeah, maybe, but,” Maddie sighs, “not everybody is your dad.”

“I know,” I tell her, but all those lessons from Mom and the memories of what Dad was like are difficult to shake.

“How wonderful is this, Lily?” Mom says when I walk into the living room the following morning. She gestures to the table. The bed has been folded away, and presumably, Landon has bought us a breakfast feast. “No visitors last night ... and a breakfast to boot. I might have to ask you to stay, Landon.”

Landon smirks, but his eyes change quality when he glances at me. I pretend last night never happened. Maddie would probably disagree, but it’s the only way I can handle this. I don’t know how to do relationships.

“It’s nothing,” he says.

“Thanks, Landon.” I sit beside Mom on the couch, relieved Landon is in the armchair. What would Mom say if she knew what we’d done on this couch last night?

At least it was on the bed, not the cushions we're sitting on.

"What do we do now?" Mom asks as the three of us load up plates.

"If that idiot comes back, we call the cops," I say quickly. "We can't expect Landon to stay here forever."

Mom rubs her arm in that gesture that I recognize. I've often wondered if it's one that all addicts use at one point or another. It brings back an army of memories. Mom knows what I'm thinking because she lets her hand drop. "You're right," she says, trying to sound sure and tough.

"I want you to be safe, too," he says. "Lily's got my cell number. I'll keep it on day and night. If you call, I'll be here, and yeah, call the cops too. They might take longer than me, though."

"He won't come back," I say. "I'm not working on that case anymore."

I stare down at my bagel, but I can feel Landon looking at me. I'm pretty sure he's glaring, but it's tricky to be sure when he only exists at the periphery of my vision. He doesn't want to say it in front of Mom, but he's trying to remind me of what he said last night.

Damon thinks Landon wants me.

"If he had any reason to think about returning," I say, "because he had any ideas or anything about me, or maybe our connection to Landon about that stuff when I was a kid, Mom, hopefully he'll realize he's wrong."

I finally look at Landon. My heart drops in my chest. I actually feel it, a judder moving through me. I assumed he was scowling, but I was wrong. He has an almost

hurt expression on his face. I nearly tell him I'm sorry, but I make myself tough.

Okay, it hurts, but I have to do this for my career and to avoid the mistake Mom made. Deep down, I wonder if that's an excuse.

Landon picks up a bagel. "Maybe when I'm down there working the case, I'll run into him," he says. "I'll set the record straight and tell him you were just another case."

"That would be good," I say, then take a big bite to stop myself from saying anything else, something like, Tell me about that romantic scene you were imagining . After devouring the bagel, I stand. "I need to get ready for work."

"Do you want a ride?" Landon says.

"No," I reply.

Mom frowns at me. I hurry down the hallway, not wanting to get into any mess about this. I don't know how to process it, end of story. I don't want to find out. I can't even imagine being with a man, really being with him.

Yet, haven't I been dreaming of my knight in shining armor ever since he left us? Haven't I wanted him to find me, to save me again?

I turn the shower up hot, scalding away any feeling from last night. Or that's what I tell myself, but I can't shake the sensation that the hot water is trying to simulate his touch. I force myself to wash quickly. The urge to touch myself is way too real.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

LANDON

“Thanks again for this,” Vivian says over the coffee table.

I do my best to smile in a civilized way. The memory of what I did with her daughter last night is almost like a physical entity in the room, on the couch she’s sitting on. Sure, the sheets are in the laundry. I made sure of that.

“That’s okay.”

“Does Lily seem like she’s acting strange to you?”

I barely know her, I almost say, but lying to Lily’s mother feels wrong. Instead, I take a sip of black coffee and lean forward. “It might have something to do with me.”

Vivian tilts her head. She always had empathetic eyes. That was one thing that made Russel’s treatment of her so rough. Rough Russel, she started calling him toward the end, a way to diminish him in her eyes. He was like a giant before that.

“With you, Landon?”

I swallow. “Last night, your daughter and I ... kissed.” I can’t include all of it.

Vivian flinches, her personality shifting in real time. “Excuse me?”

I can't back down now. "She's a very beautiful woman, and she's so interesting, so intelligent?—"

"I told you how Russ love-bombed me," she cuts in, her tone suddenly distant. It's how she sounded when she was coming down off the drugs. She said the only way she could save herself was to switch off her feelings like an electrical device.

"That's not what this is," I retort.

"Why, then?"

"I told you. She's beautiful, intelligent, exquisite ..."

Vivian waves a hand, leaning down and speaking in a hiss. "Why not somebody your age?"

"This isn't about age," I say. "It's about the fact I haven't dated in a damn long time. I never thought I'd want to. Then I saw Lily, and something changed. She changed me. I can't explain it."

"Love at first sight, was it?" Vivian says as she empties the remaining breakfast into the paper bags. When I move to help her, she snaps, "I can do it, thank you!"

"I'm not like Russel," I tell her.

"That's what I thought," she snaps. "When you came to us, saved us ... Do you know what Lily used to call you? Her knight in shining armor. For a good while after the case, she would wait up for you, convinced you were going to visit her. You're a big reason she pursued social work."

I swallow. "I was trying to do the right thing."

“You did the right thing ... then, but you’re not doing the right thing now. Do you seriously think she can accurately judge a relationship with you , Landon? Seriously? How could she? You’ve been her hero for too long.”

I lean back, running my hand through my hair. A logical man would leave here. A logical man would accept this, but with the end so damn close, I can’t. Believe it or not, she feels like a lifeline.

“She can make her own decisions, can’t she, Vivian? If she can do her job, surely she can think for herself.”

“She’s twenty-one. She’s never even had a boyfriend. She stands no chance against you.”

“Again, I’m not Russel. I’m not some seasoned playboy. I don’t mess with women’s heads like he did. I don’t make a sport of it.”

“How do I know you’re telling the truth?”

“The truth about what?” We turn to find Lily standing in a crumpled white shirt, her hair still wet, her pants hanging loosely with her belt undone. She fastens it as she says, “You guys didn’t realize how loud you were being, did you? What are you talking about?”

“He told me about your little romantic scene last night,” Vivian says.

Lily gasps and looks at me with an expression of complete betrayal. It makes me feel so callous. She thinks Vivian is talking about everything: the intimacy, the steaminess.

“I told her about our kiss,” I quickly correct so she understands.

“Oh ...” She relaxes a tiny bit. “Right, and what do you think, Mom?” Lily does an excellent job hiding how anxious this conversation makes her, but I can see the nerves.

“Isn’t it obvious? I’ve always told you never to get involved with an older man. They have too much of an advantage over you. They can twist your head any way they want, and you, Lily, with him ? He was your knight in shi?—”

“Mom,” she cuts in, her cheeks blushing fiercely.

“Well, he was!” she snaps. “How are you going to judge anything with him accurately?”

“I’m not trying to trick anyone,” I bark, standing up. “I’m not that sort of guy. I never have been. I haven’t dated in years; even when I did, it was hollow. It wasn’t like ...” I stare at Lily, the messiness of her hair and flushed cheeks, that lip-biting that entrances me. “... this.”

She swallows, her throat shifting, the blush spreading. It’s like I can see the uncertainty battling inside her.

“Please, Landon,” Vivian says. “We don’t need to hear this. Lily needs time to process the kiss.”

“Mom, don’t speak for me,” Lily replies.

“Am I wrong?” Her mother demands.

“I ... I don’t know!” she yells, throwing her hands up.

“See? Now you’re stressing her out.”

“It’s not him , Mom. It’s just everything.”

“Everything, meaning the kiss.”

“Mom,” she snaps. “Please.”

“I’m going to give my honest opinion on this.” Vivian glares at me, a far cry from the gratitude I’ve seen on her face until now. “There’s only one reason older men target women your age. They want control .”

“She’s making me lose control,” I say, my voice loud, my passion too obvious. “Until I saw her at The Row, I lived a cold, calculated life. I was ice . You hear me? Then she came along and melted me, and I don’t give a damn how that sounds.”

“ Melted you,” Vivian hisses. “After, what, a few meetings? One? Two? How many?”

“Mom,” Lily whispers, her voice tangled with confusion. “You don’t know how I feel about this.”

“Do you?” Vivian counters, and Lily doesn’t have an answer for that. She folds her arms and stares right at me. Despite the circumstances, I have to admire her mother-bear instincts. I’m happy Lily has somebody so capable and fierce looking out for her. “Let’s make it simple. Are you going to marry my daughter?”

“Mom.”

“Do you envision a serious future? Let’s assume this isn’t a scam to get her into bed. Let’s assume you’re not just playing on her emotions.”

“That’s a safe assumption,” I say coldly.

“How far are you going to take this?”

“Mom ...”

“I have every right to ask,” Vivian snaps.

“I don’t know,” I say. Months, not years ... “Recently, I went to the doctor. He gave me some bad news. Truthfully, I don’t know how much longer I’ve got.”

“What?” Vivian snaps, and I know right away she doesn’t believe me. I can’t blame her. I saw how badly Russ messed with her head. “Do you expect us to believe that?”

“Are you serious?” Lily says, her voice cracking.

“Yeah,” I say. “I’m just waiting on the follow-up appointment to confirm a few details, but the doc said it looks like months, not years.” Emotion tears at my voice, making it raspy, husky. “Truthfully, I don’t know what kind of future I can offer, but I’d never hurt Lily. I’d never manipulate her. I’d never use her.”

I stride for the door. There’s a tear in my eye, just one. I can feel it clinging to my lash like it’s trying to make me break down. This is all too damn much to go from an ordered, peaceful existence to this.

Walking across the street, I climb into my car, looking one last time at the apartment, but Lily doesn’t come out or even stand at the window. I can’t blame her. I hope they remember what I said about my cell. Day or night, they can call me.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

LILY

“ I need to leave for work soon,” I say over the sound of the hairdryer.

Mom paces anxiously, biting her fingernails. “I didn’t mean to fly off the handle like that, but what else did you expect me to do? The whole thing is suspicious.”

“He wouldn’t lie about that,” I say, struggling to keep my voice steady. “He has got months, he said —months . Did he look like he was lying to you?”

“Your dad never looked like he was lying, either.”

“Dad would never have helped somebody like Landon helped us.”

My thoughts feel twisted up. Mom makes all the points I’ve been throwing at myself to remind myself why this can never work. Yet, when they come from her, I want to defend him, defend us .

“Even if he is telling the truth, he proved my point,” Mom declares. “If he hasn’t got long, why does he want you, Lily? What for?”

“What if I want the same thing?” I yell. “What if I want to have some fun with him? Not everything has to be serious. Not everything has to be forever. If he’s telling the truth, it means he’ll be gone before he shows his true colors, right?”

The words come out vicious and cold. I don't like the way I sound at all.

"I need to get to work," I say, cutting her off when she tries to reply. "I can't not go to work. People need me. I need to keep my job and make a good impression to be an actual social worker one day. I can't mess this up. To do that, I have to focus. Okay? Okay?"

Mom's shoulders droop. "Fine, but remember, I warned you about him."

"You like him," I snap.

"I've always thought he was a good man. He saved us. He made it possible for me to move on, to be a mother. All those years ago, I never imagined that he would ..." She shudders. "... want you."

"Don't say it like he's gross. I'm a woman, Mom, in case you haven't noticed." I raise my hand before she can say another word. "Please, I need to get ready."

She turns and walks away. She knows I'll get sucked into a conversation about this way too easily. After drying my hair, I jump in the car and begin driving. At least I won't have to take public transport like I did on the way home when Landon dropped me off.

There's Landon, getting in my head again. After that standoff with Mom, it feels impossible not to let him into my thoughts. I can still feel what we did last night, my pussy aching, something inside wanting more.

Carter is waiting for me in our office lobby. He walks into my path, making me jump.

"Sorry," he says, shuffling on the spot. "Listen, we need to talk."

“Okay ...”

He leads me back to the parking lot around the corner, where the smokers gather. We’re the only ones out here. He takes out a cigarette. “Do you mind?”

“Sure,” I say. He seems even more on edge than usual.

“So,” he says, taking a big drag, “this is a fucked-up situation. I won’t lie, and it’s all off the books.” He takes another drag.

“Okay ...”

“The director saw your little standoff with Landon yesterday, too. I got word this morning that she’s pissed about it.”

“What? Why would she even care?” I hiss, thinking of the devastating look on his face when he told us about his diagnosis. “It’s none of her business. I could go to hum?—”

“Wait,” he cuts in, smoking down almost half the cigarette in one big, long, stressful inhale. “Just wait. Technically, you’re right. You could go to human resources, but it won’t be like that. It’ll be a simple case of finding some other excuse. Even if you did go to HR, it would be your word against hers. Don’t you see, Lily?”

“Oh, fuck,” I say after a pause. “If they go digging for a reason to get rid of me?—”

“They’ll probably find out you’ve been working solo cases.” He takes another big pull, then flicks the butt away. “That’ll mean my job’s in the shitter, too, but I might make it through. You won’t.”

“Because she saw me with Landon Cross? What the fuck? He’s a good person.” That

fierce certainty grips me again. It's like the universe is trying to make me fight for him, even when I was the one who was going to bury what we did. "Why does the director hate him so much?"

"It's that job I mentioned."

"The apple tree," I groan, shaking my head. "How am I supposed to take this seriously when I don't know what happened?"

"Ask Lan?—"

"I thought you were just telling me never to see him again. Or did I hallucinate that?"

He lights another cigarette. "Fair point. Okay, it's like this: simple, short, and sweet. Landon Cross went to visit a woman who wanted help leaving her husband, who was an abusive father. Landon visited, and then something happened, an argument maybe. We're not sure what, but it ended up with Landon hanging that man from the apple tree at the end of the garden."

Everything in me turns cold. "What?" I whisper out hoarsely.

"Then he used some police contact he had to get off scot-free."

"So you're telling me he killed a child abuser," I say, my head spinning, "and you hate him for it?"

"I've got a friend. Hell, he was all our friends. His name's Petey. He was one of the best social workers I've ever met. He saved more kids than I can even count. Once, during a job, he slapped an abuser across the face. He got jail time for that. He's never allowed to work again. Our industry is littered with cases like this, but big bad Landon Cross can murder a man and get away with it."

“You’re just guessing it was murder.”

“Everybody knew. Even the local sheriff told me the autopsy showed signs of a struggle and strangulation. It wasn’t a self-induced event. Get it? Yet Landon got away with it and then went on to another case, another photo op. We have to work from inside the system.”

“Landon told me something similar once.”

“Then he’s a goddamn hypocrite.”

“If the man was hurting his kid, he deserved to die.”

Carter takes another big puff, the biggest yet. He exhales with a ragged cough. “Maybe you’re right, but in that case, we should all quit and become serial killers. You might think I’m some jaded old ass, but I believed in this system once. On my good days, I still do, and you wouldn’t be here if you didn’t.”

My head feels so clouded with everything that’s happened. I move away from the cigarette smog and take a deep breath. “So you’re telling me, if I’m seen with Landon again, I’ll lose my job?”

Carter tilts his head. “You sound like a cop trying to get me to admit to something on tape.”

“If I’d known this is what you were going to tell me, I would have recorded you,” I say, “but you’re safe. Don’t worry.”

“Good, because I’ll never tell you this again. It’s a heads-up, a courtesy. If I were you, I’d forget about Landon.”

“Let’s just focus on work today,” I snap. “I don’t want to speak about my personal life.”

He nods. “Fair enough. Just remember what I said.”

For the next five hours, I focus on the moment-to-moment stress of working alongside Carter. We’re a team again, handling the depressing case of a seriously neglected one-year-old. Afterward, we head back to the office for some paperwork. I can sense eyes on me, an extra edge to my interactions with my coworkers, like they’re already labeling me an outsider for even being vaguely associated with Landon Cross.

It’s enough to make me want to scream, especially with the Mom stuff added on top of it. So, to be with Landon, I’d have to hurt Mom and risk my career for what? A relationship that can only last months, at best?

At my desk, I bury my head in my hands, the depressing thoughts coming thick and fast, a bombardment one after the other. “A girl’s here to see you,” Carter tells me, abruptly approaching my desk.

“What? Who?”

Carter shakes his head. “She said she’ll only talk to the nice lady called Lily. You better see what it’s about before we send her home. She took the bus here from God knows where.”

“How are you going to send her home, then?”

“We were hoping you would help with that.”

“So, how will I see what this is about before you send her home?”

“Fair enough. You win, Lily.”

I almost flip him the bird, but I need to remember I’m not with Maddie right now. I enter the lobby to find eleven-year-old Grace sitting on one of the chairs, her legs swinging. She’s got a red braid over her shoulder. She’s from The Row—the job I’m not supposed to work anymore.

I remember what she said when I went to visit her. “They say my hair’s really pretty ...”

“Who’s ‘they?’”

“In The Bear ...”

She smiles when she sees me, which lights my heart up in ways nothing else could. It’s like a small preview of what makes this job so worth it, a nugget of love that floods me with purpose until I remember I have to abandon her and hope that Landon can save her and her friends.

“Lily,” she grins, leaping to her feet.

“Grace.” I smile, being careful not to hug her or show any affection. It’s part of the rules for understandable reasons. “You know you’re not supposed to be here alone.”

She steps forward. “I don’t want you to forget about us.”

“I haven’t?—”

“Mommy says it’s not right.”

“What isn’t, sweetheart?”

“They knocked on the windows and told us they had treats and games last night. Kids went over there really late, way past my bedtime! They knocked on my window, too. I heard it. I watched them. That’s not good, is it?”

“No, Mommy’s right,” I say, feeling sick. “What time?”

“Uh ...” She furrows her eyebrows, concentrating hard. “Three-thirty a.m., that’s it.”

“Okay, thank you.”

“Lily.” A thin voice cuts through me.

I turn to find the director standing with her nose upturned, looking down at me like gum stuck on the bottom of her shoes.

“I’m told you might know where this girl is from?”

Behind her, Carter stares at me bleakly. He thinks we’ve been found out. My mouth feels dry. It’s been one thing after another recently.

“Yeah, she’s going to take me home,” Grace says. “I saw her at the park, and I heard what her job was, and my uncle hasn’t been being nice to me and ...” She cuts off, almost bursting into tears.

The director’s face changes, genuine sympathy appearing straight away. “I’m sorry, poor girl. We’ll help however we can.” She looks at Carter. “Make sure she gets home safe.”

“Yes, of course. You got it.” Carter is suddenly all smiles. “You got it.”

Once the director leaves, I turn and look down at Grace. She beams up at me. “You

were going to get in trouble, right? About The Bear?”

“How did you know that?” I say in wonder.

She looks so soul-shatteringly proud of herself that I want to cry. “The big one. With the coat. The boss. You know him?”

Memories stab through me. “Yes, Grace. I know him.”

“He told me you could never help me. He said you’re never coming back, but I knew he was wrong. You’ll help us, won’t you?”

I swallow. “I’ll do my best.”

Carter gives me a harsh look, but when he talks to Grace, he becomes the uncle everybody loves. That’s one of the most impressive things about Carter. He can change from a seasoned man who’s seen it all to an absolute favorite of the kids.

“Let’s get you home, Grace. Sound good?”

“Sure.” She rolls her eyes, then winks at me.

I do my best to smile at her, but she doesn’t even realize how messed up her situation has made her. Maybe she doesn’t know I can see through the sassy, cocky front she’s putting on. I can see through it to the terrified child underneath because I used to be her.

Carter leans over as we lead her out of the building. “You can’t help her.”

“How can you say that now?” I hiss.

“Because you look like you’re going to do something stupid.”

“You know I can hear you, right?” Grace says.

“Sorry,” we both echo.

“You can help me,” she says.

This time, I don’t reply. I don’t want to shatter the hope in her voice, but there’s nothing I can do—nothing I can do.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

LANDON

“ H e just doesn’t understand me,” Rosita Rubberton, the English heiress who apparently has a one-way crush on me, says. I can feel Ethan glaring at me, silently telling me to focus, flirt, and invest time in this business relationship.

I can’t because I’m distracted. I keep waiting for my cell phone to ring or vibrate. Maybe I shouldn’t have told Vivian about the “kiss,” but lying to Lily’s mom would’ve felt wrong. If we’re going to have a ... a what? A relationship? Months, not years .

“Excuse me,” I say, standing up, my chair making a scraping noise on the floor.

“Uh, all right,” Rosita mutters, narrowing her eyes at me.

I go into the hallway, take out my phone, and scroll to Lily’s name. I want to call her so damn badly. I don’t like how we left things at all, but how can I pursue a woman after her mom warned me away? Then, there’s last night. It was too ... hell, hot and steamy, but it wasn’t as romantic as she deserved.

“What are you doing?” Ethan snaps, breaking me out of my thoughts.

“I was going to make a call.”

Ethan grits his teeth, then sighs. “It better be goddamn important.”

I can't take the impatience in his voice or the disappointment. Deep down, I know I'm causing him so much hassle. Somehow, all this seems less important now. "I was calling the oncologist to schedule that appointment."

"Oh." He nods, relaxing a bit. "Okay. Good. Sorry, bro ..."

I press down on the number on the recent calls list. I need to face this anyway. I need to know just how long or short I've got. I can't keep running. Maybe I'll find out I've got even less time than I thought, making me realize I should leave Lily alone. What can I offer her?

"Hi, I'm calling to book an appointment ..."

After some back and forth, the receptionist says, "Our notes tell us you were waiting for Doctor Coleman?"

"No, that's fine. I can see anybody."

"Oh, let me see then ..." She taps some keys. "It looks like our next appointment is—I'm sorry—the day after tomorrow at five p.m."

"No, that's good for me," I say, trying to hide my relief. It's another day of putting off the inevitable and not facing it honestly. It turns out I'm not as brave as I felt moments ago. "Thank you."

"Good, brother," Ethan says. "I'm happy you did that. Now ..." He gestures at the office door. "Can we?"

I sigh, nodding. "Sure."

I have to remember all Ethan has done for me. When we started this business, he was

upfront about what I'd have to sacrifice. "If you don't think you can give this your all, tell me now, no hard feelings. When we do this, we need to be all in. Let's be honest. It's about cash. It's the opposite of your other life."

My "other life" was the pro bono work. Ethan was right. In the beginning, this business took everything from us.

Rosita huffs when we return, giving me a look I don't like at all. "Have you handled your business, pretty boy, hmm?" She giggles.

"Pretty boy," Ethan smirks. "I've never heard him called that before."

"Really?" Rosita looks me up and down in an over-the-top way. "That is very surprising to me, I have to say."

"Shall we get on with it?" I snap.

"All right ... no fun. As I was saying, he didn't understand me. He didn't care about me. He didn't listen to me. He was thoroughly selfish, and the fact is, if he wants anything, he'll have a better chance getting on his knees and begging than trying to go the legal route."

"Then maybe you should let him," I grunt without meaning to. It's her tone, the self-entitlement, the pointlessness of this all, like it's weighing down on me.

"Pardon?"

"If begging will help, make him beg. Save yourself the time and money, and it'll save me from having to listen to this crap."

Stop, stop, stop, a voice roars, but I can't. I keep thinking about the unfair disgust on

Vivian's face, then the confusion on Lily's. I keep feeling her lips against mine and tasting the other parts of her. I keep thinking of The Bear, those kids, and I'm here , doing this .

"I beg your pardon!" Rosita screeches.

"He's going through a tough time, Rosita," Ethan says. "You got to tell her, Landon. Now." Ethan glares at me.

I force out a laugh. "I'm dying. Please ..." When I drop to my knees, Ethan groans. "Forgive me. I fucking beg you."

Standing, I turn and walk away, hands balled into fists. I can already hear Ethan apologizing for me as I storm out. In the street, I walk, not even thinking where I'm going. My head is cloudy. What am I thinking, pulling a stunt like that? Ethan doesn't deserve to have to deal with this mess.

I find my way into a park, sitting down and watching as an elderly man throws a ball for his dog. I'm not sure how long I sit here. I only snap back to reality when I get a text.

It's Ethan. This is my fault. It was unfair of me to expect you to work after getting news like this. That was a lousy friend move on my part. Take some time, Landon.

That will kill you with our workload.

With all due respect, you could've just killed our most lucrative contract of the year. Luckily, I salvaged this, but you know me. I'm going to have to put the business first. Take a week.

I'll see you in a week .

I stuff my phone in my pocket. I won't argue with him about this. Neither of us has ever acted as unprofessionally as I just did. I don't have any space to explain, and I don't want to. I didn't tell a lie in there. This shit feels meaningless, which says a lot about me and how I've sleepwalked through life, taking the logical route.

Another text. I grab my phone, expecting Ethan. When I see Lily's name, I almost drop the phone, a shudder moving up my arm. We need to talk. Meet me after work?

Sure, I can meet you outside. I text back immediately.

No, let's meet somewhere else. Somewhere more private.

She doesn't want to be seen with me. I wonder if she's had issues at work.

We can meet at my apartment.

Okay, but no funny business?

I'll be good if you are, I reply.

She sends back a smiling face emoji. Despite everything that's happened, I'm smiling down at my phone. Maybe I'm putting a stupid amount of importance on that emoji, but it's like we've got some hope, which should be laughable. Months, not years ...

What can I offer? If I were the mature one, I'd back out of this before it's too late. When Vivian questioned me, she was right. I've only met with Lily a few times. What if this illness is making me crazy?

Yet I can't accept that. There's this certainty scorching through me every time I think about her.

With nothing else to do, I spend the rest of the afternoon in my home gym. Moving and sweating is sometimes the only way to block out everything else. I soak the gym floor, sweat running down my bare chest. Despite the slight silver in my hair, I look healthy and strong in the mirror. I don't look like a man who's going to drop dead in a few months.

After a shower, I wait for my phone to go off. When it does, I jump and hurry to the elevator. Lily is waiting for me in the lobby, still wearing her work clothes, the white shirt untucked now, loose around her hips.

"Remember what I said," she murmurs, walking into the elevator.

She looks up at me, lips pursed, cheeks that tempting, attractive shade of red.

"Are you reminding me ... or yourself?"

When the doors close behind her, she lets out a small moan and collapses against me. It's easily the hottest thing I've ever experienced, which maybe isn't saying much since everything is the most with Lily. We kiss passionately, but then she presses her hand against my chest and pushes me away.

"That was it, okay? My one moment of weakness."

"This is mine," I growl, grabbing her hips and pulling her into another kiss. We keep going until the elevator door opens.

She moves away from me, taking a breath and smoothing her shirt. "This is about The Row," she says. "About The Bear."

"I thought you were done with that?" I snap.

“ I am. That’s why I’m here. I need your help.”

CHAPTER TWENTY

LILY

His apartment is easily the most expensive I've ever set foot in. It's a penthouse with floor-to-ceiling windows that look down over the city. Everything is modern, new, clean, and a little clinical, almost like he needs a lady's touch.

Sitting across from him in the living room, I remind myself this isn't about that. I can't let the memories of last night rule me. The two kisses will have to be enough. I have to remember that he may be a killer, that Mom disapproves, that he's going to be gone soon, and this could get me fired.

How many reasons does one girl need? Still, I can't stop obsessing.

"The middle of the night," he says, sighing and rubbing his large, powerful hands together. "Damon's a sick fuck, and he knows how difficult it would be to get a police team out there to monitor it. Even then, he might have cop contacts, dammit."

"There must be something we can do."

"Me, Lily," he growls, staring at me almost like he did last night with that nobody-else-exists look. "Not us. Clearly, you've been warned about me."

"Why's that so obvious?"

"Because you're looking at me like you know something." He rests his elbows on his

knees. He's wearing a sleeveless shirt and shorts, showing off his massive, muscled arms. The outlines of his strength are evident in the cutting lines. "Or you think you know something."

I sit up. "This isn't about anything else. Just The Row."

"I've already figured out what I'm going to do," he says.

"Well ... what?"

"It's safer if you don't know," he grunts.

"So we're done?" I say.

He nods. "As far as The Row goes ... unless you want something to drink or eat." His voice tilts up at the end, a note of hope entering it. I know I should tell him no.

Instead, I smile. "Are you offering to cook me a meal?"

He laughs. It feels so normal and effortless despite everything—so natural. It's almost like we were destined to be together. I stop the thought before it can finish as if it will make any of this more manageable.

"I'm not much of a cook, but for you, I'll try." He stands up. "I'll check what we've got."

Once he leaves the room, I try to convince myself to get the heck out of there. "I've done my part," I try to reason with myself. I didn't have to tell him what Grace told me. He knows now and says he has a plan, but I don't want to leave even if I should. Even though Mom will be pissed, and the nerves twist through me at the idea of going all the way with him.

Nobody will see us together. My job can't end because of a meal .

When he returns, he's got this almost boyish look on his face. I think it's just the excitement of me saying I'd hang around for a while. It makes me grin and fills me with much more positive emotion than should be possible between us, considering everything.

"Pizza, okay?"

I laugh. "Pizza sounds perfect."

"I don't use this room much," he says when he sees me looking around his dining room at the tall ceiling and its sheer space.

"It's perfect for dates ..."

He shakes his head. "I meant what I said. I haven't dated in years."

"Even then," I murmur, remembering a shimmer dancing over me. "It wasn't like with us ..."

"Exactly," he growls.

"I didn't get a chance to ask what you meant by that."

"You shouldn't be asking now if this is strictly business."

"I am anyway," I say, then take a bite of my pepperoni pizza so I don't keep going. Do you feel the same as me? This crazy mixture of everything being new, exciting, dangerous, yet oh-so-natural?

“Natural,” he says, like he’s reading my thoughts. “That’s how it’s felt, being with you, but your mother is right. It hasn’t been long.”

“Is that all she’s right about?”

“I wasn’t lying about the health stuff,” he shrugs. “That’s life; it is what it is.”

“But ...” I almost chicken out but force myself to continue. “What do you want with me, then? I guess Mom had a point there.”

“I want you,” he says fiercely. “I can’t put a label or a trajectory on it. It’s probably damn unfair of me to even tell you this. Maybe your mom’s right. Maybe I mean too much for you to think clearly?—”

“I can make my own decisions,” I snap.

“Either way,” he remarks, “it makes no sense for me to tell you this. You’re just so damn beautiful, so kind, so intelligent, so sassy, so determined, so impressive.”

My body floods with so many warm emotions that it makes me suspicious.

“You think I’m love-bombing you,” he says, looking closely at me.

“It’s that obvious?”

“It makes sense. I met your father, remember? I know what he was like. What sort of man he was. I’m not, by the way. I’d never do that to you. I said all that because it’s the truth. You are an amazing person, whether or not you like me saying it.”

“I never knew my dad, not really,” I murmur, changing the subject. “I saw him hurt Mom sometimes if he was drunk. You saw the bruises.”

The mood darkens immediately. He clenches his fist, trembling. “Yeah, I did, and that’s why I pushed for you to stay with your mom. It was pretty damn obvious who was in the wrong there.”

“That wasn’t often.”

“Either way, it was evil,” he growls. “What happened to him?”

I shrug. “He went to jail for those four months, then he disappeared. He left. He never contacted us again. Mom said he once seemed scared when he called her from jail.”

“Good,” Landon snaps.

“I never saw him scared,” I say, a hopeless feeling gripping me. “Just big and tough and filled with rage. Mom always told these stories about what he was like before. It was almost like she was trying to convince me she had an excuse for being in this mess. He changed like that , apparently.” I snap my fingers.

“I saw it a couple of times,” Landon says. “He’d try to switch it up on me, but I knew what sort of man he was. I wouldn’t fall for his bullshit charm.”

“After it was all said and done, you scared him.”

“Did your mom tell you that?”

“It’s the only thing that makes sense. You scared him because there’s another side to you, right? There’s a demon in you.”

Landon unclenches his fist slowly. It looks like it takes a considerable effort. “Yeah, maybe there is. Or maybe I’m just a man who understands certain people will never learn their lesson. You’re right, Lily. I put the fear of God into your father. I held him

at gunpoint, and I said some seriously deranged things so he'd get the point, and I'd do it again."

"I'm not mad about that," I murmur. "I just wanted to know, but what about the other thing?"

"Are you wearing a wire?" he grunts, then stuffs a slice of pizza into his mouth.

"Hilarious," I snap.

"It's not necessarily a joke," he says after eating. "Just like there's a world where I'm love-bombing you, and everything I've said is bull, there's a world where your friends at work have asked you to record me. The thing is, Lily, I trust you. I killed that man."

He speaks so coldly, so savagely. It causes a weird sensation to dance through me, like a combination of lust and righteousness.

"What happened?" I whisper.

Landon stares at me. This is difficult, but he won't let it break him. He won't look away. "At the house, that monster admitted to ... hurting his daughter. He bragged about it to my face. I blacked out. When I woke up, I'd strangled the motherfucker. I was going to turn myself in, but the mother begged me not to. She said we could get away with it.

"My friend Ethan saved my ass. He has police contacts through his family. It was suspicious and close at certain points, but I got away with it. Carter's right. There's a demon in me. I won't deny it, but I think he and the rest of them are goddamn hypocrites for branding me the way they have. They would've done the same if they were in my position."

“Carter says we need to work inside the system,” I murmur.

“I don’t care what Carter says. I care what you think. Hearing the truth, do you hate me?”

“I could never hate you,” I whisper, warning myself to be careful, “but ...” This next bit will be painful. “I can’t be with you.”

“You can’t be seen with me,” he says. “Did they come outright and tell you they’d fire you?”

“They’re being sneaky about it.” I shrug. “It’s my job, Landon. It’s everything I ever wanted.”

“Nobody can see us now,” he says in that husky voice, sending tremors all over me.

“Yeah, but what about the future? We can’t exactly date like this.”

He smirks. Suddenly, all the darkness seeps out of the room. I wonder if he knows how impressive that is and how strong his effect on me is. Nobody else has ever even come close.

“I’m not thinking about the future,” he says.

“What did the doctor say?” I ask. “If you don’t mind me asking.”

“The big C. I’ll get more details the day after tomorrow, but he made it clear I had months. Months , and I’ve wasted so many years helping to tear relationships apart, milking idiots.”

“Why?” I ask. “If you hate it this much ...”

“That’s the thing. Before this diagnosis, I put little stock in how I felt or in what I wanted. I saw that there was a business opportunity. I promised Ethan I’d help, so that’s what I did. I lived my life on autopilot before ...”

His gaze lingers on me. “Your diagnosis?” I fill in.

“No,” he snarls. “Before I saw you. You’ve made me feel alive.”

“Don’t,” I whisper.

“Don’t tell you how perfect you are?”

“Every time you say something like that, it’s like a little shot of dopamine right in my brain.”

“Dopamine’s the pleasure chemical, right? Isn’t that a good thing?”

“No, because pleasure makes it hard to think clearly.”

He laughs ruefully, looking me up and down. “You don’t have to tell me that.” He stops smiling when he sees I’m being serious. “I know how it sounds, but it’s true. I saw you, and it was, like you said, a shot of dopamine ... or twenty.”

“You’re not tricking me?” I murmur. “You’re not just saying what you think I want to hear?”

“I wouldn’t fucking do that,” he growls. “Sorry. I didn’t mean to curse at you, but hell, it just makes me sick, even the idea of tricking you like that. You don’t deserve it. You’re too ...” He trails off when he realizes he’s about to go into another complimenting spree. “I’m not.”

“Were you telling the truth about not dating?”

“I told you—autopilot. I’ve been a logical, cold, shameless, capitalist killer until you.”

Another shiver moves through me. I squeeze my legs together under the table, relieved he can’t see because there’s so much inside me that’s telling me to leap across the table, grab him, and kiss him. This time, go further than we did last night.

“I should get going after this,” I say, nodding to the pizza. “Mom’s probably wondering where I am.”

He nods, picking up another slice.

We eat without talking for a few minutes. I’m surprised by how comfortable it feels. It almost gives me long-term couple vibes, but then I’m hit with the cold fact that we can never have that. Fantasizing about it is useless, even masochistic.

“What are your plans for the rest of the night?” I ask.

He shakes his head. “You can’t know that.”

“They have something to do with The Row?”

“Are you trying to get yourself in trouble?” he says.

“There isn’t a case there, is there?” I go on. “What are you going to get them on? Will you get the parents to testify that their kids are being groomed?”

He runs his hand through his hair. “Lily, I’m not telling you a damn thing, but let’s just say this. Damon made a mistake pushing a man who has nothing to lose.”

“What does that mean?” I snap, horrible images flashing across my mind. “What are you going to do?”

“I can’t tell you,” he snarls, “but I know one thing. I won’t let them hurt those kids.”

“But—”

“You need to stop asking,” he cuts me off. “What good can it do, Lily? This is out of your hands now. If you’re even a small part of this, you and Carter will lose your jobs, right?” I reluctantly nod. “So leave it alone. Anyway, it’s not like we’re?—”

“Just because we’re not going to get married one day, it doesn’t mean I can’t care,” I hiss. “Just because you’re going to ...” Tears abruptly spring to my eyes. It must be the quickest I’ve ever gone from dry-eyed to crying. I wipe angrily at my face. “Just because you’re ill, it doesn’t mean I want anything bad to happen to you.”

He reaches across the table and takes my hand. Until now, we’ve both been careful not to touch each other. We know that any contact is a risk of us never letting go. He holds my hand, smoothing his thumb over my knuckles.

“Everything’s going to be okay,” he says.

I laugh away a sob. “That’s just silly. How can you say that?”

“Your life is going to be okay ... better than okay. You’re going to make such a difference.”

“I don’t want you to go,” I whisper, my voice cracking. The tears flood from my eyes, flowing down my cheeks now. My vision blurs from the crying. It’s like two different versions of reality clash together. I see the younger version of Landon and now this one, and then the younger, past and present, clashing.

“Lily,” he says passionately, walking around the table and leaning down into a hug.

I stand up, meeting him halfway, pushing my face against his chest. When I was driving over here, I seriously thought I’d be able to hold my emotions inside. I thought I could go into work mode and switch them off, but that seems like a joke now.

Wrapping my arms around him, I dig my fingernails in, clutching onto him tightly. I can’t believe somebody so solid, so real and vital to me, impossibly significant, won’t be here anymore.

“Lily,” he whispers, stroking his hand through my hair. “It’s going to be okay. I promise.”

“Not for you,” I moan.

He kisses the tears from my cheek, cradling my face and brushing hair from my eyes. “Your life, though,” he goes on, smiling tragically. I can tell he’s just trying to brighten me up despite the pain he must be feeling. “We got to share this time, at least. If you leave here and decide you want nothing to do with me—this meal, last night, the restaurant—I’ll count myself lucky to have had that.”

I try to fight off the tears. I try to tell myself it could be one giant love bomb, but I can’t. I push myself against him again. He holds me for what feels like a long time, whispering that it’ll be okay over and over. He sounds desperate for me to understand, to believe.

“It would’ve been better if I’d left you alone,” he groans. “Then you’d have nothing to miss.”

“No,” I say passionately, his words jolting me from the sadness. “I feel the same. I’m

happy we've shared what we have, and maybe we can share more. Maybe we can do this again, and you can give me a rundown of what happened?"

"Lily ..."

"I know." I squeeze onto his arms, feeling the solidness, the permanence. "I shouldn't be asking this. I'm sending so many mixed signals. I know all that, but I can't leave here thinking we'll never see each other again."

He brings his lips to mine in a searingly passionate kiss. I grip the back of his neck like I'm holding on for my life, and maybe I am, in some sense. I'm holding onto a version of romance I never thought I'd experience—my knight—and I don't care how cheesy that is.

He grabs my hips, gently pushing me away as he leans back. "You drive me too wild, Lily. You know what you're making me think, making me want ..."

I almost reach out and start stroking the front of his pants, but then a bout of nerves grips me. With so much serious stuff going on, it's frustrating even to be thinking about my virginity. But I can't just suddenly become some sex goddess for him.

He reads me, taking another step back. "Your mom will probably wonder where you are."

"Yeah," I say, "but we'll talk soon, right?"

He nods. "I can see you out."

We don't kiss again. I think he's trying to be a gentleman. As I leave his apartment building, it's as if I'm walking out of a dream. I came here determined to keep us separate, to walk that line between need and knowing we're never going to work, but

I didn't walk it. I stumbled. I wanted to stumble, and now I want to do it again.

Maybe there's something wrong with me for not caring about the apple tree case, believing him so easily, or crying so fiercely for a man I should be able to let go.

Already, I'm waiting to hear from him. I was supposed to be content to let this case go, but I can't.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

LANDON

After Lily leaves, I take a few minutes to calm myself down. I've never experienced that level of emotion before. When she was crying, it was like something was breaking apart inside of me. All I wanted was to make her better. All I wanted was to make it so she'd never have to cry again.

Pure delusion. I'm not going to be her "ever" anything. Months together, then what? Shatter her heart when I go?

I stalk into my bedroom and grab my gun and my digital camera. The camera is high-end. It was a gift from Dad the last time he was in the States. I'd made an offhand comment about being interested in photography. Dad took it to heart. I haven't used the damn thing, which is points in the bad-son column, but it'll come in handy now.

Dressing all in black, I know this is a moment the old Landon would snap to his senses. He'd feel like the world's biggest ass as he looked at himself in the mirror, black hood pulled up, black jeans, black boots, with a gun at his back. He'd think, "What are you doing, jackass? Who do you think you are?"

Yet I don't have any of those doubts or hesitations. I get in my car, ready to do whatever needs to be done. Driving to the outskirts of The Row, I go into a convenience store and grab a bottle of whiskey and a brown bag. Then I pull my goods up and start half stumbling, half walking through the neighborhood.

I've got the camera in my hoodie pocket, and the pistol is in a chest holster. It's slightly less convenient, but I can hide it with my hoodie. I stumble to the apartments opposite The Bear, dropping down against a wall and sitting on the sidewalk. A block over, another drunk is wailing into the night.

I just sit here, occasionally taking a pretend sip from the bottle. I don't care how long I have to wait. The Bear is quiet for the first hour, but then people begin to arrive, and the music starts. Nobody looks my way. I spot Damon and a few men I recognize from before. My hand twitches for the gun.

I focus. The last thing I need is to black out like I did on the apple tree job, only this time, with a pistol in my hand.

My body begins to ache about two hours in, and I need to take a leak. I seem invisible as I sit here and sip. Nobody gives a damn about some drunk homeless guy in a neighborhood that's full of them. I just keep waiting. I don't care how long it takes or if my bladder bursts.

Finally, at around half past midnight, the music gets much quieter. About ten minutes later, men swagger from the bar, heading to the apartment building on the other side of the street. I take out the camera and set it in my lap, covering the light with my hand when I click record. I don't know if the angle is any good. I can't move around too much or make it too obvious.

Then I see him, the sick fuck. I watch as Damon walks, like the biggest, baddest man who ever lived, right up to a window and knocks on it. He must say something, but I can't hear. I see it, though. As the window opens, I watch a boy, maybe a teenager, jump out. He's laughing.

The sick fuck has convinced them he's their friend until he has enough, and then ... I take a risk, adjusting the camera so I can see the viewscreen. I get a video of Damon

lifting one girl from her bedroom window.

“Uncle Damon,” she calls out loud enough for me to hear.

I’d wonder how this could be possible, but I’ve seen enough deadbeat, junkie parents to understand how it could happen. Their parents are probably passed out, not even thinking of their kids, too doped up to be jolted from sleep. Or maybe Damon has even paid some of them off.

The men return to the bar with around six children, walking around to a side exit. I have to stop myself from following them. I have to remind myself that they won’t hurt them, or they haven’t yet .

I will need to get this video to Ethan, who can get it to his cop buddies. Then I’ll give them twenty-four hours to shut this shit down, or I’ll go nuclear. I can’t leave this life knowing this is still happening.

Once the street is quiet again—not a single parent has raised the alarm—I move around to the side of The Bear. They’ve taken them to a small basement door that could be missed easily. I get some extra footage of that, take a piss in the alleyway, and then return to my spot.

I can’t leave until I see those kids back in their homes. I wonder if I should call the cops. I could tell them that kidnapped children are in the basement of The Bear right now. The cops have been called before, and nothing has happened. Still, surely, I have to try.

My primary concern is that these freaks haven’t hurt the kids yet . If they suddenly hear sirens—and somehow hide the kids or grease the cops—then I might force their hand. Maybe they’ll realize they need to speed up this sick process.

I chew the inside of my cheek, wishing the world was simpler, wishing I could just go in there and challenge Damon to a fair fight. A rat like him, dealing in the sick shit he does, would never agree to it, but if he had the stones, it would make this so much easier for everybody involved.

Taking out my cell to check the time, I almost instinctively call Lily. The quick dinner and all those revelations at the apartment have made me feel even closer to my mortality. It's like having a small preview of what we could share if given a chance, but it has hammered home the fact that I'll never have that chance.

I put my cell away, still chewing the inside of my cheek. Insane visions tempt me as I sit here, trying not to think about her, but I see the future—an impossible one. Regardless, I see her sitting with a baby in her arms. I see her smiling at me during a celebration dinner after she gets promoted. I see her moaning with her wedding dress draped over the end of the bed, tearing her nails down my back.

Blinking, I rub my eyes. I need to get a hold of myself. She's brought so much to the surface.

What the hell am I going to do? I take out my cell again. The cold, ugly truth is that those men could do anything to those kids, but they're probably still in the grooming stage.

I stand up, put my hand on my chest, and feel the gun. This is driving me nuts. Then it hits me like a cold slap in the face. Lily was right. Things like this have been happening all over the city, and I was in my penthouse or a high-rise someplace, severing marriages.

I've got to decide?—

A scream cuts through my thoughts—a child's, high-pitched and terrified. It's

muffled coming from the back of the bar, but then I hear another.

I'm running fast, no longer thinking or feeling anything other than cold and focused. The basement door is metal and looks difficult to open from the outside. I take out my P365 and use the butt to hammer it over and over until I feel it open.

Quickly, I move to the side of the door and into the shadows. I'm not blacked out this time, but the same cold aggression has gripped me. The same feeling I experienced when I tied that man's body up in the tree.

A burly man walks up the stairs. "What the ..."

I dive on him and smash the gun over his head. He stumbles and falls to his knees. I hit him again, and he falls flat on his face. He won't be out for long, but he'll be damn groggy when he wakes up. Moving fast, I aim my gun down the basement stairs.

When I turn the corner, the door at the end of the narrow hallway bursts open, and a little girl runs out.

"Will somebody get her?" a man's voice roars. I'm sure it's Damon.

Staring at my gun, the girl freezes when she sees me. She's got a red braid over one shoulder, and her eyes are the same shade of red, bloodshot and full of pain. She's been crying.

"I won't hurt you," I tell her.

Damon appears in the doorway behind her, a grin on his face. "You brave bastard."

"This shit ends tonight," I snarl, pointing the gun at his head.

“Is that so?”

“I will fucking end you,” I snap.

Damon snorts and gestures to the room behind him. “If you fire a single shot, what do you think happens to those kids there?”

“Do you have any idea how sick you are?”

“We’re playing video games. Relax.”

“Is that why she’s crying?”

“I want to go home,” the girl whimpers, squeezing herself against the wall like she thinks she will disappear.

“Let all the kids out. Now.”

“If you shoot me, you’re a dead man.”

I walk forward slowly, my gun trained on him the whole time, waiting for any movement. He’s got his hands up. The closer I get, the more terrified he looks.

“Make a move,” I say when I’m halfway down the hallway. “Give me a fucking excuse. You’ve been around killers before. Look at me and tell me I’m bluffing.”

He swallows as I dart my hand out and grab the front of his shirt. I pull him roughly against me and then wrap an arm around him, putting my gun to his head. Then I kick the door open the rest of the way to find a small entertainment room, a flat-screen TV on one wall with a video game setup with the kids huddled around it.

Men stand in a circle around the kids, none of them with their guns out, but all with hands near their hips, the implication clear.

“You’re all pathetic,” I snap. “You’re all scum. Those kids are all walking out of here right now. They’re going home. If you try to stop them, I’m going to kill your boss right here.”

None of them laugh or show any sign that they think I’m bluffing. They exchange looks of complete horror. They know another killer when they see one. They know I’m more than capable of doing this. They must be able to tell.

“Boss?” one of the men grunts.

Damon stiffens against me. “Go on, kids. Go on home. Fun time’s over. Little Gracey ruined it for you all.”

Grace . The girl in the hallway. That was the name Lily gave me when this started, the moment I saw her again after all those years. Grace is the girl trying to do the right thing.

The kids stand, all looking petrified, more like cattle than children. They walk in a docile way out of the door and down the hallway. I look behind me, watching them leave, keeping the gun to Damon’s head the whole time.

“Now what, tough guy?” Damon says, doing a half-decent job of hiding the fear from his voice, but there’s nothing he can do about the stiffness in his body. He can’t hide that.

“Now, you shut The Bear down and never come back.”

“Ha ha,” Damon says.

“Tell your cartel buddies you waited too long. The place got too hot. You’ll have to find somewhere else.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

I slowly back out of the room, keeping Damon close, never relieving the pressure of the pistol’s barrel against the side of his head. He needs to understand that I’ll pull the trigger any time. His men stalk after me slowly, cramming into the hallway, all looking ready.

“Going to be difficult to walk backward up those steps, buddy,” Damon says.

“We’ll figure it out,” I grunt, backstepping as I drag him after me.

He groans and struggles not to fall on his ass, but I keep dragging him until we’re in the cold night air. It feels like an eternity since we’ve been down there. The kids are walking across the street, all except the girl with the red braid, who lingers near a trashcan. Damon’s man is leaning against the wall, his hand on his head, looking confused.

“Go home,” I snap at the girl, Grace.

The girl’s voice is hollow, too jaded for anyone her age or anybody. “Shoot him, mister. Shoot him!”

“Oh, how lovely, Gracey,” Damon says with shit-eating sarcasm.

I twist the barrel of the gun, causing him to whine and shift against me. He quickly cuts it off when he remembers his men can see and hear us, but I can sense how much effort it takes him.

“I heard you talking! You said you were going to put us in trucks,” Grace yells.

“Eavesdropping little bitch.”

I snap—a mini blackout—and when I “wake up,” I realize I’ve smashed Damon over the back of the head with my gun. His men rush toward me. I catch Damon before he can fall, then heft his body up, putting the gun against his head again.

“Grace,” I say over my shoulder.

“Yeah?”

“I need your help.”

The little girl is heartbreakingly eager. “Yeah?”

“I’ve got a digital camera in my pocket. I want you to take it out and start recording.”

“Yes, sir,” she says right away.

“What game are you playing?” Damon groans, slowly returning to his senses.

“This isn’t a fucking game,” I growl, resisting the urge to hit him again ... for now.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

LILY

“I ’m so happy you’re as crazy as me,” I whisper as I put a playing card on the coffee table.

Maddie grins over at me from the other side as she places a card down. “Who can say no to a sleepover? Anyway, I’m not the one with work tomorrow.”

“Work,” I say, nodding, my stomach tight. “Yeah, but I know I’m not going to sleep. He’s doing something tonight. I don’t know what it is. It sounded like he planned to get reckless, but he wouldn’t tell me.”

“Because you’re not supposed to know,” Maddie says lightly. “Are you? Unless you want to lose your job ...”

“I don’t want that, obviously,” I sigh, placing another card now. “Snap,” I add halfheartedly. “You let me win that one.”

“Anything so you wipe that look off your face.”

“Can I genuinely care this much?”

“Can you care? What do you mean?” Maddie asks.

“I don’t even know him, but I want to be with him now and in the future. I want to

see where it goes, but that's the cruel thing. It's not going to go anywhere. It can't."

"Not everything has to go somewhere," Maddie says, shrugging. "Maybe you could have some fun?"

"I broke down on him," I tell her. "I couldn't stop crying. I couldn't stop hating that he was going to leave me, and that was after days . After weeks, months, I think it'd break me."

"I'm so sorry, Lily. I wish I had answers."

"I'm just glad you're here."

We play quietly some more, and then Maddie says, "If you think he's doing something tonight, you could text him and ask. You could explain that you know you said you didn't want to know, but it's eating you up. It's not like work has the right to check your personal cell, so they'd never know."

"That work situation is a joke, anyway," I snap.

"I wish you'd recorded Carter saying all that stuff."

"Me too," I say. "He was smart. He didn't give me a chance. I bet he'll never admit it again, but I saw the director's face. She's definitely pissed at me."

"But he told you the truth ... and you don't think he did anything wrong?"

I haven't told Maddie about the apple tree job, but she knows I know what happened. I nod. "I can see why Carter resents him, but hating him is unfair ." I grab my phone. "You know what? I'm going to do it right now."

When I look at my screen, my mouth falls open.

“What’s wrong?” Maddie says.

“He’s called me seven times in the last ten minutes. My phone’s been on silent.”

“Call him back!”

I quickly press the call button. He answers after not even a full ring.

“Lily,” he says. “I’m sending somebody to get you and your mom right now.”

“Wait, what?”

“I can’t explain, but it’s unsafe for you there.”

“Where are you?” I demand.

“At The Row with Grace and her mom.”

“Grace ... the girl with the red braid?”

“Pack a bag, enough for a couple of days at least.”

“But—”

“Please,” he snaps. “I can’t lose you. I can’t even imagine it. Please, Lily, listen to me and trust me.”

“You’re scaring me,” I whisper.

“You trusted me before,” he growls. “When I told you that you and your mom would be happy, that you’d find a way out of the stress and pain, you didn’t believe it. I could see it in your eyes, Lily. You were so scared, so beaten down. I told you to trust me, and you said you did. Do the same now. Keep your cell on loud. My friend will be there soon.”

He hangs up.

“Maddie, you need to go home,” I say.

“What, why?”

“Because Damon knows where I live, but he doesn’t know about you. Go out the back door and get home fast, okay? Text me when you’re there.”

“Are you serious?”

My voice breaks. “You have to, Maddie.”

Mom leaps up from her chair when the apartment buzzer goes off. It feels like something cuts through me, too. She shoulders her bag. “Is it ... him?”

Her emphasis on him makes me wonder if she’s talking about Landon or Damon. I go to the front window and look out at the street. Then I check my phone. Landon sent me a photo of Ethan, his business partner. “It’s him,” I say. “Our ride.”

“Are we sure about this?”

“Would you prefer to wait here for the Irish mob to show up, Mom? Landon is doing this for us, to keep us safe.” I turn to Mom, finding her frowning at me. “You can look at me like that all you want. I’m saying this because it’s true, or do you think he

made up the mob and The Bear, too? Do you think he invented it all?

“Of course not,” Mom whispers.

“We have to go. Come on.”

I take her hand, and we leave the apartment and go to the main entrance together. Ethan is tall and wide, built similarly to Landon, except he looks a little slicker, a little less genuine somehow. Perhaps a bit more corporate, but he’s here, helping us, so I should probably stop judging.

“Lily?” he says. “And Vivian?”

“Yes, hello.” Mom steps forward and offers her hand. “It’s nice to meet you.”

“And you,” Ethan says. “I wish it could be under different circumstances. I hear you are staying with me for a couple of days?”

“If that’s okay?—”

“You’re more than welcome. Let’s go. Mind if I drive?”

I know why he’s saying that—extra precautions. They don’t want Damon to be able to track us. Ethan leads us across the street to a sleek black sedan, precisely the car I’d imagine him driving. We put our bags in the trunk, and then Mom and I get into the backseat.

“Is Landon okay?” I ask as Ethan starts the engine.

“He’s safe,” Ethan replies, “but I don’t know much. He just told me I had to come and get you, so that’s what I did. I asked if he was safe. He said he was, but that’s all

the information he'd give me. He's been acting strange since ..."

"I know about his diagnosis," I mutter.

"He hasn't been himself," Ethan says. "Or, maybe, he has been himself."

"Huh?" I say.

Ethan shakes his head slowly. "I don't know. Sometimes, I wonder if Landon even really knows who he is. Sometimes, I think he went from dedicating his life to the pro bono work to our business because ..."

"You helped him," I say. "He told me."

Ethan flinches. "He talked to you about that ?"

"Yeah," I say, glancing at Mom. "Sorry, Mom. I can't say."

Mom waves a hand. "This is all crazy enough without adding more madness on top of it."

Ethan takes a corner, running his other hand through his hair. "I helped him, so he decided to help me with the business. The thing with Landon is—or was—that he doesn't place much stock on his happiness. He performs. He rises to the occasion. He's become richer than God, but I think he didn't stop to think if it was what he truly wanted. Since it was what I wanted, maybe he just went along with it."

Ethan sighs. "Sorry, ladies. I didn't mean to unload."

"Don't be sorry," I say quickly. "I should be saying thank you for this insight into Landon."

“Since his diagnosis, and since ...” He glances in the rearview.

“What?” I whisper.

“Since he ran into you again, Lily, he’s finally thinking about what he wants. You’ve helped him discover himself more in a few days than anyone else could have in years. That’s why he’s doing this. That’s why he finds our work hollow now. I can’t even blame him for it. I want him to be happy with whatever time he has left.”

The last bit makes me wrap my arms across my middle. I feel tired, drawn out, and aching emotional. Mom reaches across and touches my hand. I’m shocked she’d offer support when it comes to this.

“Ethan,” Mom says.

“Yes?”

“Tell us about Landon’s girlfriends.”

That gets a rueful laugh from him. “His what?”

“His girlfriends. His dating life.”

“Why?” Ethan asks.

“Why don’t you want to tell me?” Mom counters. “Is there something you’d like to hide?”

“No, but if you want me to start dishing out dirt on my friend, you’ll need one hell of a reason.”

“My daughter is in love with him?—”

“Mom.”

“I want to know he isn’t love-bombing her. He’s older than her, you might’ve noticed.”

“Mom, I’m an adult, sentient person who, you might have noticed , had to grow up fast,” I snap.

Ethan doesn’t say anything for a while. “Landon hasn’t dated in years,” he says after the tension has passed. “Even when he was on the dating scene, it would be a couple a year, and those were mostly double dates I’d drag him along to. Once, I asked him if he ever wanted to find a woman and settle down. Rich, coming from me ...”

“What did he say?” I murmur, trying to hide how achingly bad I want to learn more about him.

“He said, sometimes when he was out in public, he’d look at married couples who were in love. The happy few, he called them. He said if he ever found a woman he could imagine experiencing that with, he’d snap her up in a second, but he didn’t sound optimistic.”

“Why?”

“There’s a demon in him, he said. Maybe because of the ...”

“I know,” I whisper, so he doesn’t have to reference the apple tree job again.

“He said it made him cold when he needed it, but it’s why he’d never be able to find a woman. You know his brother died suddenly, too.”

“Charley,” I murmur. “I remember from when I was a kid. Do you, Mom? He talked about it.”

“A heart attack, the poor man,” Mom murmurs.

“After that, he was even colder than usual, even more logical. You can never fault Landon for being logical, but sometimes, that works against him. Sometimes, it’s like he’s built a prison for himself.”

I’m trying to help him to break out. That goes unspoken. I’d probably sound like a dork if I said it aloud. I wanted to call him and check if he was doing okay, but he refused to answer once he knew I was with Ethan.

“We’re almost there,” he says.

“Has he told you what he’s doing?”

“The right thing,” Ethan says. “It’s the only thing he knows how to do.”

I want to ask Ethan to be more specific, but I can’t push this too far. Instead, I sit back and rest my forehead against the window, thinking of Landon being alone for years, never knowing if he would find somebody. That’s the difference between him and me. As messed up as it is, I thought I’d found my knight in shining armor the first time I saw him.

Sure, it was a girlish crush. He was an inspiration. I couldn’t have known he would one day be the man for me. Yet silly and immature or not, I always had that fantasy to keep me going, at least. When I felt lonely or hopeless, I could think of him. Obviously, he wasn’t thinking of me. He had nobody. He was cold.

“Lily,” Mom whispers.

“I’m fine,” I say, angrily rubbing my hand over my cheek. “What am I going to do about work tomorrow?”

“You’ll have to call in sick,” Ethan says. “It’s Saturday the day after. Do you work Saturdays?”

“Not this week.”

“Then yeah, call in sick, take the weekend, and hopefully, this will be sorted by next week.”

“The mob ... sorted , how?”

“Landon will find a way,” Ethan snaps, then clams up.

I sigh and stare out the window until we get to his apartment. Ethan helps us carry the bags to the underground parking lot’s elevator. The urge to scream is almost overwhelming as we ride it up together. How can I stay here, hiding away from the world, when Landon’s helping people?

“What happens if we want to leave?” I ask.

“Why would we do that?” Mom snaps. “We should be grateful. If bad men are after us ...”

“I’m just asking.”

“I’m not going to stop you,” Ethan says. “I can’t legally keep you here, but I’ve never heard Landon like that. He made me promise to protect you. He sounded committed and seriously passionate about it. He would never forgive himself if you left here and something happened to you, Lily.”

“Okay, I get it,” I tell him, guilt pulsing through me. “I’m not going to run. I’m not going to do that to him.”

A bitter voice reminds me that I have to remember about my job. If anybody sees us together ...

The elevator door opens. A woman is lounging on the hallway chair, wearing nothing but a robe. She stands up when she sees us, brushing herself down.

“Are these your friends?” she says anxiously. She’s got a British accent.

“I said you could wait in the bedroom, Rosie,” Ethan replies.

“Are they staying with us?”

“With us ?” Ethan says, shaking his head. “Jesus, we talked about this ...”

The woman frowns. She has a dignified look despite her messy hair and her outfit. “That isn’t very gentlemanly to say in front of company.”

Ethan glances at us, gritting his teeth, and not from the effort of holding our bags. “Rosita?—”

“So we’re back to formal names now,” the woman utters. “Oh, excuse me, ladies.” She sneers over at us. “I just hope you know what sort of man you’re dealing with. He’ll turn a business meeting into a date, into drinks, then act as if you’re trying to marry him for making a simple comment.”

“Let’s talk in private,” Ethan says, stepping forward.

“I knew I should’ve stuck with the other one,” she snaps. “My good boy Landon

would never treat a lady like this.”

She struts away. I gasp, a chord of shock jolting through me. Ethan drops the bags and follows Rosita, who is babbling. I hear the word sorry at least three times before they disappear around the corner.

“She said Landon,” Mom mutters.

“I heard her,” I snap.

“Ethan said he never dated, but she said?—”

“Mom.” I spin on her. “Just listen to me, please. I heard her, and I don’t want to talk about it.” When she opens her mouth to say something, I raise my hand. “It’s been about the longest day of my life. I don’t know what she meant, but I trust Landon, and that’s that.”

Mom lowers her gaze and allows a slight nod, but I can see how badly she wants to start tearing into Landon even now, despite everything he’s going through. She’s too scarred by my father, by the love-bombing crap. I wish I could say it was just her, though. I feel the same uncertainty. Why would she say that about Landon?

Ethan returns a minute later. “Sorry about that. Let me show you to your rooms.”

“Can I ask something?” Mom says.

I glare at her. I don’t want to get into this now. Landon can explain it to me himself. I meant what I said. I trust him, even if Mom doesn’t understand that.

“Where is your bathroom?” Mom asks.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

LONDON

“We can’t initiate combat,” Lex Hayes tells me on the phone.

I’m sitting in Grace’s living room. She and her mom are in the bedroom, sleeping. My gun is on the table, and morning sunlight filters through the curtains. There’s no sign of Damon or his cronies, not yet. I’ve called Hayes Securities, the top protection firm in the city.

“However, if we witness a crime, we’re allowed to take reasonable steps, and of course, we can protect our client, sir.”

“So you can protect me,” I mutter. “If I happen to be across the street from a mob bar, and those mobsters happen to want to start something, you’ll stick to your post?”

“The cost would increase steeply,” Lex says, “but that is something we can accommodate.”

I nod. “Then let’s talk numbers.”

For the next twenty minutes, we arrange for me to pay Lex and his men a quarter of my net worth for one week of protection. I’m not sure what I’ll do after this week is over. I sent Ethan the video I took last night, and he’s replied telling me two things: he’ll get it to his police contacts, and the ladies have settled into their rooms.

I purposefully didn't ask any follow-up questions. I want to see Lily so bad, to hold her. My end already seemed so close because of the diagnosis, but last night, it could've happened at any moment. I've watched the video Grace took. She was only recording to stop them from doing anything stupid.

It shows me backing into the apartment, then throwing Damon out and slamming the door at the last second. Then I grab the camera and aim it through the small window. Damon gets close, slowly grinning like a horror movie villain.

"Have a good night, my friend. Enjoy it. Savor it."

Then he stares, his implication clear. Soon, I won't be able to savor anything.

He turns and gestures to his men, and they walk across the street.

I shut off the video, pick up my gun, toss it from hand to hand. Lex and his men are going to be here soon. They will set up a contingent in the street, around the bar, and at the rear of the apartment building. Lily and Vivian are in Ethan's penthouse, which has round-the-clock security. There's no way Damon would be stupid enough to attack anybody in a neighborhood that expensive.

I quickly tuck the gun under the table when the bedroom door whines open. Grace stands in the doorway, a terrified little girl trying so hard to be tough. It breaks my heart because I've seen that exact look before.

"Mom is still asleep." She shuts the door behind her. "Can I braid my hair, Mister Landon?"

"You don't have to ask, Grace."

She sits cross-legged on the floor, yawning. She has that demeanor that many kids in

her position get in my experience. She can't imagine this not being her life. She's calm in the chaos like Lily was ... or tried to be.

"Are they coming back?" she asks.

"I don't know," I tell her truthfully, "but I'm going to keep you and your mom safe."

"Are you going to keep the others safe, too?" She's looking at me in the reflection of the turned-off TV.

Maybe I should lie to her, tell her I can't be sure, but even if she's staring from a reflection, it's still a plea I can't ignore. She reminds me of why I spent so long doing pro bono work. "Yes," I bark. "I won't let anything happen to anyone in this building. Soon, those men will be gone, and that bar will disappear."

She turns to me, a big grin on her face. I smile at her, but deep down, I know I shouldn't have said that.

"Do you know the other one? Lily?"

"The other what?"

She blinks at me like it's obvious. "The other hero."

I shake my head. "I know Lily."

She giggles. "Then why did you do this, silly?" She shakes her head overdramatically, causing her braid to spin around her neck. "Oops."

Because I don't consider myself a hero, but that's depressing to say to a kid. I chuckle. That's the beautiful and magical thing about kids. No matter what, they can

find a way to laugh and be happy about the small stuff.

“I know Lily,” I tell her.

Grace lights up. “That’s so cool. She was so nice. If I ever had a big sister, I’d want her to be like Lily. Lily said she’s going to help me, too.”

“She’s the reason I’m here.”

“Whoa. Really?”

“If it weren’t for her, I wouldn’t be here,” I say honestly. “I might’ve tried to get a case going, but I wouldn’t have hired security. I wouldn’t have done what I did last night. She’s the reason I keep going. I inspired her to get into social work, but she inspires me .”

Grace laughs again. “Is Lily your girlfriend ?”

“I wish,” I say, getting another laugh. “Do you want to watch TV?”

“Yeah. Can I choose?”

“Sure.”

“They’re sleeping right now,” Ethan tells me thirty minutes later. I’m making myself some coffee in their little rundown kitchen. There are pill bottles in half the cupboards, some with pills, others for the trash. “I’m pretty sure they are, anyway. I can knock lightly if you want to talk to her?”

“No, don’t do that. Let her sleep.” I force myself to say this, but it’s not easy. The urge to hear her voice is real. “How did she seem?”

“Shaken up, but she’s strong. I can tell that. I might’ve said more than I should have.”

“How so?”

“Vivian asked about your dating life. I think she was in mother-bear mode, you know. I told them the stuff you said to me once about never being able to find a lady.”

“Until Lily,” I growl. “Maybe it’s a good thing. Maybe she’ll know how special she is now.”

“What are you doing, Landon? Exactly?”

“It’s better if you don’t know,” I tell him. “Just try to get your cop buddies interested in that video. Somebody has to care.”

“I’ve sent it to two friends from ... the time before.” He’s talking about the apple tree. “But this is different. This is the mob.”

“Just let me know what they say,” I snap.

He sighs. “I will, but don’t get your hopes up. I can’t make any promises here.”

“But she seemed okay?”

“Yeah, man. She did. Maybe you should call her.”

“She can’t be part of this,” I snap. “It’s too dangerous. As long as she’s okay.”

“Yes, Landon, she’s okay.”

I sense the sarcasm in his voice. I must've used the word okay about twenty goddamn times.

“Good.”

“Just be careful, brother.”

“Or what? I'm dead anyway.”

“Jesus, Landon.”

“I'm sorry. That was too much.”

I hang up, feeling glum and way too ready for more violence. It's like my frantic energy comes from knowing that I have to handle Damon and his goons if I'm going to spend time with my Lily. My Lily? I don't care how it sounds, dammit. I'm going to think of her that way. It feels true. When she broke down last night, holding me, I felt closer to her than I ever have to anybody.

Ethan was right to tell her I'd sometimes look at the happy few married couples in public, on some level, wishing I could have the same. Though on another level, even more profound, I knew I never could. Something in me makes me cold, and Lily sees it. She accepts it.

Lex calls me when he's outside, as I requested. He's waiting for me outside his black jeep. Three men stand in a perimeter around the vehicle, all young with military-style haircuts. Lex is around my age with a Marine cut and the bearing of a soldier.

He approaches me and offers his hand. “Sir.”

“Please, call me Landon. Let's go inside, Lex.”

He motions to his men, whirling his hand around in a circle. His men immediately disperse and begin looking for places to watch, to wait. Lex follows me into the apartment. Grace has disappeared back into the bedroom.

“Coffee?” I offer.

“Sure, thank you.”

“So,” I go on, “how does this work?” I pour him a cup.

He narrows his eyes in confusion. I can see the businessman in him resisting the urge to say, We spoke about this on the phone , which is true. We did.

“What if I want to put the son of a bitch in the dirt myself?”

“Premeditated murder, Landon?” Lex says.

“You know the person we’re talking about. You know what he was planning.”

“Still,” Lex says, shaking his head slowly, “it’s more than I can officially discuss.”

“Officially ...” I step forward, looking at him in the eye, man to man. “You’ve most likely been places and done things I can’t imagine doing, Lex. I’m the one who should be calling you, sir . The cold, ugly fact is that I’ve spent years shamelessly making as much money as possible. I’ll give you another fifty percent if you agree to one simple thing.”

He swallows and glances at the door like he thinks we’ll be overheard, but I can see the second he decides. His eyes harden. I read his history online. I know he’s served five tours. I know he’s been in combat countless times and worked with politicians, some on the shady side.

“What would that be?” he asks.

“If a body needs disappearing, make it disappear. Make it so it can never be linked back to me. That’s it. All it takes is a nod. I’ll add the money as a performance bonus at the end of the week.”

He internally debates it again but then nods at me in a small, decisive motion.

“Awesome.” I grin. “Shall we discuss the protection area, then?”

He snaps back to professional mode. “Certainly, si—Landon.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

LILY

“Is it a bug?” Carter asks down the phone.

Guilt and shame twist through me as I make my voice raspy. I’ve always prided myself on never calling in sick to work, even when working at the pizza joint as a teenager.

“I think so,” I say. “Hopefully, it’s just a twenty-four-hour thing. I should be good for Monday.”

“Yeah, well, just rest up,” he says. “We don’t want you infecting the whole office.”

“Sorry for leaving you in the lurch.”

“You can’t help it if you’re ill.”

I hang up, then roll over and lie on my side. The sun is beginning to rise, glowing through the curtains. I’ve slept fitfully, with my thoughts shackled to Landon. I had to set an alarm to call in sick, but now, I should get more sleep.

Instead, I go to mine and Landon’s text conversation. My stomach is tight after what that English lady said—implying she and Landon were a thing. Maybe she was trying to hurt Ethan, tell a lie to wound him during an argument? There are bigger things to worry about now, mainly Landon’s safety.

Breaking the no-talking rule, I write, Are you okay? I know you want to focus, but I can't stop thinking about something terrible happening.

He replies quickly, making me think he's been waiting for this. I wonder if he's been feeling the urge to contact me as strongly as I have to contact him. I'm okay. I'm doing my best. I can't get into specifics but know I'm thinking about you, Lily. I miss you badly. I wish we could've shared everything we did under different circumstances.

We'll get our chance , I type, my emotions suddenly rising close to the surface. I've nearly cried too many times recently.

You don't have to commit to anything now.

We can find a way , I reply, not thinking about work for a moment, about Carter, the director, the threat of losing my job. Just come back safely and soon.

I'm doing my best, he texts. Nothing would make me happier than finding a way with you, whatever that means for us, however long it lasts. But I don't want to hurt you.

Maybe being apart from you hurts even more.

You're so damn sweet. So perfect. Let's talk more when this is over.

I almost type, " I want to help , " but I can't. I have to be strong. I have to remember the consequences. Helping Landon means losing my job and being unable to help more kids.

I'm sorry for making it hard for you to focus.

You're the reason I can focus on this at all, he tells me. Without you, I never

would've felt this passion again.

Is that a good thing? Is it good that he feels like this—ready to tear the world apart? He should spend his final days with his loved ones, savoring the time he has left, but I heard Ethan. Before me, he never cared about stuff like that. He never cared about himself or his own feelings.

I wish I could help.

You can help me by keeping yourself safe. If I can think of you over there, calm, collected, and SAFE, then it's one less thing to worry about.

You don't need to worry about me , I reply. I'd never say this to Mom, but I've been taking care of myself for years.

That doesn't mean I don't want to take care of you.

I want that, too. So bad, but I shouldn't.

Neither should I , he texts. It's a damn cruel thing for me to do—make us both care.

Never say that again. Never even think it. The time we have is the time we have.

The time we have is the time we have, he replies. I like that. Talk soon.

I thought we weren't supposed to be speaking.

Yeah, I know. But now that I've heard from you, there's no damn way I'll be able just to pretend you don't exist.

I smile and clutch my phone to my chest. It's a moment of heat and release that

makes me feel silly only when I realize I'm doing it. I put my phone down, reminding myself how serious this is. I can't let my hopes and wants get carried away, either. I can't pretend this is going to have a happy ending.

Sleep doesn't come, so I get up and use the en-suite shower. I get to thinking how many times I've stood in the shower with the water dripping down me, hot, steamy, making me think of Landon, my knight in shining armor. My body heats up as I wish he were here, wish he would appear in the steam and wrap his arms around me, pushing his naked body against mine.

If we get another chance, I'll throw myself at him. I won't let the virgin nerves have a single say. I won't let them dictate what I should do and who I should be. I'm going to jump on him, kiss him, hold him, remind myself he's real, and he's alive .

After the shower, I go into the kitchen. The lady from last night, Rosie, sits at the bar with a cup of coffee. The bar is next to the tall windows that overlook the city. I realize this building must be directly next to Landon's. It was too dark, and I was too panicked to notice that last night.

The woman turns, seeming more sober now. Less wired. Or maybe just less angry. "Oh, hello," she says.

"Hi," I reply, remembering what she said about Landon and hating it. "How are you this morning?"

"Just hanging around. Ethan put on quite the show last night." She laughs with a somehow mocking mixture of curiosity and disbelief. "Who are you? It was so strange last night, I have to say. One minute we were ... and the next, he had to go. Are you family? His secret girlfriend?"

"No," I say.

“Of course not.” She puts her hand over her mouth. “Girl, I’m so sorry. That was absentminded of me.”

I don’t know why she’s being so mean. Maybe it’s just who she is, and she doesn’t even realize it. I shouldn’t rise to the bait, but it’s too late. I take a step forward. “I’ve got a boyfriend. It’s not Ethan. You’ve probably met him. Landon Cross?”

It’s petty, but I enjoy the angry look on her face, even if the very existence of this expression is proof that there’s a romantic connection there. Ethan’s at work. Why would she put on a show now?

“Landon Cross is your boyfriend,” she says.

“Yes, ma’am,” I say, knowing I need to stop. Inside, I cringe a little. Why did I call her ma’am ? “You seem surprised.”

She looks me up and down. Since we’re not going anywhere today, and I want to be comfortable, I’m wearing my oldest pair of PJs with a hole in the leg. “Well ... a little. I don’t mean to be rude, but you’re not exactly who I imagined.”

“Why are you imagining Landon’s girlfriends, anyway?” My voice gets emotional. I feel like I’m venting a bunch of stuff at her that probably has nothing to do with her. I can’t tiptoe around it anymore. “Last night, you said you should’ve stuck with Landon.”

She smirks. “So you caught that, did you?”

“Why did you say that?”

“Do you really need to ask?”

“I’m asking now,” I snap. “Have you slept with Ethan and his business partner?”

“Are you trying to shame me, girl?” she says in a haughty tone. “That would be very close-minded and rude, don’t you think, one woman to another? Perhaps you should consider your words carefully.”

“I’m asking you a simple question.”

“We’ve had ... our dalliances, but you know Landon. He never likes to take things seriously. Oh, he’ll spin a good story. He’ll tell a lady what she wants to hear, but in the end, he just wants a good, hard fuck.”

Her smirk gets wider with each word. I want to yell at her. I want to call her a liar, but she looks so confident, so convincing .

“You made me act nasty,” she says a moment later. “I very much resent that.”

“I didn’t make you do anything,” I say, disgusted. “You’re just gross. Why would you try to hurt my feelings?”

“Maybe I’m saving you. These lawyers pick up and use women. They’re high-fliers and players. If I were you, I’d stay away.”

I turn and walk quickly away. I don’t want to give her the satisfaction of yelling at her. My thoughts spin frantically around as I try to think why she’d make that up. Maybe she’s just cruel. I know Landon isn’t like that. I trust him. I believe him.

Maybe he had a quick fling with this woman and decided not to tell me. Perhaps he thinks he’s protecting me by keeping it secret like he’s always protected me.

I go into the bedroom, try to relax, and not to think. My body feels tired, my eyes

heavy, but my thoughts won't settle and let me rest.

My phone suddenly starts to ring. I leap on it, expecting Landon.

It's Maddie.

"Hello?" I answer.

When I hear the voice, I know it's all over.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

LONDON

I almost reject the call when my cell phone rings and I don't recognize the number. I don't give out my number easily, so when I get a call like this, that's usually the best policy. But considering the circumstances, I quickly answer. What if it's them? What if the security team is calling from a different number? What if it's Lily?

I answer the call. When I hear the terrified female voice, I sit up, tension flooding me. Sitting cross-legged in front of the TV, Grace even turns around and looks at me like she can sense it.

I smile at her in the kindest, most calm way possible, then stand up and go into the bathroom.

"Say that again," I say.

"My name is Maddie Scott. I'm Lily's best friend. We met in the fifth grade when she helped get a mud pie out of my hair. Damon O'Connell has kidnapped me and ... and ..." She sniffles. In the background, a man's voice, low and steely, "Get on with it ..."

"Lily's here too," she says, coughing out a choked sob. "I didn't want to do it, but they made me call her. They made me bring her here."

"Where's here?" I growl.

“Another one of their bars. They’ve told me to text you the address.”

“How do I know any of this is true?”

Maddie says something to the men, and then I hear Damon laugh. I’m sure it’s him. His tone is ugly and specific like the rat bastard knows he’s about to do something horrific. He’s happy about it. Maybe that’s what this has all been about for him—getting to torment people.

“He wants proof ?” Damon growls. “Give that here.” Suddenly, his voice is louder in my ear. “Are your security buddies listening, big man? It would be a mistake if they were. I hold all the cards now. Every fucking one .”

“Nobody’s listening,” I snap.

“You should be. Go on. Tell him to save you.”

Lily’s voice tears through me like an accusation. It forces me to realize everything I’ve done wrong—number one being not getting her out of the city and just to Ethan’s apartment. Fuck . “Stay away from here, Landon. Don’t give him?—”

“The satisfaction, presumably,” Damon says, taking the phone back. “What about that, Landon? Do you find that logic persuasive? Just know, if you did what she said and purposefully withheld my satisfaction from hurting you , where do you think I would have to aim my aggression? A man gets bored, after all ...”

“Text me that fucking address,” I growl.

“Do you think you’ll make it out of this alive?”

I grin like a madman, catching sight of myself in the cracked bathroom mirror. I look

deranged and ready for whatever comes. “Are you telling me there’s another option, Damon?” I say bitterly. “You’re right. You’ve won. My only job now is to mitigate the damage.”

“You know if you trick me and try to bring those security assholes along, it’s going to go very, very bad for these women. You understand that. I hope you do, at least.”

“I get it,” I snap. “What do you want ... money?”

“Money,” he laughs grimly. “We’re far past that. You tried to make a fool out of me last night.”

Tried? He looked like a jackass, but I’m not going to tell him that. I’m not going to rub it in. Knowing he has Lily has lit a fire in me like nothing else ever could. As twisted as it is, the fire is even fiercer than when I fought for the kids and their families. It’s more vicious than the apple tree case.

“Nothing to say, Landon? No apology?”

“I just want to get this over with,” I snarl. Truthfully, I want to put him in the dirt, make him pay, make him bleed, and make him scream. The protective impulse is so damn clear that I know I’ll never be able to fight my feelings for Lily again. For the rest of my life, however short it will be, I know she’s mine .

“Then you better hurry, lad,” he says. “If I see even a single security motherfucker, I’m going to make use of these two little sluts and then dump them in the sea. A cement-boots type of deal, understand?”

“That couldn’t be clearer,” I say.

“Good. See you soon.”

I hang up. A moment later, a text arrives. The address is on the other side of the city, conveniently situated next to the water, so he can make good on his threat. Outside the bathroom door, I hear Lex speaking with Grace's mother. He must ask where I am because Grace says, "In the bathroom, Mister ..."

Gritting my teeth, I move toward the window, pushing it open and awkwardly climbing out, scraping my arms on the frame. I hug to the side of the building and then move toward my car. One of the security spots me and begins walking toward me, but they're here to keep people away, not stop me from leaving.

"Sir?" he calls.

I slam the car door and start the engine. As I quickly drive away, my cell phone starts to ring. I toss it on the passenger seat. This must be Lex, but I can't think about anything other than keeping my woman safe.

My woman. I don't give a fuck anymore. I'm tired of running and pretending. I'm tired of thinking I ever stood a chance against this desire, this certainty.

When I saw her outside The Row, I knew without a doubt. Maybe I didn't acknowledge it then. Hell, perhaps I couldn't, but she was mine the moment I saw her.

Speeding across the city, I promise to save my Lily no matter what I have to do or allow to be done to me. She doesn't deserve any of this. She's a woman who's only ever wanted to do the right thing. She's got the best heart of any person I've ever met.

I love her.

As I think the words, I let out a shaky breath. It's the truth. I love her. I don't care if it's the diagnosis that has spurred me to realize this so fast. It doesn't change the

facts. I love Lily so much that it hurts thinking about a future without her. My life will have meaning if I can ensure she gets a future.

This bar sits across from the dockyard, an old chipped painting of a pirate-style tankard above the door. Two burly men swagger across the street toward me the second I pull up. I recognize them from the bar, but all these bastards begin to look alike after a while.

“Are you armed?” one of them asks as I step from the car. He’s got a flat face and a nose that’s been broken a few times. The other is big and tough-looking, too, but minus the deformed nose.

“No,” I tell him.

The other one snorts. “That was a mistake.”

“Hey, it’s his funeral. Are you going to come with us peacefully?” The one with the broken nose snaps. “Or are you going to make it difficult for us, eh?”

“At least he came alone,” the other one says.

Broken nose nods, looking at me seriously. “The boss would’ve had some fun if you’d tried any bullshit. He’s not happy. Lennie, is it good when the boss ain’t happy?”

“Not one fucking bit.”

“Come on.” The man steps forward and grabs my arm. When I instinctively move away, he squeezes on harder. “If you want to play this game, all I’ve got to do is send one text to the boss, and your girl will be in for one hell of a time. Did you seriously think we wouldn’t be watching your apartment, tough guy? We saw you go in

together. Personally, she's not my type. Go on. Lie. Tell us she's nothing to you. We'll take you seriously."

I stare into his eyes, letting him know wordlessly I'd happily tear him to tiny, bloody pieces. "She's everything to me," I snarl.

"Good." A shit-eating grin smears across his face. "That means you won't try anything stupid, then."

With no other choice, I go with the men. No weapons. No backup. I keep telling myself whatever it takes. I'll do whatever I have to do to get my Lily, even if it means losing my life earlier than I thought I was going to anyway.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

LILY

I want to tell Maddie I'm sorry, but Damon has stuffed rags in our mouths. We're tied back-to-back at the rear of the bar. Men sit around the edges, most armed, though they haven't drawn their weapons. Damon paces up and down, punching one fist into the open palm of his other hand. He's getting himself ready for something.

When I snuck out of the apartment and began walking down the street, a car honked its horn at me. Inside, there were two men. Both of them were mobsters. Both of them were leering at me. "Get in," one grunted. What choice did I have?

I can't believe I've put Maddie in danger. If something happens to her, I'll never forgive myself, and what if something happens to Landon? Even if the doctor has put him on a timeline anyway, it doesn't make any of this okay.

The door bursts open; a man drags Landon behind him. Well, he's got his hand on Landon's arm, but it's clear Landon is moving on his own. Nobody could drag Landon or make him do something he doesn't want to except by threatening me.

"Ah, finally," Damon says, clapping his hands together. "Landon, old buddy, old pal. It's so nice of you to join us."

He stares across the bar at me. I look into my man's eyes —my man . With my own death so clearly possible, I can't hold back those thoughts anymore. I want to be his. I've wanted it for a long time, but in a silly, childish way. This is real. If we had the

chance, I would spend the rest of my life with him.

“Did he come alone?” Damon asks one of his goons.

“Yeah,” the man grunts. “Fucking idiot.”

“You must really care about this one, Landon,” Damon says, gesturing at me.

“You’ve got to know that nothing good will happen now. You need to understand that.”

“I understand you need to feel tough,” Landon growls. “I understand that all of this—grooming the kids, intimidating people in their own homes—is for you, Damon. It’s so you can look tough.”

“Look tough?” Damon snaps. “That’s one way to phrase it, but I’m not as interested in looks as I am in facts, buddy. First things first, be a champ and get on your knees for me. You’ll have to do some good old-fashioned begging to make up for your little stunt last night. You seriously concussed one of my men. Are you proud of that?”

Landon hesitates. He looks down at Damon with every muscle swelling, with his savage features contorted into pure fury.

“You think you’re too good to beg?”

Damon spins and rushes over to us, then tears the tape off my mouth. I gasp as spit slides down my chin, and the gag falls out.

“Tell him,” Damon shouts, glaring down at me. “He has to do this for you, hot stuff.” He puts heavy sarcasm on hot stuff. “If you don’t make him see sense, I’ll place a shot right here.” He pokes me in the forehead. “If I’m lucky, it’ll go right through your empty head and take out your friend with the same bullet.”

I can feel Maddie's fear by her shuddering since we're tied back to back. It's a reverberation of pure terror.

"Landon," I whisper, turning to him, hating the tears that prick my eyes. Landon has brought my emotions closer to the surface than anybody ever has. "You have to do what he says. For Maddie."

"And for you," Damon grunts. "Look at him, sweetie pie. Do you think he gives a fuck about her ? He can't keep his eyes off you. If it wasn't so disgusting, I might almost be moved."

"Do you think this means anything?" I hiss. "If he gets on his knees and begs, what do you think?—"

I stop when he pulls out a gun and shoves it right against my mouth. A primal, deep-rooted impulse twinges inside me, a voice roaring to do what he says, not to make him mad, to stop trying to be clever and reason with him.

"Not got much to say now, have you?"

"Leave her alone," Landon growls.

Damon turns to him but keeps the gun against my head. I can hear Maddie crying through her gag. More unbearable than that, I can feel her shaking against me. Her chair makes tsk-tsk noises as the legs rasp against the floor. It's like she's about to have a full-blown panic attack. I can't blame her. I blame myself.

"That's up to you, buddy," Damon says. "You're not a soldier. No need to stand at attention. Get on your fucking knees ."

When Landon slowly drops to his knees, Damon makes the ugliest, most vicious

noise of satisfaction. “Yes, yes,” he whispers.

It looks so strange seeing somebody so powerful and self-possessed like this. All around us, men laugh coldly, low, and torturous. It reminds me of high school. All these men are nothing but overgrown bullies.

Damon removes the gun from my head and walks across the bar to kneeling Landon. He puts the gun against Landon’s head and then looks at me with a cocky grin of pure victory, a grin that says, I’m in control, and there’s nothing you can do about it .

“Shall I ask her to choose, Landon?” he says. “Head or heart, hmm, Lily? What do you think?” He moves the gun toward Landon’s chest, then back to his head, a pendulum back and forth. “Would you prefer to see his hair spattered all over the floor or a big hole in his chest? Which one, Lily?”

Maddie’s trembling is getting out of control now. The guilt practically drowns me. I know I’ll never be able to make this up to her if we ever get out of here. The chair legs judder around. She’s shaking so much that even my chair leaps everywhere.

“Jesus Christ,” Damon growls. “Will you tell that bitch to stop? I’m trying to enjoy myself.”

“She suffers from panic attacks sometimes,” I say in the calmest voice I can manage. It’s difficult when the prospect of my man’s death is so close—far closer than learning about it through a doctor’s appointment. “She can’t help it. She needs space and time to calm down.”

“I’ve got a simpler idea,” Damon snaps, walking back across the room.

I can’t see him when he walks around to face Maddie, but I know he must be pointing his gun at her. I can feel it in the mayhem it causes in her body. She’s shaking all

over. Then she begins to scream through the gag, a sound that cuts me to my core.

“You’ve got five seconds to stop, missy,” he growls. “Otherwise, your friend will feel a warm splatter on the back of her head. Is that what you want, hmm? Remember what I said? One bullet could take both of you. So shut the fuck up. Five, four, three ...”

Maddie’s panic gets so intense that the tied-together chairs fall sideways.

I grunt when my shoulder slams into the sticky bar floor.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

LANDON

Before the diagnosis, the logical Landon never would've considered what I was about to do. It's like time slows as the chairs fall to the floor. Lily lets out a yelp of shock and fear, giving me all the fuel I need. Something in me hardens when she slams into the floor: a primal instinct, the animal, the demon. Whatever the fuck the world wants to call it.

I leap to my feet and spring at the man with the broken nose. He roars as I reach into his waistband, snatch the gun free, and then spin and fire a shot right at Damon. The muzzle flash blinds us, but when my vision returns a moment later—my ears are ringing like crazy—I see Damon drop to the floor. Maddie screams even louder through the bindings.

I dart at the man with the broken nose, wrap my arm around his throat, and bring the gun to his head. It all happens so damn fast. It's like I black out again, but not as literally.

"Fuck," my hostage gasps as I drive the gun against the side of his head. "Fuck, fuck ..."

I begin dragging the man toward the chairs. The other men are all closing in on me, all with their guns in their hands now. There are at least seven of them. The metal of their weapons gleam. I want to lean down and pick Lily and her friend up, but I can't let go of this man.

Damon has died quickly, making no noise except for a gurgle. Adrenalin pumps through me, but it seems distant. Just like the last time I committed murder, there's no guilt. There's no shame. Maybe that means there's something wrong with me.

"Move forward a little," I growl in my hostage's ear.

He lets out a whimper, no longer the tough guy he was when he had the upper hand. When he steps forward, I push the gun against the back of his head. With my other hand, I take out my cell.

"Your boss is dead," I tell the men as I navigate to Lex's number. "You've got two choices now. Risk your friend here going the same way for no reason, no gain, since your boss is gone. There's nothing you can do about it now. Or you can leave and fight another day. Wait, there's a third option. You can wait here while my very well-trained and very fucking merciless mercenaries arrive. The choice is yours."

I send Lex a text with the address. Then I wrap my arm around the man's neck again.

"Fuck," one of the goons grunts. "Fuck."

Slowly, they filter out of the bar. I don't let my guard down, though. I keep my eyes on them. I keep the coldness inside of me, the knowledge that I may have to keep shooting, keep killing. Once the last man has gone, the hostage says, "What about me?"

"You're waiting here until I know we're safe," I snarl. "Lily, I'm sorry. I can't help you and your friend until my backup arrives."

"It's okay," she says from the floor. "Maddie, listen, just breathe. It's all over now. Landon has saved us. It's over, okay?"

We stay like this for some time. It takes all my effort not to turn and hold Lily. I feel free to let him go only when the door opens and Lex busts in. Lex runs across the room and grabs the man. More men filter in, spreading out.

I kneel down and lift the entangled chairs. On the other side, one of Lex's men begins untying Maddie. I cradle Lily's face in my hands, feeling her warmth and tears.

"Lily," I whisper.

"I'm okay," she replies.

"Lily ..."

There's so much else I want to say, but it's like words fail me. Instead, I lean in and hug her tightly. She buries her face in my chest. I cradle her like I never want to let go. No, not like that. It's the truth of what I want and need, but I must remember ...

"Don't think about anything else," she whispers into my neck.

"How did you know?"

"I can feel you tensing up and worrying, but let's savor this. We're safe. We're together. That's all that matters."

Later that night, I'm sitting with Vivian and Lily in my living room. I've spent the day with Lex, getting my story straight and establishing an alibi. When the cops turned up to investigate the gunshot, Lex arranged for one of his men to admit to "accidentally discharging his weapon." It cost more money for the man to take that hit, but he won't get prison time since "nobody was hurt."

"He saved me, Mom," Lily says, squeezing Vivian's hand. "Without him ..."

“You never would’ve been in danger to begin with,” Vivian says.

“That’s not true. I went to The Row before I met Landon again. He saved my life. You have to accept that he’s not Dad, okay? He’s not that person.”

“I swear, Vivian,” I tell her. “I would never trick your daughter. I would never hurt her. I’d die before I let anything happen to her.”

That’s literally true, in my case, but I don’t add that morbid thought.

“I’ve been holding onto the past,” Vivian whispers after a pause, her anger visibly draining away. “I’ve been trying to hate you, but I can’t.” She looks at me with glistening eyes. She’s been torn up ever since learning what happened. “I can’t, Landon, but I need to know you are who you seem to be.”

“I can’t promise I’m perfect,” I tell her, “but when it comes to your daughter, my intentions are honest.”

Vivian slowly breaks into a smile, glancing at her daughter. She can read the hope on Lily’s face as easily as I can, most likely the way she’s waiting to erupt in relief. I know it’s been a hard day for Lily, too. She spent much of it with the security team, trying to calm Maddie down. Now, she is at home with a security detail, just in case. I can’t believe I didn’t think of her friend before.

“Thank you,” Vivian says, “for taking care of my daughter before ... and now.”

Lily throws her arms around her mom. They hug for a long time. I lean back on the couch, letting myself smile even if it feels surreal. I’ve killed two men in my life now. Sure, they were two men who deserved it, but it’s still more than I ever planned.

“Do you mind if I have a lie-down?” Vivian asks.

“Of course not,” I tell her.

Once she’s gone, I move to the couch with Lily. She makes the most tempting moaning noise when I wrap my arm around her and pull her close. I lean down and kiss the top of her head, taking the time to inhale her scent, her realness, her aliveness .

“I love you,” I tell her.

She gasps and looks up at me. “Don’t just say that because?—”

“I’m saying it because it’s true,” I tell her. “As soon as I heard your voice when that bastard had you, I knew it was true. I knew I started loving you the instant I saw you outside The Row. You’re the best person I’ve ever met.”

“I love you too.” She puts her hand on my leg, squeezing, digging her nails like she wants to tether herself to this moment.

I smirk. “Don’t just say that because?—”

She leans up and kisses me passionately. I’ve been resisting the urge to grab her and own her all day. With the security team around, it was easier. When she went to be with her friend, it was convenient. With her mom sitting right there, it was hell.

Now, just us, I can’t hold back anymore. I growl and press myself against her, lying on the couch. She falls back, wraps her arms around me, then bites my lip.

“Sorry,” she murmurs.

I smirk. “You don’t have to apologize to me ... ever. Is something wrong?”

“Do you think we should go into the bedroom?” Her eyes sparkle with something like danger. “You know ...”

She laughs when I stand up and bring her into my arms simultaneously. The laugh is one of pure relief and delight. It’s a laugh that flips the bird to death, to the bullshit the mob tried to pull, to the crazy adventure we’ve been on together.

She feels perfect in my arms, her curvy body sculpted for me. I nudge my bedroom door open with my elbow and carry her to the bed. When I place her down, she sits up right away, grabbing the front of my shirt and pulling me into a kiss. I sense the nerves in the movement, her desperation to be as close to me as possible. Maybe it’s the virgin thing making her move so fast.

I can’t overthink it, though. The second I feel her body against mine, I know she wants this, needs this, as badly as I do. I slide my hand down her body and between her legs, pushing my hand against her sex through her jeans.

“Fuck,” she gasps, letting her head fall back. “That’s so sensitive. So hot.”

“You’re so goddamn hot,” I groan as I rub the outside of her pants quicker. I’m sure I can feel her heat and her wetness through the fabric. She shifts her hips as I rub her, and then she bites her lip, staring at me.

“What?” I say, pausing.

“I don’t want any clothes between us.” Despite everything we’ve shared, that gorgeous blush still creeps across her face and neck. “I just want it to be us, nothing else, nobody else, just us ...”

I stand up and reach for my shirt. “Then you better show me your perfect, curvy, naked virgin body. Now .”

She makes another ball-tingling gasping noise as she sits up and tugs on her clothes. I tear mine off quickly, my manhood springing up with glistening precome on the end. She wriggles out of her clothes and sits naked on the bed, her tits bouncing as she lets out a shudder of anticipation.

“You’re so big,” she murmurs, reaching forward and sliding her hand up and down my length.

I look down in awe, completely captivated by her hand stroking precome to my base and then back to my tip. Her thick, gorgeous tits drive me wild. I can’t take the motion of her hand for more than a few strokes until I begin to lose it.

“I need your tight virgin slit,” I groan. “Fuck. Your legs are glistening already.”

“You make me so wet,” she moans, her hand still pumping.

With a groan of pure hunger, I lean down on the bed, laying my naked body against hers as gently as I can. She wraps her arms around me, squeezing her fingernails against my back as I reach down and grip the precome-slick base of my dick.

When I guide my tip to her slit, her moan is almost enough to finish me straightaway. Her heat kisses my head like she’s trying to make me erupt. I slide in as slowly as I can, even as instincts scream at me to grind deeper, to push further.

Before I glide in, she grabs my face with her hands. “I’m sorry,” she murmurs.

“What’s wrong?”

“Before we ... you know, I have to know.”

“Know what?” I growl, struggling to hold myself back, struggling not to push in,

keep going, claim her as mine now and forever.

“There was a lady at Ethan’s apartment, Rosie. Rosita, I think. She said you and her were an item.”

Classic Ethan ...

“Never,” I snap. “I swear, Lily. Never . You’re the only woman I’ve ever wanted. Every single experience I had before you was a goddamn waste, and I never had many to begin with. I love you . It’s only you .”

Her smile is the greatest gift any man could ever receive, but I’m the only one who ever will . She smiles gorgeously and then digs her nails in with even more passion. “Then what are you waiting for?” she says with a hint of sass.

She’s magical. It’s the only way I can think of her. After everything she’s been through, she can make us both live on the brighter side of life. She’s an angel, my angel.

Her perfect pussy feels like the only place my dick could ever belong. Her walls grip me tightly as I inch my way in. Her walls spread and caress my length. She might be a virgin, but when she twitches her hips, it’s like she knows how best to drive me nuts.

I glide even deeper, guided by the sounds of her moans. She gasps and whimpers like she’s never felt this before, and for her, that makes sense. Yet it’s the same for me. I’ve never felt this warmth, this need, this certainty.

“I love you so damn much,” I groan when I’ve slid into her tight-as-fuck hole.

She stares up at me, her lips trembling, the corner twitching like she’s going to smile

again. Her hands are on her tits now, squeezing them together. I stare down at her thickness as my seed roars at me to claim her.

“It feels so, so good,” she moans. “Oh God, don’t stop.”

There is no way I can stop when I hear the hunger in her tone. I slide out, savoring every time she twitches and moans, and then I push back in again. Her virgin hole takes every inch. I groan when, on the next thrust, she moves in time with me, shifting up and down on the bed. I grunt and lean down, finding her lips.

She kisses me back with more intensity than I’ve felt yet, which is saying a damn lot where my passionate angel is concerned.

“Yes, yes,” she whimpers between kisses. “Oh, fuck, fuck , Landon. I only want you. Just you. Forever.”

“Forever,” I growl, leaning back so I can watch her body shake for me with each thrust.

Our pleasure collides hotly. Her tight walls pulse around my dick. It’s like I can feel the orgasm getting ready to release. We lose ourselves in the thrusting, in the fusion of our bodies. I’ve often heard about sex meaning more to some people than it ever has to me, but with Lily, I experience it.

The heat is bonding and fusing us, and we are becoming one. Her eyes begin to flutter open and closed when I fuck her even faster. The bed is whining. She sinks her hands into her ample tits, turning her creamy skin red in love marks. I grunt as seed boils, building up like it’s getting ready for one big explosion.

“Oh, oh, oh .”

On the third, oh , I know her orgasm is about to slam into her, about to take control of her whole body. There's a good few seconds between when she realizes, and I feel it in the pulsing of her perfect slit.

She almost screams, but then she must remember her mother. She covers her mouth with one hand, moaning loudly through her tightly clasped fingers. I fall atop her as the seed explodes out of my dick, so much of it pumping out of me I feel lightheaded. I feel like, finally, everything makes sense.

I've lived my life coldly and logically. This is the opposite. This is pure heat, pure impossibility, and pure wild perfection.

Once I regain my breath, I lie gently next to her, leaning down and kissing her on the cheek. She finds my lips and kisses me deeply, sounding giddy with her release. "I love you so much. You were always my knight in shining armor. I know this wouldn't have been as special with anybody else. I don't care what anybody would say if they heard me say that. It's the truth."

"I feel the same." I kiss her again. "You're one of a kind, Lily."

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

LILY

I sit in the doctor's office with Landon, gripping his hand tightly as we look across the large, somewhat imposing desk from his doctor. Doctor Gallivan is a serious man who's giving me bad news vibes. On the way here, I wondered if Carter, the director, or somebody else from work might have spotted us together, as irrational as that sounds.

We still have to deal with that, but it doesn't matter as we sit here now.

"Your first doctor was ..." The doctor leans forward with a sigh. "... slightly eager in his diagnosis. All your tests are showing signs of Schwannoma."

"What's that?" Landon says, and I hear him trying to hold back his hope. I do the same, trying not to let the warmth bubbling inside overwhelm me.

"It's a rare type of tumor that forms in the nervous system. Schwannoma grows from cells called Schwann cells. Schwann cells protect and support the nerve cells of the nervous system. Schwannoma tumors are often benign, which means they are not cancer, but in rare cases, they can become cancer. Doctor Coleman shouldn't have told you that you definitively had cancer."

"So ... I don't?" Landon sounds almost boyish in his budding excitement. It brings a big smile to my face, hearing him like this. "Mine aren't cancerous?"

“No,” the doctor says, “but we will monitor you over the coming months and years to ensure that it remains that way.”

“Wait.” Landon massages his forehead. “Years?”

The doctor finally smiles. “Yes, Mr. Cross, years .”

As soon as we’re alone in the doctor’s office hallway, I throw my arms around Landon and hug him tightly. I don’t even stop to think that somebody who might know me could spot us. I don’t think about anything other than he’s not going to die .

“Years,” he murmurs, “not months ...”

“Are you going to sue?”

He tilts his head at me. “Sue? Without that misdiagnosis, I never would’ve gone to The Row. I never would’ve seen you.” He takes my hands in his, holding me warmly. “I never would’ve fallen in love. I would’ve just kept going on autopilot: cold, empty, living from one day to the next with no thought about what the hell I honestly want .”

“I love seeing you like this,” I murmur, my chest feeling bright with joy. It’s like a star is in me, beaming light and heat.

“I just can’t believe it,” he says, grinning from ear to ear. “I don’t have to leave you. I don’t have to think, every second we’re together, that there’s no way we can have a future together. I don’t have to feel guilty because falling in love means leaving you behind, leaving you to grieve.”

I jump into his arms, kissing him. He holds me up, moving against the wall. I wrap my legs around him. When we hear a door open down the hallway, he quickly puts me down, just in time for a nurse to walk by us.

“Maybe we should go somewhere more private?” I whisper.

He smirks. “Now there’s an idea ...”

During the car ride back to his apartment, he says, “I’ve just realized. We’re not out of the woods yet, are we? We still have to think about your work. If Carter finds out we’re together?—”

“I don’t want to think about that,” I confess. “I know it’s selfish, but we’ve got the rest of the weekend ahead of us. Let’s focus on the next hour, the next minute.”

“Just because I’ve got longer than I thought,” he says, nodding, “doesn’t mean we should stop savoring every moment.”

I beam, reaching over and taking his hand. “That’s exactly what I’m thinking. We can still make every second count, but I need you to know something. I’m not leaving you. I don’t care what they say.”

“Your job, Lily ... It’s what you’ve always wanted.”

“If they think they can tell me how to live my life, especially based on something so stupid, they can go to hell. I’ll find another way to help people.”

“They shouldn’t have any right to tell you what to do,” he says, nodding, “but the fact is, they’ll fire you. It’s the cold, hard reality unless ...”

“Unless what?” I ask.

“When does your internship end?”

I think for a moment. “Five weeks.”

He nods. “We can make that work, can’t we? For five weeks? Once they’ve given you the job, there’s no damn way they can fire you for finding a husband.”

When I gasp and he looks at me, I can tell he doesn’t realize what he’s just said. Maybe he meant to say boyfriend , but it just slipped out.

“What?” he asks, then, thankfully, turns back to the road.

“Nothing,” I tell him. “I’m just so happy, Landon. All this time, I thought we had an expiration date.”

“Our only expiration date is forever ,” he says intensely. “That’s the only time frame I care about with you.”

As we drive—in that comfortable silence that feels oh-so-natural—I think about what he said, realizing he’s right. If he and I are married, there’s no way work can fire me. Maybe they can try to find some other excuse, but if I perform my job impeccably without giving them any reason to fault me, how can they?

It’s still a risk. But when I see that happy-to-be-alive look on my man’s face, I know the risk will be worth it. If he didn’t misspeak, that is. Is thinking of marriage this soon crazy? I almost laugh at the question. All of this is crazy. Trying to single out one thing makes no sense.

Reaching over, I place my hand on his arm.

“I love you,” he says.

“I’ll never tire of hearing that.”

He smiles. “That’s good. It means you won’t go nuts when you hear it about a million

more times.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

LONDON

It's Sunday evening, and I've just gotten off the phone with Lex. Apparently, infighting started in the Irish mob after Damon's death, which is officially a "disappearance." "The cartel is backing off," Lex told me. "I've got reliable sources who informed me they want no part in this mess. You did well, Landon. You saved a big part of this city. Nobody will ever know it, but you should be proud."

"I'm just glad those kids are going to be safe."

"Those and many, many more because of you."

I hang up, waiting for Lily to return from the bathroom. My heart is pounding. I almost thought I slipped up when I said husband in the car after the doctor's appointment. She gasped but then played it off.

My phone rings again. It's a number I don't recognize. Dammit, is it them? Isn't this over yet?

I answer quickly. "Yeah?" I grunt.

"It's Carter Weston," he says. "Is this Landon?"

"Uh ... yeah," I reply. "I won't ask how you got this number."

“I’ve got my ways. I wanted to call because I know you had something to do with the mob backing off The Row.”

“Where did you hear that?” I snap.

“It doesn’t take a genius to figure it out. You were working on that case, and suddenly, the bar is shut down—no more mobsters. I got a call from one of the parents today, thanking me like I did something, but it was you, wasn’t it?”

“I can’t comment on that, Carter.”

“This is tough to say, but I need you to know I’m sorry. I know we’ve had our differences. I heard how grateful that parent was, and I spoke to her kid, too. Grace, I think you’ve met her?”

“What did she say?” I ask, imagining everything she could tell him if she wanted. She knows how involved I was.

“Enough for me to be making this call,” he says. “I don’t know if Lily told you, but I warned her to avoid you. I told her it could cost her the job here.”

“She said,” I snap.

“That’s over. I’ve killed it. Grace was crying on the phone—a little girl crying happy tears, telling me you were her savior. You’re all right, Landon.”

He hangs up, leaving me with a stunned smile on my face. Lily approaches the table, looking gorgeous in her stunning dress, the cut showing her legs and cleavage. Even secreted away in this quiet corner of this quiet restaurant twenty miles outside the city—so we don’t get spotted—she looks like she belongs on a red carpet.

“Is something wrong?” she asks.

I stand up quickly, walking around the table and taking her hands in mine. She beams at me with a smile I never could’ve dreamed of when this started. It’s a smile that makes me feel alive and purposeful.

“Carter just called me,” I say. “It was surreal. He said he’s forgiven me, and your job is no longer in danger. We can be together, Lily. Nothing is stopping us: not my diagnosis, not your mom, not your job, nothing. We can be together .”

When she tries to hug me, I take a step back.

“Not yet,” I murmur, my voice growing husky. “There’s something I need to say first.”

“Okay ...”

“I love you more than I thought a logical, cold man like me could ever love.” When I fall to one knee, tears spring to her eyes. The restaurant isn’t busy enough for a big crowd, but already, people are turning to us. “Lily Brooks, will you marry me?”

“Yes,” she cries, staring down at the ring. It’s a big cushion cut glittering diamond, flashing every color of the rainbow, something worthy of my woman, set within a flowery band as elegant and bright as she is.

I slide the ring onto her finger and then climb to my feet. She throws herself at me, making me laugh as I catch her and spin her around, finding her lips in the beautiful chaos of our happiness. She takes my face in her hands, kissing me with her classic Lily passion. It feels natural but also new each time. It makes me grateful.

Life is good, great, perfect. I can’t believe I lived such a cold, disconnected existence

before. With my woman, my future wife, I know I'll never return to that sort of life.

From this day on, I will love as if it's my last chance to love.

"Shall we get out of here?" she whispers, brushing her hand across my side. She looks around, shocked to find people applauding.

I laugh. I hadn't noticed it either until the kiss ended. I was too immersed in her.
"That sounds good to me."

LILY

Five Weeks Later

“Of course, they offered her the job,” Mom says, beaming at me across the dining table.

I smile at Mom, looking so happy, so at ease with herself. It’s been over a month, and there’s no sign of that mobster crap returning. Last night, I even drove by The Row. The bar is boarded up, and the families are safe.

Maddie grins at me from beside Mom. It took her some time to get over what happened—of course, neither of us is entirely over it—but she looks just as proud as Mom.

“Is that him?” she says, gesturing to the window.

My belly swirls as I hear Landon’s car pull up. The past weeks have been beyond perfect, each day sweeter than the last. We’ve still savored every moment, even after discovering he wasn’t on a shortened timeline.

“I just hope this doesn’t change anything,” I murmur.

Maddie stares at me. “You remember you were on speaker earlier, right? When you told him you got the job? I’ve never heard anybody as happy as that.”

“Still, this is different ...”

“He will be overjoyed !” Mom says confidently. “I know I had my doubts, but Landon has shown himself to be a decent, loyal man. Now go tell him!”

I leave the table and enter the hallway, opening the door before Landon presses the buzzer. He always presses the buzzer to Mom’s place out of politeness, even though he has a key. I think of it as Mom’s place now since I spend so much time with my fiancé.

Landon rushes over to me, sweeping me up. “I knew you were going to get it,” he says. “You deserve it. I’ve seen how hard you’ve been working.”

“Today’s been insane,” I murmur when he puts me down. “It isn’t just the job ...”

“No?” he says with an easy smile. Over the last weeks, that smile has come to his face easier and easier. “I’ve been waiting my whole life to be happy,” he told me the other night after we’d made love, both of us sweaty and contented. “I never knew I was waiting for you.”

“Remember our first time?” I say. “When we were a bit careless?” That first time, we hadn’t even considered protection. After we learned he could live for years with the proper care, we decided to use protection, knowing full well I could have gotten pregnant that first time. We agreed fate would decide.

“Wait.” His smile gets even wider. His voice bubbles with excitement. “Are you telling me?”

“I’m pregnant,” I say, my voice cracking with pure emotion.

I’ve rehearsed this moment countless times since taking the test. I’ve imagined him getting angry, suddenly distant. I’ve even imagined him completely changing, showing signs that this was always a love bomb. Having this pregnancy be an

abstract idea was one thing, but the real thing was another.

I never should've doubted. He cheers and pulls me into his arms again, spinning me around so fast I feel I could take off.

"I love you," he says, putting me down, "and I love our perfect baby."

I giggle, happy tears sliding down my cheeks. "Already?"

"Already," he says confidently, touching my belly. "I'm just happy you're so irresistible that I forgot to use protection."

We laugh in the most carefree way together as he leans in for a kiss.

LANDON

Eight Years Later

I stand at the back of the bookstore with Evie, the newest addition to our family, sleeping uncharacteristically peacefully in my arms. Jax sits next to me, eagerly watching his mother finish her speech, explaining the experiences that led to her writing her first nonfiction book about social work.

“She’s so cool,” Jax whispers.

I grin down at our son. He grins right back. He’s got his mother’s eyes, with a mop of jet-black hair that reminds me of when I was a kid. Soon, it’s time for signings. Lily told us we didn’t have to hang around for this bit, but it fills me with so much warmth watching as people line up for her signature.

My mind drifts back over our lives so far. Ethan understood when I told him I wanted to leave the firm and start doing more rewarding, selfless work. A couple of years back, we got news that Lily’s dad had passed peacefully in his sleep. Vivian is still as fierce and mother-bear-like as ever.

Further back, my mind goes to the wedding. I broke down like a little kid when I saw her walking down the aisle in a dress made for her curvy figure. Angel, I’ve taken to calling her, and it was never more true than that day.

After around an hour, the crowd thins out. A young lady with a red braid over her shoulder approaches the desk. I lean forward, watching Lily’s reaction. She still has

that gorgeous flush that sometimes lights her up, like all her vivaciousness is bursting out of her.

After a brief conversation, Lily stands up, walks around the desk, and hugs the woman.

“Guess who that was?” she says after joining us at the rear of the store.

“Who?”

“Grace,” she says. “From The Row. She wanted to tell me she’s going into social work, too. I inspired her like you inspired me.”

Some people become jaded doing Lily’s work, but not my wife. I lean over and kiss the tears from her cheek. “I’m not surprised you inspired her.”

“ You inspire me , Mommy,” Jax sings.

She smiles, reaching down and gently touching his cheek. “I love you so much. All of you. I know it’s been crazy in the lead-up to the book, but?—”

“No buts,” I cut in. “Crazy or not, I’ve savored every single second. Every moment with you, Lily. Always.”

“Always,” she repeats, moving in for a kiss, then leaning down to Evie in the baby carrier and gently kissing her on the head.

THE END