







# Not Her Day to Die (Star-Crossed #2)

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**Category:** Romance

**Description:** Sunday. Sunday. Sunday.

Why did you have to go and burrow your way into our hearts? Is that why the stars aligned? Is that why we couldn't live a day without you?

Our Sunday.

Axel's Little Lamb.

Darius's Wildflower.

My baby girl.

You may think this is the first time you have fallen into our lives, but for us it's been years.

Years of pining.

Years of following.

Years of longing.

But now, after all this time, you're finally safe.

Except...something isn't right.

Fate is still tugging you towards danger.

Leading you into the underbelly of this corrupt town.

Shoving you towards the last secret we're keeping from you.

And when you figure it out, when the ugly truth comes to light, please don't run away again.

Because now that we know we can have a future with you?

We will never let you go.

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## Page 1

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 3:11 am*

They're both dead.

And again, just like before...

It's my fault.

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 3:11 am*

Sitting in the back of the squad car, Darius watches as the woman he loves is driven away in an ambulance, readying himself to face whatever comes his way.

Even with the anxiety of all the new thousands of what ifs that are forming as he marches on this new timeline, he can't help but feel relief. He has finally escaped this hell they had been caught in for what was the equivalent of years.

Above, a star falls from the sky.

He doesn't think.

He makes a wish.

I wish to know before she's in danger.

He is so incredibly exhausted from only finding her after the fact.

He shifts his attention outside of the vehicle to his phone.

The live stream should still be on, and it appears the sheriff and officers are trying to figure out how to fix that.

"His phone is locked! Did the video end?" an officer calls out.

"No, they keep going even with the screen black. We can't turn this off," another replies.

A few beats later and the squad car door is whipped open, the sheriff thrusts the phone into Darius's uncuffed hands.

Did they keep me uncuffed for the camera's sake ?

"You need to turn this off." The night is swallowing them, but the other cop car's headlights illuminate the sheriff. It casts him in eerie shadows, making only his face visible. His beady eyes are bloodshot, his brow furrowed in a mixture of concern and anger. "Before your father shows up."

Darius stiffens, the threat hanging between them. Darius looks down at the phone's camera, trying to portray to anyone who might be watching with his eyes how desperate he is.

He clicks open the screen and catches that his viewer count on the live video has somehow rocketed into the millions. Cries of police brutality, concerns for the shot woman, and anger at the sheriff's reaction are highlighted in the comments.

Hope blossoms. But now they need to know who he is. How to find him.

If Sunday is under public scrutiny, they can't just kill her and get away with it.

Please don't hate me for this.

"That was Sunday Masch, and I am Darius O'Brien. We live in Florida, in the small town of--"

The sheriff wrenches the phone from his hands, swearing loudly, and slams the door shut. Darius watches as the man throws his phone to the ground, stomping on it.

Please let that be enough. Let the public's interest keep her safe. Please.

With Darius still confined to the backseat, an officer gets into the front of the car and races away.

Darius does not know where he will be taken. How this will end.

But as long as Sunday is alive, as long as she makes it out of her loops, it will be worth it.

It has always been worth it.

## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 3:11 am*

The bathtub is overflowing.

Standing above it, I'm able to see a girl slumped over. The way her hair flutters eerily in the water. The ripples caused by the faucet steadily pouring down.

The girl isn't moving.

The girl is dead.

I am the girl.

"This was about the eighth go 'round. They sent you off to our grandmother's but you were just so lonely, so anxious. You held your breath too long, the panic took hold, and just like that, you died," my brother murmurs, his voice wrapping around me in a warm caress.

Turning my head, I search for his familiar eyes, his comforting form.

But he isn't here.

I am alone in this bathroom. I am with my corpse.

An oxymoron.

My mind races and gyrates in anxiety. I attempt to wrap my arms around myself, to comfort myself, but I can't feel anything. My skin is translucent, and I am acutely aware that I both exist and don't in this plane.



Schrodinger's Sunday.

My senses are dulled in this state, except my heart. It pounds painfully in my chest, loudly .

“Look closer.” This time it isn't Auggie, but my boyfriend Tripp. My dead boyfriend.

My vision shakes as I shiver in unease.

I don't want to look closer. I don't want to examine how sickly pale my skin is, how the water carries on up and over the bathtub's edge, flooding the floor below. How the puddle grows and grows, slowly slinking towards the bathroom door.

Reaching forward, I attempt to turn off the faucet, but my fingers shimmer as they brush through it.

“You need to see it. You need to understand,” Auggie says. His voice is gentle, but there is more to it.

His tone reminds me of when he was helping me with my homework.

As if I am so close to all the answers I need, but it is my own stupidity and anxiety that keeps me from getting there.

Narrowing my eyes, I attempt to follow his guidance. I want to trust him, to believe that I will magically understand , but internally I am panicking.

My memories are a foggy mess, but I remember the pain. Darius's gentle fingers. The sirens.

Julia.

My best friend.

Her blood seeping into my clothes.

“Julia is dead. Will she come back to life in the next cycle?”

“There is no next cycle Sunday,” Tripp growls. “She isn’t meant to live. But you are. You just need to remember. Need to see. Use your goddamn eyes!”

They may not physically be visible, but his voice is loud, grating. Metal scratching on paper. Painful . My hands come up on their own to cover my ears.

One hundred lifetimes.

Nothing makes any sense, but even so, I listen to him.

Widening my eyes as much as I possibly can, I stare down at my corpse.

Even in this ethereal state, I find the need to blink, but I refrain. My vision slowly blurs, but I don’t pay it any mind.

“Don’t think about anything. Focus on your connection.

Concentrate on what brings you together.

On what keeps you apart. Sunday, your soul is marred.

You aren’t meant to die but that doesn’t take away from the fact that you have.

” Auggie’s whisper wraps around me in a soothing embrace.

“You are connected to each of these deaths by a physical thread. Each cycle, you were drawn towards a comfortable path. You were tugged by the whispers of destiny. You couldn’t see it, so you didn’t have a chance. Couldn’t fight it.”

“But why now?” I ask as I continue to stare down at my body, my eyes tracing a line between us. For a moment, I see something shimmer, but just as quickly, it dissipates. “Why are you telling me now?”

“This isn’t the first time, but we are hoping it will finally stick. You made it out of your cycle. You escaped your finite timeline. But you aren’t done yet.”

This time, the shimmer solidifies. It is unmistakable—a red glowing line that pulsates between me and my dead self. The strand is thin between us, but when I focus on it, on where it touches her body, I watch as it expands.

She—my corpse—is wrapped in thousands of glowing crimson strings. They cover her in a bloody shroud. They pulsate, as if they’re alive. Literal tentacles of death slowly digesting her whole.

I screw my eyes shut. “What is that? What the fuck is that?” My voice cracks, and I fall to my knees.

“Fate, Sunday. It’s fucking fate. Or whatever you want to call it.

It’s what has been driving you along. Deciding when you will die,” Tripp mutters.

“When you made a wish. When my brothers made a wish. When L—” He stops mid sentence, a jolting silence echoes before he continues.

“When you die, your memories trap themselves in your prior self. Your wish is fulfilled, but theirs aren’t.

You all created a paradox. An endless loop.

An infinite realm of possibilities, but all with the same outcome. ”

Unease settles in my gut. My memories whip through my mind in rapid succession. Of the choices I made. The stupid fucking choices. To chase after murderers, to follow Julia, to go to parties, to walk along a river bend alone.

At the time, I chalked it up to my own devastating grief, but what if...what if it was something else entirely?

“Was I even making my own choices? Or was everything predetermined for me?”

“Sunflower, little sis, if everything was predetermined, your loop would have ended at the lightning strike every time, but it didn’t.

You would make it further, you would live just a bit longer, give us all hope, but then you would die.

Over and over again. And Tripp and I were forced to watch it all.

Unseen, unheard, but we did it...for you. For his brothers.

We both love you—all of you—but it’s time, Sunday.

You have to end this. Once and for all. Make this your final cycle.

Fulfill the wishes. All of them. Make your own destiny, your own decisions.

Follow the strands, your intuition, but be careful.

Don't be a fucking idiot. And for the love of God, trust the fucking brothers!

You aren't alone as long as they are with you. They will keep you safe."

All of them?

I can almost feel his arms tugging me up to my feet, almost see his eyes in front of me, narrowed in a healthy dose of love and annoyance.

"I'm sorry," I say. Because I still don't understand; I still feel so lost and confused. But my grief, which once seemed so tangible, is fading. It is still present, but not nearly as visceral as it had been moments ago. Some fundamental part of myself is changing.

"Tripp and I died. That happened, and no matter what you do, it won't change anything. We have been dead for years now. It is time for you to move on, time for you to live. Please little sis, I'm begging you. I can't watch you die again." Auggie's voice cracks.

"Sunflower, I love you, I always will, but you need to carry on. Take care of my brothers, they love you. They need you." Tripp's words brush against my ear, followed by the phantom sensation of his arms wrapping around me from behind.

"Use your eyes, your sixth sense. You are going to be okay, you're going to be happy. "

"Where are you going?" My heart is breaking all over again.

But this time they don't answer. The puddle on the ground has seeped into the floor below and shouting comes from outside the room.

“Sunday?! Sunday!” Darius screams as he kicks the door down. “Oh god, no! Not again. Please.” He collapses, landing on his knees at the edge of the bathtub, he gathers my corpse in his arms.

My eyes blink rapidly at the sight, and I watch as the red disperses into the air.

Darius is physically shaking away my fate. He is changing it.

I want to scream, to shout, to yell, to get his attention, but then the other two brothers are joining him.

Grayson and Axel.

As soon as they step into the doorway, my vision fills with a blinding light.

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The bright fluorescent bulbs are painful against my eyes. They shoot by blurringly. As soon as I focus on one, the next appears.

The smell and sounds hit me rapidly .

Chemical. Blaring. Sterile. Sirens.

None of it is pleasant, and I want nothing more than to make it all go away.

I am a foggy mess as I attempt to sit up.

“Lay back down! She’s coming to! Sweetheart, you were shot, you need to stay still. We’re going to take care of you, but you need to go into surgery. Who is your emergency contact?” A face bends over, her features are unfamiliar, but she is

wearing scrubs.

She reminds me of my parents.

The lights stop whipping by as we pause our movement.

“Where is Darius?” My throat throbs. It is thick, full of cotton and sharp razor blades. He was the last face I remember. He was holding me.

He wouldn’t just leave me.

“Sunday!”

“You have to get back! She needs to go into surgery.” The nurse whose voice had been so kind before turns cruel.

“Grayson is her emergency contact. Let us through!”

Axel and Grayson’s voices are a salve, and I shift my head in their direction. In my search for them, my attention lands on a sole woman leaning against a white plastic wall.

She is distinctly out of place and it catches my attention. Keeps it. Her clothes are dirty and torn. Her long chestnut hair is messy, her brown eyes listless.

Déjà vu slaps me against the face, presses down on my chest, rings into my ears.

My vision shifts as what I am lying on—a hospital bed—is pushed again.

The unusual woman lifts a finger to her lips.

A yin and yang tattoo on full display.

A scream rings out around me.

“Administer— ”

My vision darkens, the fluorescent lights leaving ghostly trails. The sounds and smells fade into nothingness.

And it isn't until I am nearly under that I realize I was the person screaming.



## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 3:11 am*

W hoosh.

“You need to leave. The blackmail they have on you both—”

“Grayson, you promised she would be safe with you.”

Whir.

“—my best. I’m sorry.”

Whoosh.

“Your brother—”

“—charges won’t stick.”

“—live video is enough?”

“Reporters—”

Hum.

“Little Lamb, I’m right here. Don’t listen to them argue. Your parents are here. They love you, but they can’t stay. It won’t turn out well.”

Whir.

“Axel! Shut—”

“Our sunflower, what have they done—”

“—more evidence.”

“Go outside! She shouldn’t hear this. She could wake up at any point.”

Whoosh. Whir.

“They’re gone, Sunday. Just focus on getting better. We need you to open your eyes. Please, I can’t do this without you. ”

Whoosh. Whir.

“ It isn’t fair. This isn’t fair! You have me wishing to be back in that god damn fucking cycle! At least then I knew you were going to wake up!”

Whoosh. Whir.

“ Wake up, fucking dammit! The doctors said you should be awake by now, so why aren’t you?!”

Whoosh. Whir.

“Fuck!”

Crash! Bang!

“Axel! Get out of here! Go outside!”

“She’s dying! Darius is in jail! And where is our fucking incubator? Our mother? This isn’t fair!”

Whoosh. Whir.

Beep.

Beep.

Beep.

Beep.

Beep.

“Don’t listen to him, baby girl. You’re going to be right as rain. Just hurry up for us, will you? Please? We’re a mess without you.”

Whoosh. Whir.

A harmonica.

## Page 5

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 3:11 am*

My throat hurts. It burns.

It is on fire.

Whoosh. Whir.

“Sunday?”

My eyes are sticky, sealed so tightly that for a terrifying moment I think I’ve gone blind.

A distant memory of a harmonica flutters around my subconscious.

“Get the nurse, she’s moving!”

My toes flex out, but my legs are weighed down.

Whoosh. Whir.

A cough forms in my lungs, but it’s trapped.

Panic shrouds me, the darkness creeping in.

“Her vitals—”

“Then take that fucking tube—”

“Oxygen—”

Warmth wraps around my left hand, grounds me in this instance. It squeezes a tight, comforting hold.

“She’s ready. On three. Two. One .”

My insides are being tugged violently. I attempt to squirm and thrash about, but I still can’t physically move.

Pain .

My shoulder throbs. My lungs are in agony as I cough and cough and cough .

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After the nurse leaves, I remain still for a bit longer, adjusting to the empty hollow feeling in my throat. I do my best not to fall back into another coughing fit, swallowing down the discomfort.

My mouth tastes like paint thinner and I nearly gag.

“Here.” Axel moves closer to me, presenting a water cup with a straw. His shaggy hair is unkempt, in disarray. There are thick heavy bags under his eyes. The exhaustion I feel radiates from him in crushing waves.

“I died.” My brain isn’t fully operational, but my memories are slapping through my mind in rapid succession.

“Not this time.” Grayson leans against the hospital door. Taking up his spot as a sentinel. If Axel is exhausted, then Grayson is on death’s doorstep. His face is gaunt,

his beard thicker than I have ever seen it, his shoulders slumped downwards.

Guilt eats into my gut as my eyes flicker up to him. Even past his fatigue there is a wariness in his gaze that I don't remember. He is uncomfortable , shifting from foot to foot.

Unwelcome memories churn deep in my belly, a fork twisting and turning.

We kissed. I took his keys. I drove to my own demise. He called me.

He told me.

“But I did before. Ninety-nine times. ”

Grayson jumps forward, his attention flashing to me. “So, you do remember.”

“Just this lifetime. What you told me before, I took your car and—” I cut myself off, the memories of Julia's body scrape their way into my mind.

Axel pulls the water away, setting it down on the table beside us. He regards me with his typical intensity as he carefully brings his hand up to my cheek. He moves languidly, slowly, as if to not startle me.

“The hundredth time is the charm,” he says.

And then the rough hot pads of his fingers are gripping my face, tugging me to him. His mouth pressing against mine, his lips scorching me, marking me.

He is consuming me, like I am the little lamb he has established me to be.

Distracting me from my own internal turmoil.

He is everywhere. Lighting my skin on fire, replacing the trauma of one hundred lifetimes, searing into my nerves. He is everything I didn't know I needed in this instance.

A small, tiny oasis in an otherwise chaotic state.

"Cut it out," Grayson growls.

Startled, I jerk back from Axel and cast a look over his shoulder.

Grayson has stepped closer to the bed; he reaches over it and physically tears Axel away from me.

I turn behind me waiting for Darius to break them up.

But he isn't there.

"Darius?" I am not sure if it is the concern or the word itself, but either way, it causes the brothers to separate and turn to me.

Grayson offers an almost imperceptible head shake, and Axel clenches his jaw .

"Tell me the truth." I need to hear it. To know what has happened. "Is he okay?" I swallow around the gravel in my throat. Reaching over, I take the water from the table and gulp down a few sips.

Grayson watches me and waits until I am done to answer. "He's safe and alive."

But I can tell there is more to it than that. "How can you be so sure? Where is he?"

Axel lets out an exasperated grunt. "Fucking stop beating around the bush." He whips

his focus to me, his hands clenching into tight fists. “Darius is in jail .”

My heart beats louder, faster in my chest. Each thump echoed by an eerie beep on the machines I am still connected to. “Why aren’t you rescuing him?” For the first time since I came to, I try to get up, but my body is weak and my legs are stiff from disuse.

“Darius made his choice.” Axel leans over me again, his bright eyes boring into mine. “He’s going to be fine. Can’t you fucking trust us? It’s you who almost died. You were shot.”

My vision blurs as tears form. “I’m sorry.” My emotions are a thousand broken chords, each more choppy than the last. And all of them play the most disgusting song together.

I am raw.

Grayson swears under his breath. Almost as if in a trance, he settles carefully onto the bed next to me, gathering me in his arms. “We’re here. You’re going to be okay now. Everything is going to be fine. Darius will be safe, they won’t kill him.”

“But how can you know?”

They already killed Auggie and Tripp, what would stop them from doing the same to Darius ?

I am a blubbering mess. Now that the tears have started, I can’t turn them off. I feel as if I am mourning some part of myself. As if, right now, I am letting loose the emotions of ninety-nine lives that I lived.

I try to turn away from Grayson, but then Axel is slipping carefully onto the other side of the bed. Both men are hanging precariously over the edges, using me as the



anchor to hold them in place, but even still, they are gentle, aware to not jostle me.

And then Axel begins to hum a familiar tune from my childhood. It is the same one from our ride home from the river party.

“How do you know that song?” I wanted to ask him before, but I forgot.

One of probably a million things I have forgotten.

Axel nuzzles further into my side, inhaling me. Even over the harsh acrid of chemicals I can smell him. Smoke and leather.

“I learned it in an early timeline, I found that it always calmed you down. Helped you sleep.”

I shift uncomfortably in the small bed. For just a single instance, I feel as if I might suffocate, but then Grayson wraps around me further. His arms securing me in the here and now.

“Do you understand now? Why all I wanted was to keep you safe? We watched you die so many times,” Grayson grumbles into my ear.

His hot breath tickles the skin there, invades me, enters my bloodstream, ventures its way to my gut. All of the brothers have slowly filtered into me.

Except it wasn't slowly at all.

“How long have you lived through this?” The question slips out on its own.

“Years.” Axel's arm wraps over me, above Grayson's. “Now you need to get some rest.”

“But Darius– ”

“His lawyer spoke to Grayson earlier. His bail hearing is in a few days. We can’t do anything until then.”

I want to argue, to scream and shout. Darius needs us. How many days has he been alone in a jail cell?

I have hundreds of swirling emotions, thousands of questions, millions of prickling stabs of anxiety.

But I am exhausted. Even though I haven’t been awake long, my body is not cooperating with me.

Axel’s arms tighten, tugging me closer to him, my face burrowing into his chest.

My throat is still raw, my mouth dry, my body a mess, but here, wedged between the two brothers, I allow myself to relax.

I can’t do anything if my body isn’t healed.

My eyes flicker over Axel’s shoulder to the door of the hospital room. To the large glass window in the middle.

There’s movement, and I think perhaps the nurse will come in and separate us, but then it’s gone. My blinks are longer and longer as Axel continues to hum.

And just as unconsciousness takes hold, I see a shimmer of light leading from me to the hospital door. To the person that is, once more, standing on the other side.

## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 3:11 am*

The freezing concrete presses into Darius's skin uncomfortably.

He shifts, rolls, squirms, but he cannot find relief.

He wasn't gifted a blanket or a pillow, simply thrown into this bare room.

Time passes in his cell in a way he isn't quite used to.

Before, he was using time to his own advantage, using the clues of previous lifetimes to adjust and change as needed.

But now?

Now in this windowless prison he is simply at the mercy of its passage.

Has Auggie's birthday already passed?

There is no way to measure it, no way to guess how long it has been.

But she's alive. I know she is. It is worth it.

A rush of cold air presses into him as the door to his cell is slammed open.

"Get up."

Darius stiffens, but doesn't acquiesce.

He recognizes the voice. It has taken shape in his childhood, in previous timelines, and in his nightmares.

The owner of the voice is the reason Darius sacrificed himself. It is why in all the timelines Darius was never truly hurt.

It is why everything in this town is corrupt and broken and disgusting.

“Put him down here,” the same voice says .

Just a few beats later, rough hands grab hold of Darius’s shoulders and tug him forcibly off his concrete pallet. They heave him to the ground and push him onto it. Onto his knees.

Darius screws his eyes shut, head angled downwards.

He doesn’t want to see his “visitor,” doesn’t want to acknowledge him in any way.

Cold smooth fingers grip his chin, jerking his head up. Caught off guard, Darius’s eyes flash open on their own accord.

“That’s better. You never did learn respect, just like that filthy mother of yours.” The man before him flashes his teeth in a feral smile.

Hot coals tumble in Darius’s stomach at the thought of his mother. He looks anywhere except at the man. Over his shoulder Darius begins to count the bricks along the wall.

He makes it to twenty-three before the man speaks again.

“I promised her I would leave you be, that I would let her raise you. I half believed

you weren't mine."

Darius thinks back to when he first learned why he was so different from his other brothers. Why he always felt so lonely around them. Why he seemed so secluded from them.

It was when he was eight; his mother had returned from one of her benders, a mess. But Darius hadn't cared, he'd just wanted her love, her affection. It was before he realized she had none to give.

When she passed out on the floor, he crawled onto her, wrapped himself in her arms. It was the happiest he had felt in awhile.

But then she woke up.

Screaming at him. Telling him to never touch her again. That he was an abomination.

That while Tripp, Axel, and Grayson were made out of love, Darius was the product of trauma .

He was unwanted, unloved. He was a monster she should have gotten rid of.

At the time, Darius hadn't understood. He had run to Grayson with tears in his eyes. He expected Grayson not to know either but that wasn't the case.

Grayson had sat him on the bed, watched him with his typical intensity.

And then he had explained.

Grayson had stated it matter-of-factly, emotionlessly. As if he had rehearsed the conversation for years and was finally telling Darius.

Where Axel, Tripp, and Grayson shared the same father, Darius didn't.

"But you are mine. A DNA test proved it, and it's clear as day, you can't hide your lineage." In the here and now, the man before Darius continues. The man drops his hold on Darius's chin, but Darius doesn't dare move.

In every lifetime, he had never come face to face with the man before him.

With his father.

He hadn't wanted to, done everything he could to avoid it, but perhaps that is why the mindless loops ended the same.

Darius shifts his attention to the man before him, boring into their eyes, they are an exact replica of his own. Dark green, flecked in brown and gold.

"What do you want from me?" Darius asks, clenching his jaw.

His father sneers, "You need to replace what was taken from me."

Internally, Darius's heart pounds aggressively against his chest, but externally, he doesn't flinch.

What does that mean?

"I let your mother raise you, allowed her to influence you with her softness, but it is time you return to your family. To your purpose," his father continues, his lips lifting cruelly. "How is your mother doing? "

This time Darius can't prevent his reaction, he recoils as if slapped. "You know how she's doing. You don't let her out of your sight."

His father heaves a sigh. “Such a beautiful woman. If only she were from a better family, I would have kept her by my side, but alas, I could not.” He drags a hand across his face.

“This conversation is tedious. Here are the facts—you will join me, you will replace what you have stolen from me, and you will do as I command.”

“And if I refuse?” Darius snarls.

His father snaps his fingers and one of his goons steps into Darius's line of sight. Another clear indicator of his father having his fingers in every organization. Presenting a tablet, the goon presses a button and the previously black screen transforms.

Ice drops heavily into Darius's gut, he wants nothing more than to launch himself at the man before him.

At the man that had raped his mother.

At his father.

Darius watches the tablet. In the corner, the word LIVE flashes. It shows a hospital room, and it takes less than a second for Darius to realize whose it is. On the screen, Grayson climbs into Sunday's hospital bed, followed shortly by Axel.

He understands the threat that this is.

His heart hurts . Not in jealousy, but at the realization he will never have that again .

He knows with certainty that he will essentially be a prisoner for the remainder of his life.

His father will make sure of it.

“What did you expect, son? You killed your own brother.”

But it was worth it. Sunday is alive. The video is proof of it.

“Listen when I speak to you! ”

The fist collides with Darius’s cheek with a bruising force. He hadn’t expected it, and it sends him to his side.

“Weak! Just like your mother.”

Next is a series of kicks, to his gut, to his ribs, to his legs.

Darius accepts the abuse. He deserves it.

He is a product of his environment. Of his mother’s trauma. Of his father’s wickedness.

No matter how much Darius wants to be a good man. To break a generational cycle.

He can’t.

After all, he is the evil that has eaten their town alive.

He is a Thorne.



## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 3:11 am*

“Get the fuck out of here. Haven’t you done enough?” Axel grumbles, but the words are distant, muted.

I reach out to swat him, to shut him up, but he’s no longer next to me.

My head is pounding, my mouth dry and aching, but my body is cooperating. At least better than it was before.

“She has a right to make her own choices.” This voice I don’t recognize, a loud whisper.

Grumbling, I reach up, rubbing my eyes and opening them. The light in my room is off, but there is a window that is partially uncovered offering just the dulllest rays of sunlight to creep onto my skin.

“You’re awake.”

My head wrenches to Grayson. He sits on the chair next to the bed, his arms crossed, his eyes gaunt.

It reminds me of a distant memory, of when he was the one in the hospital bed. It feels so incredibly recent and also as if it were years ago.

A crash draws my attention to the door, through the window at the top, I can make out the back of Axel’s shaggy hair.

“Who’s out there?” I ask, readjusting on my hospital bed. I don’t feel nearly as weak

as I did before.

Grayson reaches up, massaging his temples. “A nuisance. We didn’t see her in every timeline, but she was always on the edge. I don’t have proof but I suspect she led to your demise on more than one occasion. ”

Before I can question who exactly “she” is or pummel Grayson with the endless questions pouring through me, the door is slammed open.

“The hospital is forcing this onto us. Sunday. Do not listen to the hot garbage she will spew your way.” Axel takes up his spot on the other side of the bed, he stands next to it, his arms cross over his chest.

I don’t have time to understand what is going on before the woman steps into the room.

“Sunday Masch,” the woman states, migrating to the foot of the bed, directly in my line of sight.

Her chestnut hair is pulled into a bun, her eyes nearly the same color. Her face is hard, stoic.

There is an eerily familiar nature to her, but in this instance, it isn’t déjà vu that takes hold—it’s something else entirely.

“Who are you?” I shift further up the bed, this encounter is hitting hard and fast. Stabbing at my psyche, prickling across my nerves, slithering uncomfortably in my gut.

A shimmer of light catches in my vision, but when I blink, it’s gone.

The woman reaches into her pocket and pulls out a badge. She flashes it at me.  
“Agent Franz. Jane Franz.”

Whatever I am expecting, it isn't that .

“Agent?”

“Ex-agent,” Axel snarls. “Are you even on the force anymore? Did your superiors approve you coming down here to interrogate a gunshot victim?”

Jane's eyes darken before she plasters her face back into place. An impressive mask. She is both a concerned woman and a bullheaded agent.

“This doesn't concern either of you two.

Axel, you still have a few years left on your probation.

Do you want me to put in a call to your PO?

” The woman's voice, which had been so gentle with me, turns stern.

“I am here on official FBI business. Due to her injuries, the public outrage, and the suspicious nature of the sheriff's response to the man that has been taken into custody, a case has been opened.

Didn't you wonder why she was placed in a private room?

Why the reporters have been kept at bay? ”

Axel's jaw clenches, but he remains silent.

I am surprised when it is Grayson who speaks. “You mean our brother. Our brother’s half-cocked arrest. His lawyer will have him out at the trial. I mean, the entire case should be thrown out! He didn’t even have a weapon, nor was one found anywhere nearby.”

The woman’s eyes widen in shock. “You don’t know?”

Axel breaks his silence. “Know what?”

I open my mouth to speak but then that familiar flicker flashes, and I close it. This time I try to follow the light, but it’s almost as if as soon as I do, it disappears.

Am I going crazy? Have all of these deaths caused me to lose my mind? Did I meet this woman in a past life? Is that why she’s so familiar?

The agent rolls her shoulders, flattens her lips. She places her hands on the rail at the foot of my bed, levels me with her stare. “Darius was released just a few hours ago.”

Grayson falls back, away from me and towards the nearby wall. My attention catches on the movement, the way his eyes dull, his mouth opens in shock.

“No!” Axel yells, lunging himself towards the woman.

My hand moves on its own catching him, he lets me.

“Isn’t that good?” I whisper. Nothing is making any sense, even less than before.

Darius has been sprung, he’s free, we don’t have to worry about him. We escaped the loop. Everything is okay...

Nobody answers, but Jane examines me with a critical intensity .

“Where is he?” I ask even softer than before. The urge to cough presses against me, but I swallow it down.

“With his father .” Jane continues to stare me down.

Axel jerks under my hold. She pauses for a few beats.

Jane cocks her head. “You don’t know who his father is?”

My head twists on a swivel, looking between Axel and Grayson. “What’s wrong with your dad?” I had never met the man, never heard of him. But Tripp had mentioned him once, he was a deadbeat that disappeared before Darius was born.

“She doesn’t .” Jane stands back to her full height, her tone evolving, her eyes darkening until they are nearly black. “What else are you keeping her in the dark about?” She raises a hand to push a strand of hair that has escaped her neatly pulled back bun.

And that is when I see it.

“What is this?” I jerk back in the bed, my hands shaking. “Who are you?” My mind falters between reality and somewhere much darker. A nightmare I can’t escape. A loop I wasn’t even aware I was thrown into.

A picture of a girl.

On a bed.

With a matching tattoo.

Yin and yang.

“This is the girl’s mom. From the photo,” Axel provides.

“She is the reason everything bad has ever happened. She is the reason Tripp and Auggie are dead. She is the reason you are in this hospital bed.” And he believes it.

It is in the cadence of his voice, the way he grits his teeth, narrows his eyes.

It’s similar to how he was with Rayden. He despises this woman.

“Her daughter?” The realization strikes, a thousand bolts.

“They kept you from me.” Jane transforms before me .

I almost can’t believe I didn’t see it prior. She is a woman on a mission. With nothing to lose. Searching for a daughter that has already been brutalized.

“You should leave,” I say. My stomach is knotting in on itself. I press back further against the bed. Sensing my discomfort, Axel shifts his attention to me.

“You’ve met her before.” He stares directly into me, and in this moment, I finally understand what I was sensing before.

A different loop, another life I lived. I have questions for him, but I save them.

Jane remains silent, but straightens back up. This time I am almost sure I see a glimmer flash between us.

A string ?

Is it a shadow of the past creeping across her skin?

The longer I stare, the brighter the light becomes before it envelopes her, thousands of bloodied neon strands, and just as it shrouds her in a disgusting cloak, she inclines her head.

It disperses, as if it were never even there.

“I’ll be back.” She throws a card onto my bed, spinning on her heel, and marching away.

The mirage vanishes with her movement, and I am left staring after her slack-jawed and uneasy.

The knots in my stomach have twisted and tied themselves together.

Once she leaves, it’s as if a collective sigh releases into the world.

Grayson paces the room. “She should be gone, we are out of the loop. This doesn’t make any sense. And Darius... fuck ,” Grayson mutters under his breath, a tattooed hand comes up to brush his hair from his face as he continues marching across the room and back .

“Who is Darius’s dad?” I ask, readjusting in the bed, attempting to find comfort, but there isn’t any for me.

While Jane was here she distracted me from the dull throb in my body, but in her absence my pain takes forefront.

I was shot.

But how long has it been?

“Obviously, we didn’t tie up all the loose ends. The bitch kept showing up at the restaurant, at our house. We’re lucky she didn’t cross paths with Sunday sooner. I almost think she’s the reason for it all,” Axel grumbles. His hand reaches out on its own, tucking one of my curls behind my ear.

The warmth of his skin is a salve I didn’t know I needed, and I incline further into it.

“Who is Darius’s dad?” I repeat my question, raising my voice just a bit.

Grayson appears deep in thought as he continues his pacing, to one corner of the room, to the door, and back to my bed, on and on he goes. It takes him all of three steps for each loop and it isn’t long before I am dizzy from tracking his progress.

“We should have just turned her in. We practically had the evidence needed. Maybe we all should have just left this town. Ran as far and fast as we could.” Grayson increases his pace.

“You know that wouldn’t have worked. We tried to ship her off to her grandmother’s. You remember how that went.” Axel’s fingers trace along my face now, but his attention is on his brother.

Darius wouldn’t ignore me. He would listen when I speak. He would know what to say, how to fix this.

“Who is Darius’s dad?” I’m not yelling, but my voice is loud enough that it causes me to cough, my lungs to heave, my wound to pulse in agony .

“Maybe we can find Darius, get to him, and then try again. Maybe it will work now,” Grayson says. “I can keep you all safe. It will be fine. We’ll get him back. We have to. We can’t lose him too.”



Lose him too?

Now panic has fully set in. This doesn't make any sense. If Darius is out of jail, he should be here. Unless he got caught up, but eventually he would make his way here.

"What can we possibly do?" The pads of Axel's fingers press firmly into my skin. "Sunday isn't safe in this town. They want her at all angles. Darius knew the risks when he stayed behind for her."

Stayed behind for me?

I knock Axel's hand away from me. "WHO IS DARIUS'S DAD?" This time, I scream.

Grayson comes to a stop, he's at the door, his attention zeroes in on my face, my lips, my nose, before settling on my eyes. "I promised him I wouldn't tell you. Not until he had the chance to."

"Well, I didn't make that promise." Axel jumps on top of me, onto the bed. He pushes me back on the mattress, his hands landing on each side of my head.

I expect pain to follow, but he is careful in his movements, knowing exactly where he can and can't press down.

His lips hover above mine, his bright eyes swirling hypnotically. "Darius's dad? Are you sure, Little Lamb? Isn't it better to not know?"

My hands come up between us and with all the might I can muster, I push Axel off of me. I can feel my stitches pulling, but I pay it no mind as I roll him off the bed.

He falls to the linoleum ground with a loud grunt, and then... laughter .

Grayson remains silent, choosing to watch how this plays out instead .

“I see. I guess you might be ready. Darius’s dad?” Axel grunts as he makes his way back to his feet. His lips curl cruelly as he stares down at me. “Sterling. Maxwell. Thorne.”

My heart pounds up my throat, nearly chokes me. “His dad...his dad...his dad,” I stutter.

Grayson breaks free of whatever was holding him in place and rushes to my side, his arms wrap around me, comforting me. His chin finds the top of my head as he gathers me carefully into him.

Darius’s dad...

“He’s one of the founding families. One of the men in charge of the disgusting happenings of this town,” Axel confirms. “So no, Darius isn’t safe. But now that he’s in his sperm donor’s clutches? There’s nothing we can do.”

Grayson remains silent, but squeezes me tighter to him. And it is in this instance that I realize Grayson isn’t here to comfort me.

He needs the support.

Another one of his brothers is in peril. And just like before...

It is my fault.

## Page 8

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 3:11 am*

After a few more minutes of silence, Grayson finally pulls away from me. “It’s time we tell you. Tell you as much as we possibly can. At this point ignorance will only get you in trouble.”

Axel inclines his head, his messy hair falling forward. “Finally, we agree on something.”

My mind races. When Grayson first revealed to me the loops I didn’t believe him, but then he reminded me of all the happenstances and the near deaths. And I remember the déjà vu. The feeling in my gut, the tugs in directions I didn’t necessarily want to go.

When I left to chase after Julia, it was almost as if I were having an out-of-body experience, as if I weren’t making those choices at all, but they were made for me.

Looking back...there are a lot of instances that feel that same way.

The memorial.

The party at Maxwell’s.

The river.

The space center.

Julia.

“Julia.” Tears form, but I blink them away. “Did she always die? Was there nothing I could do to stop it?”

Grayson opens his mouth to speak but pauses .

Axel takes over. “We don’t know. All I can say is I never saw her alive at the end. She’s been in the Thorne’s clutches since before Tripp and Auggie were killed. We tried to find her, for your sake, for our own, to see if it would change anything, but it never did.”

“What about the agent’s daughter? The girl with the yin and yang tattoo?”

Grayson shakes his head. “We can’t be sure if you ever found her, but we weren’t there when you did. There were some lifetimes that we weren’t together for, that we tried to let you live on your own, but it didn’t matter, the universe still found a way to strike you down.”

“But why?” Why had this happened to us?

Why was I granted so many chances when so many others, weren’t ?

Axel snorts. “A fucking wish on a goddamn star. You made one and so did we. That’s the only thing that makes any sense, even if it makes none at all. Some sort of cosmic flaw, we made one to keep you safe. And you made one to reunite with those you love. ”

My face burns in shame. “I told you?” But even as I ask, I know that I have. Just as I know with certainty everything they say is true. Maybe the memories aren’t currently reachable, but I can almost feel as the fragments slice through my brain. “But why do you all remember?”

“Because we aren’t the ones that die. Every time you died, we would be tugged to your body.

Forced to find you. And as soon as we did.

It would all restart. Over and over again.

” Axel snaps. “You are the stupid girl that kept running headfirst into danger. Do you know how it felt? To go through that so many times? For us to watch you die over and over again without being able to stop you? You drove us half mad, and we had to be. We had to be insane to carry on the same pathway so many times.”

“It isn’t her fault,” Grayson admonishes .

Axel pushes a hand up through his shaggy hair.

“Fuck!” He heaves a shuddering sigh. “It’s not your fault, Sunday.

None of this is your fault. We realized early on, the ‘choices’ you made were strands of fate tugging you towards your demise.

All we could do was try to be there to stop it.

And we also realized that parts of you remembered the past. Remembered what had happened. ”

“The barrels.” I don’t know why I say that but as soon as I do, a fuzzy memory forms in my mind.

Darkness. Dizzy. Rolling.

“Yes,” Grayson agrees. “You died there, I didn’t expect your reaction to it, but some part of you must have recalled it.”

My mouth opens and more questions burst free. Of how long they have lived through these endless cycles. Of all the ideas they tried. Of why they never gave up. Of who kept killing me.

And for their part, they take turns answering me, being patient and accepting that I finally deserve to know everything. I understand why they hadn’t told me before because it’s a lot.

Nearly too much.

But the more they divulge, the more I feel myself connecting to my past selves, understanding that we are all the same person, but we are just made up of different facets.

“Do you get it now?” Axel asks. He’s sitting on my bed, his chin resting in his palm as he watches me. “Why we treated you the way we did? Even when we told you in past lives you still died. It was like playing a game of tag, but as soon as we reached you, you would fall down into a pit and die.”

I laugh at that. “That’s not how tag works.”

Grayson smiles wistfully. “It is for Axel. He used to set traps for us.” Grayson finally relaxes, settling on the bed with us. “Maybe, now that everything has played out, that you’ve made it past your death day, you can safely leave this town. We can help you escape, and you will be unharmed.”

A weight drops down my throat, heavy and acidic, I gulp around it.

“Darius.” So caught up in my racing mind and my endless questions, I had nearly blocked my worry away, but now that it is back, it attempts to envelope me.

“What can we do? How can we get him away from his dad? The agent said there are reporters? Can we talk to them?” They had explained how evil the Thornes are.

Their link to the hidden underbelly of this town.

“Talking to the reporters will only paint a larger target on you,” Grayson warns. “There is no we, Sunday. You need to go somewhere safe, and then Axel and I will rescue Darius.”

This time, I can’t blink back the tears and they fall freely. Landing in big drops on my lap.

“You idiot!” Axel swings back before landing a heavy punch on Grayson’s shoulder.

Rejection slithers against my skin. It leaves a trail of anxiety in its wake.

Were they really going through all of this, all of these years of insanity just to keep me safe? Do they even actually care for me or is this all out of obligation, to fulfill some celestial prophecy? To complete this timeline? And what of me now?

Maybe they would be better off without me ruining what’s left of their lives.

Without me giving them another lifetime of death, destruction, and tragedy.

Without me .

I’m alone. Just like before, but now I know what it feels like to not be.

How will I survive it ?

I need Darius. He would make this all better. He always knows what to say.

But...but what if he doesn't want me either?

After all, isn't he in danger now because of me? Stuck with his evil father.

The tears turn to loud sobs. They block out the altercation between Axel and Grayson.

"Sunday, hush, he didn't mean it. My brother is an idiot. We all care about you, we aren't going anywhere." I feel the scratchy leather as Axel gathers me up. "We're not going anywhere, I promise. Please ." He's begging now.

But I don't know what for.

My sobs intensify.

I am crying for myself.

For my previous selves.

For Julia. For Darius. For Tripp. For Auggie.

For this god-forsaken town.

For Jane and her daughter.

For the countless victims that came before them. For the many more that will follow.



For nothing. For everything.

I am a blubbering mess and I don't know how to stop. It's as if now that I am letting my emotions out, I can't pull them back, can't wrap them into a neat bow and leave them be. They are strings, frayed at the edges.

What if they went through all of that and I still die? Or even worse, their brother dies? What if to keep me alive someone has to trade places with me? Isn't that how it always works?

I am hyperventilating now, I can't stop it. My body is weak, damaged, and I'm in so much fucking pain. Emotionally, physically, spiritually.

Sunday your soul is marred .

The words aren't my own, but they pop up into my mind as I continue devolving. I no longer feel Axel's arms, hear his heart. I no longer see Grayson or smell the chemically sterile hospital room.

My vision twists to a bathtub, I want to fall into it, to calm myself down, but then I see it's already occupied.

With my own body.

Pale and gaunt. Terrifying.

Lifeless. Bloated.

I scream. And scream. And scream. Until I'm breathless, until I can't anymore.

And then I'm coughing and wheezing and scratching at my throat.

Arms grab me now, but they aren't familiar.

I attempt to fight them, to shake them off, but then my body stops cooperating.

My motor skills devolve into a numbing chill.

And then I am drowning.

## Page 9

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 3:11 am*

Darius sits on the couch in the bedroom he was thrown into. His face is buried in his hands, his elbows dig painfully into his knees. It's been weeks since he was sprung from one cell and placed into another.

"Axel and Grayson are not going to come for you," Maxwell sneers from the chair across from him. "I can't believe you're related to me. When father told me"—Maxwell bares his teeth—"I didn't believe him. But then he explained how your whore mother had led him astray."

Darius whips his head up, his eyes narrowing at Maxwell. The man's nose is raw, his pupils blown, his skin is a sickly pale.

Addiction.

Darius recognizes it. His mother walked in and out of his life with it for as long as he could remember. "Dipping into the drugs a bit too much? It's no wonder he came searching for a replacement son."

Maxwell shoots to his feet, he points a beefy finger at Darius. "You killed my brother! And then he brought you here. Forced me to take you 'under my wing' but you're the enemy. The reason we had to scale back the business in the first place. You, your brothers, Augustus, and that girl. "

Darius's jaw clenches but he doesn't react otherwise. Even still, Maxwell clocks it.

His eyes darken, a sinister smile stamping itself across his skin.

“Rayden wouldn’t let me have my fun with her.

But now that he’s gone? I’m going to play with that bitch, toss her around, and when she’s used up?

I’m going to cut her open and throw her in a shallow grave.

I wonder what her cunt feels like? I heard your brother had his fill, but you all have been close to her now too.

Have you used her up? Will she be too stretched for me to—”

Darius jumps and swings before he processes what the repercussions will be. His fist lands with a satisfying crunch, effectively breaking Maxwell’s nose.

Before Maxwell can retaliate, the bedroom door slams open.

“You son of a—”

“Sit down!” Sterling commands.

Darius drops to the couch. He knows better than to argue with the man before him.

Sterling. His father. A Thorne.

The man fills up the room with his evil, it is suffocating, thick. A choking haze that causes Darius’s throat to dry.

This is the man that plagued his nightmares.

Tall and slim, dressed neatly. Black hair, cropped short and primly styled. Horn-

rimmed glasses sitting on a straight nose. A sharp jaw. His age is only evident by the etches of wrinkles furthering his frown lines and defining his eyes.

Darius hates him. Hates how he looks. Hates that the longer he stares the more similarities he sees.

He had spent as many years as he could pretending this wasn't his father. That it was some faceless man that left his mother in the dead of night.

But now the truth is literally staring him down.

"Sit," Sterling commands again. He glowers at Darius but speaks to Maxwell.

Maxwell is a blubbering mess of righteousness and anger. "He broke my mother fuck—"

"Language." Sterling snaps his fingers and a butler appears .

The butler attends to Maxwell, pushing him down onto the chair, tilting his head back, staunching the blood that still gushes freely with a thick bandage.

"You two will need to learn to get along," Sterling advises coolly.

"But that girl!" Maxwell yells, wildly waving his hands.

"That girl is the least of our concerns. Darius here put on a show . And now he needs to finish it up. The outside is concerned about police brutality ." Sterling's tone is level, but even still Darius shivers under the weight of his words.

Sterling Thorne. One of the founding families. He appears unassuming, but Darius knows better.

Knows that the man before him is not only a rapist, but the main culprit in their town's disgusting underbelly.

"Then why did you bring him here? He's the one that has caused all of your problems!"

Sterling snaps his fingers, jerks a hand across his throat. The butler who had been helping Maxwell is now strangling him. He wraps the bloodied bandage around his neck, pulling it tight. Suffocating Maxwell.

It goes on for so long that Darius almost wants to intervene. To keep Maxwell from being killed.

But he doesn't. Darius's face may no longer be bloody, his ribs are healing, but he remembers the first week after his beating. Remembers how it hurt just to breathe. How he was thrown into a closet to sit in darkness, his mind only able to focus on two things.

His pain.

And Sunday.

He knows his brothers will keep themselves safe, knows that Grayson won't allow Axel to act out, but Sunday is a different matter entirely. Before she was being yanked along by fate, but now what? Has she truly escaped her death? Or had they simply bought her more time.

Maxwell's gasps bring Darius back to the here and now.

Sterling angles his head down, takes his glasses off and neatly folds them into his chest pocket.

“No. Sunday is not our main concern. That would be the agent. Specifically the one whose daughter you decided to take for your own. The one you raped and nearly let escape. The one who could single-handedly bring down our organization,” Sterling states levelly.

“And now the FBI has opened a fucking case into Rayden’s death.

Into this town’s handling of Darius’s arrest. Of their delay in aiding the poor bleeding girl .

” Sterling redirects his anger towards Darius.

Darius’s heart pounds into his ears, but he ignores it. He already knows all about Jane and her daughter. Knows that even in this timeline she didn’t let up, she tried her best to make contact with Sunday. But they never let her. Always one step ahead.

He knows that the LIVE feed he made is the only reason Sunday is being kept alive. Knows that Sterling wouldn’t want to bring anymore unwanted attention.

It's why Darius is healed. Why he’s being kept in this gilded cage. Why Maxwell is here with him. They need to appear a united front. Darius needs to be camera ready.

Sterling groans. “A dead idiot. A drug addict. And a bastard. That’s what I’m left with. Rayden couldn’t kill one little girl, instead he left a fucking mess.”

Darius can see that Maxwell wants to speak, to yell at Sterling, but Maxwell is also terrified. His breath coming out in ragged pants, his face pink and splotchy. The butler is back to helping with his nose, but Maxwell flinches away from his touch .

“Sunday is leaving the hospital soon. There is no audio feed on the equipment set up, but it is clear she did not listen to the agent and hopefully she will continue not to.

But if that changes, Darius, you will need to act. You will need to convince her. And if you can't.

..” Sterling allows the threat to hang between them.

Darius doesn't speak. There is nothing that he can say that will change Sterling. The man has been on his throne for too long; he deems himself untouchable.

And maybe he is.

“At least the bastard is silent.” Sterling cuts his attention back to Maxwell. “Stay out of the supply. You have caused enough damage and I don't want to clean up any more of your fucking messes.”

Maxwell grits his teeth but keeps his mouth sealed.

“Good, you're already learning from your brother.

Now get acquainted and figure your shit out.

There will be an interview soon. The lawyers should do most of the speaking, but you will both need to appear amicable.

After all, who would suspect Darius killed Rayden if we all act as if we are a united grieving family. ”

“But what about Rayden?” Maxwell blurts out.

Sterling steps forward, bends on his knees right in front of Maxwell and speaks. Even from his spot feet away, the move enacts terror.



Darius's pulse quickens, his body tensing.

“He shot himself. That is the official report. He saw Darius with Sunday, and shot her in a fit of jealousy and then turned the gun on himself. A lover's spat gone awry. Two brothers that fell for the same sweet fruit.”

That is the last Sterling says before he is snapping his fingers and marching from the room, the butler following suit.

He turns in the doorway. “Now clean yourself up. The interview is in just a few days.”

Neither of the brothers speak again.

## Page 10

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 3:11 am*

Time passes.

It passes in a way I am not unaccustomed to, but it is painful nonetheless. After my breakdown, I was put under in order to calm my nerves.

A panic attack. That's how the nurse explained it. But it was more than that. It was my soul unwinding from my body. It was my emotions and feelings readjusting to the knowledge that Axel and Grayson placed on me.

I needed it.

But now I need to heal. And that's what I have been doing. Healing. Recovering. Rehabbing.

A gunshot wound does not just go away, but finally it feels as if I am nearly back to normal.

Or as normal as can be.

"Sunday, talk to me. What's going through that pretty head of yours?" Axel wraps his body around mine in the stiff hospital bed. He has long since learned to take up as little space as possible, to avoid my wound, to not hurt me.

I am back in my own clothes, this is my last day here. Yet it leaves me wary. "I hope Darius is okay."

This room is small, sterile, cold . But it has felt like a reprieve. A quick pit stop

before diving right back into the madness that is our town.

Axel jolts. “I’m sure he’s fine. ”

Grayson makes his entrance, banging the hospital door open. Now it is my turn to jump.

Grayson hasn’t spoken to me since I had my meltdown. Since he told me I should leave. Since I woke up with only Axel.

He doesn’t acknowledge me now, his eyes focused above us. On the tiny TV that is perched on a metal box. I haven’t used it once, but Grayson clicks it on.

It only takes him five seconds to find what he is looking for.

“Darius?” I gasp.

There he is. My best friend. The sweetest man I have ever known. The one who took care of me at my lowest. Who cooked me my favorites.

The ones he must have figured out from previous lives.

Who gave me my only birthday gift.

Who kept me company when I was at my lowest.

There he is, stone-faced standing shoulder to shoulder with none other than Maxwell.

“Is this a joke?” Axel is standing now, as close to the TV as he can manage, his neck crooked upwards glaring at it. “They put Darius next to Maxwell? The guy whose brother he killed.”

Grayson clicks up the volume.

“—cording to the lab report, it has been confirmed that Darius and Rayden were biological brothers. And new evidence has emerged via text message communication, a woman was the reason for their altercation. Unfortunately, Rayden, who was so lost to his own jealousy, hurt the woman before turning the gun on himself.” The man speaking is clearly a lawyer.

A slimy one at that. The expensive suit perfectly tailored to his body, his hair slicked back, his eyes soulless.

“The Thorne’s will be taking care of the victim’s hospital fees and anything to help on her road to recovery. ”

The screen flickers to an evidence bag. To a gun .

“Axel?” Grayson growls.

“That’s not the murder weapon.” Axel squares his shoulders. “They’re twisting the narrative. Darius’s idea with the live feed worked. It’s probably the only reason we have been left alone. Too many witnesses outside of the town, they couldn’t cover it up the way they typically do.”

When it’s clear that Darius will not reappear on the screen, I shift my focus.

A light shimmers.

A flicker.

This time I stare at it, allow it to take form.

“Sunday?” Axel asks.

“Water,” I say.

He moves.

“I want to get it. Just let me have a few minutes. I won’t go far.” I don’t want to tell Axel or Grayson for that matter about what I’m seeing. About the incessant urge I have to follow it.

Keeping my eyes peeled I leave my room in a trance. For once, the brothers seem to listen to me.

Avoiding the other patients, the hustle and bustle of the hospital, I follow the light. It is hypnotic, and before I realize it, I am at the nurses station.

Standing there lamely for a minute, I’m unsure of what I’m supposed to do.

Is my mind unraveling? Am I losing it?

But then one of the nurses walks around and smiles at me. “Hi Sunday, I was told to give this to you when you were alone.”

The light that was once so dim is bright now, it envelopes the woman before me. I reach out to touch it, but instead she drops something small and rectangular into my hands. A phone. As soon as the item touches my skin, the light disappears. Almost as if it were never there to begin with.

The nurse’s blonde hair hangs sharply around her jaw, and her bright eyes are kind.

“The agent wanted you to have a way to get in touch with her. She was afraid those

boys were being too overprotective, and I can't say I blame her.

That O'Brien may be your appointed guardian, but that doesn't mean he knows best. Now put that into your pocket and keep it with you when we release you.

Just in case." She squeezes my uninjured shoulder reassuringly before stepping around me and walking away.

I clutch the item lamely. This encounter wasn't what I expected.

Well, that's not exactly true. I hoped if I followed the light, I would magically understand what it meant, but now it has left me with more questions than answers.

"Sunday," Grayson barks. His voice is unmistakable, even if it feels as if a lifetime has passed since I heard it.

For the second time, he startles me. I spin on my heel, slipping the phone into my pocket.

"He speaks," I say snarkily. "Aren't you done with me now? You did what was needed, now leave me be. When I am released, I will return home and stay out of your hair."

"Sunday ." His voice is velvet as my name leaves his lips again. He casts a glance around. "Not out here." He reaches out, gently taking my wrist and tugging me along.

When we make it to an unlocked closet, he throws us inside before placing his back against the door.

The enclosed space smells strongly of bleach, but that isn't what is turning my stomach. It's Grayson's eyes.

This is the first time we have been this close in weeks. The first time he has truly looked at me since I woke up in this hospital. Before, it almost felt as if he were staring through me, but now he is scrutinizing me. As if he can see every piece of me.

I feel naked . I cross my arms. A shield.

His hands come up, they push my hair behind my ears before landing on each side of my face, his thumbs stroking my cheeks.

“Sunday.” His lips move fluidly. I’m in a trance. “I should. For your own sake. But I can’t let you go.” He provides no more explanation.

He bends, until our lips are centimeters apart, he waits, allowing me time to stop this.

I don’t.

“Please.” I blink up at him. “ Please . Convince me that it wasn’t all a lie. That you care about me. That I’m not a mistake. That it wasn’t just to escape the loops.”

“Oh, baby girl. Is that what you think?” His hot breath fans my face.

The phone weighs heavier than it should in my pocket, but I ignore it. “How can I not? You want to send me away. You want me to lea—”

And then he is pressing against me. Harsh lips that leave no room for argument. But that is what I want to do.

Grayson has been the most confusing of the brothers. Hot and cold.

Always leaving me on edge, afraid that at any moment he would simply disappear. That I was too much of a burden.

His tongue drives into me as he continues to consume me.

I give as much as I take. My arms reach up, my fingers tangling into his hair. One of my legs wraps around his waist.

He uses a hand to grab my other, to cradle me against him, to walk us back to the metal shelves behind me. They dig into my back as he wedges me against them, his hard cock rubbing through the thin fabric of my shorts.

He pulls back to say, “You let them all leave their mark. ”

His lips trail along my neck. He sucks the sensitive skin there. The sensation sends sparks of desire directly to my core. It has already bloomed and now it is overgrown, attempting to escape.

I need more than this.

“Grayson,” I murmur, rolling my hips up to him. I want to reach between us, to shove down our shorts, to jump on him. To ride these waves of ecstasy wherever they take me.

His hand moves and for a fleeting second I think he might do just as I want, but then he brushes against the phone in my pocket.

Before he can question me, the door whips open behind us. A nurse I don’t recognize stands in the doorway and mutters under her breath.

Grayson doesn’t react, he slowly separates from me, turning around, blocking me with his body. Protecting me. “Apologies, we will be leaving.” He grasps my hand and shields me from the newcomer’s line of sight as he leads us to my hospital room.



Back in there, he slams the door shut behind him. “Sunday, what is in your pocket?”

Axel jumps up from the bed. He eyes me speculatively. “I told you to make-up not make-out. But I suppose it needed to happen. The tension between the two of you is thick.”

“She has something in her pocket.” Grayson redirects him, not acknowledging anything Axel says.

Axel marches towards me.

I have all of three seconds to come up with an excuse, to run, to leave this situation.

But then I question that.

Why would I hide it from them?

“I was going to tell you.” I’m not sure if that’s the truth, but it shocks both the brothers when I don’t fight them on it. When I pull the phone from my pocket. “I felt...fuck it. I saw something and I followed it.”

Where has keeping secrets from them ever gotten me?

Dead.

“Look.” My lips are still tingling, my nerves shot, my neck throbbing in a mixture of pain and pleasure, but I push it all down.

I place my free hand on my hip, jut out my chin, harden my shoulders.

“This is going to sound crazy but I saw a light shimmering and when I followed it, I

ended up with this.” I open my hand, revealing the phone.

“A nurse gave it to me. It’s from the agent. ”

As soon as the words escape my lips, there’s another spark, a bright thread, it tangles endlessly around the phone, making it nearly impossible to look at.

“A...light?” Grayson questions. His voice is soft, unsure, but he doesn’t sound critical.

“A light.” Axel mulls it over. He too seems to be taking me seriously.

“Aren’t you going to call me crazy? That all of these deaths have made me go insane? That a knob is loose?”

“Sunday, you died ninety-nine times. You seeing a light is not too far out of the realm of possibility, is it?” Grayson murmurs, his voice is soft, gentle. “And you’re...you’re trusting us?” He reaches for the phone.

I hand it to him without a fight. I want the light to go away, it doesn’t seem necessarily bad, but it isn’t good either.

Chaotic neutral.

“You are trusting us...”

I cannot ignore the unfiltered happiness that lathers his words. “I am. I think, at least in this timeline, I have always trusted you. I just wasn’t sure what the feeling was and so it made me apprehensive. But you all make me comfortable, safe, happy.”

Shame hits me now, out of nowhere, shortly followed by grief.

“To you all, Auggie and Tripp have been dead for years.” Their lack of reaction at the memorial makes more sense now. And in some ways it feels as if years have passed since their death to me too, but that doesn’t dispel the guilt I feel. As if I am substituting Tripp.

Except even as that thought whips through me, I know with certainty Tripp will never be replaced. He will always hold a spot within me. My first love, first kiss, first broken heart.

“They have,” Axel confirms. “It still hurts, but nowhere as much as watching you die over and over again. Unable to stop it.”

“Except you have stopped it. I’m alive. And I am putting my trust in both of you. But...But I need you both to do the same.” The plan swims to the forefront of my mind. It started in that closet with Grayson, it grew on the walk back, and it expands now in this hospital room.

This town makes a cycle of victims, of pain, and suffering.

Julia. Tripp. Auggie. They all pointlessly died because of it.

And who knows how many more will.

Darius was taken from us by the evil behind it all.

And who knows what will happen to him.

Unless we stop it.

Axel always calls me his Little Lamb.

Perhaps it's time I start playing the part.

“I will be the bait.”

## Page 11

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 3:11 am*

The trip back to their house was a muted affair. At least from the two brothers.

However, as soon as I tried to leave the hospital, reporters ambushed us. And not just local ones, there were channels from all over the country. Shoving their microphones into my face, their cameras focused on me, asking questions I wanted to answer.

Part of me wanted to scream how evil this town is, shout it until my face turned red, but then what would happen to Darius?

Instead, I remained silent until the hospital security was able to successfully escort us to their vehicle.

To Darius's truck.

But even once we were settled inside, the brothers didn't speak. The statement I made left a cloud of thick tension in the cab. Stuck between the two brothers, it was easy to see their anger. In the clenching of Axel's jaw, the wrinkle etched between Grayson's brows.

I want to regret telling them my plans, but I don't. Uneasiness is a snake that coils tightly in my gut, but I ignore it.

I have to convince them. For Darius's sake.

And now we sit in the garage. Grayson's knuckles white from gripping the wheel .

“They can't hurt him now. Not now that they publicly showed he is a Thorne. They'll

keep him safe,” Grayson mutters. The words are what breaks our endless quiet.

“But that doesn’t mean they can’t hurt him,” I argue.

Wedge between the men, I try to make myself as small as I can, I don’t want to accidentally touch either of them.

I don’t want to set Axel off anymore than I already have.

“We need to make a different plan. We need to stop this. Once and for all.”

“Shut. Up,” Axel growls, his face whipping to me, he stares down his nose at me.

“Do you know what they would do to you, Sunday? If we use you as bait, if they catch you. They won’t just kill you, they will torture you, rape you.

They will take all that they can from your flesh and when you wish for more than anything to die, they’ll keep you alive even longer. ”

Axel’s words have the opposite effect than he intends. “So that’s what they’ve been doing to all the missing girls?”

“Convince her!” Axel opens the truck door, slamming it shut behind him as he stomps into the house.

“He’s right,” Grayson says. “You can’t be the bait, Sunday. You will be hurt.”

“I mean, I’ve died ninety-nine times. Why does it matter if I’m hurt again .” I flex my fingers out on my lap, wiping the sweat on my shorts, and attempt to steal my nerves. “The FBI opened a case, the woman isn’t going to stop until she finds her daughter.”

“Then they can use someone else for bait. They can figure it out. You aren’t an agent, a detective, or anything else. You are a teenage girl.”

“Am I though?” I ask. “Or am I nearly thirty at this point? Do we not count all of the lives I’ve lived only when it is convenient?”

“You’re stubborn,” Grayson groans. “And purposefully so. Completely and intentionally bullheaded. ”

I reach up to him, prying his fingers from the steering wheel, I twist until I am facing him as best I can and stare him in the eyes.

“Grayson, I know you just want to keep me safe. But Darius doesn’t have anyone else.

He is inside the monster’s lair, and we need to get him out.

The FBI isn’t going to care about him. The Thornes would sooner use him as a decoy than let him go.

Do you see any scenario where he leaves their home alive and free? ”

Grayson reaches up tucking my hair behind my ears, one side at a time, but then his fingers linger on my face.

He grips my chin with two fingers, forcing me to continue to watch him.

“But what about you, Sunday? What if we went through all of this and then you die . How can you expect any of us to survive that?” His voice is husky, broken .

“And do you think Darius would want this? He made us promise to keep you

protected, no matter what.”

He is asking impossible questions that I have no way of answering.

I want to look away, to gather my thoughts, my mind, but he’s still holding me in place.

“Grayson. I love you. All of you.” I press the shame down, that this isn’t right.

I shouldn’t feel this way about the three of them.

My dead boyfriend’s brothers. Three men.

But I do. “I am in love with all of you. Even if I don’t remember everything you all have gone through, I can feel it.” I rub my hand against my chest.

He drops his hold on me, his breath coming out raggedly. “Sunday.” My name is a warning.

“Grayson.” I let go of all the air in my lungs. “I don’t want to lie to you all anymore. It didn’t get me anywhere before and it still won’t now. But here’s the truth of it. I need to do this. To rescue Darius.”

“But what if it’s that thread of fate? What if it is pulling you to another death?” Grayson is scrutinizing me, as if he can see all the lines of fate that wrap around us.

He might not be able to, but I can .

Ever since the phone, I am seeing more and more of them. Different colors, different levels of brightness, different directions. There’s one right now connecting him and I. It is purple and pulsating. The longer this conversation goes, the brighter it becomes.



Averting my attention from it, I return my gaze to him.

“This is different, but you’re right. Fate is tugging me towards Darius, to the phone.

And it feels familiar, similar to how it was when I chased after Julia.

But now I know that, doesn’t that mean we can change it?

Doesn’t that mean we can rescue Darius? Doesn’t that mean we at least have to try? ”

“But why do you have to be the bait, Sunday?”

Because my gut is telling me that I have to be.

Because I owe it to all of you. Because even though loving all three of you is insane, I still do.

Because it’s my fault Darius is in this mess.

Because I can’t exist without Darius by our side.

Because it hurts to breathe and each second away from Darius is like another piece of time is being stolen from us.

Because I deserve whatever happens to me.

But I don’t answer him with my words, instead I shift to my knees and throw myself at Grayson. My lips find his, and I can feel him freeze at first, but then he is kissing me back, his strong arms wrapping around us, tugging us even closer together.

He smells like salt, the ocean, and diesel. A marina. I love it. I crave it. I need more

of him and it. I want Grayson to finally cross this unspoken line that we have, and I am now doing my best to shove him past it. But then my head hits the glass of the truck and we break apart.

Falling back on my knees, I rub the spot I bumped and look up at him through my lashes.

“You okay?” Grayson quirks his lips, he’s trying not to laugh.

“Is it weird?” I ask instead of answering.

He cocks his head .

“Isn’t it weird that I want to be with you all? That whatever this is between us...what if...what if one of you decides it’s too much?” Insecurity has decided to gnash its ugly teeth into me. After all, even with the trauma, the depression, the endless loops, Grayson is right. I am a teenage girl.

Even if I forget that myself.

Grayson laughs. I don’t expect it and my face heats in embarrassment.

“Sunday, that is the least ‘weird’ thing in our lives. It is honestly what makes the most sense. Even if it did take awhile for us to listen to Axel.”

“Axel?” My memory snaps back to the roof with him. To him explaining his plans.  
“Of course it would be him.”

“But I get your point on being the bait .” The word hisses out between his teeth.

“I don’t agree with it. I don’t think it’s right.

But I understand that you are stubborn and even if we say no and try to stop you, you're still going to do it .

Just promise me, promise me that we can be with you every step of the way.

And please remember, that woman, that agent.

She's a mother first and FBI second. She will cross any lines she can if it means reuniting with her daughter.

" Grayson reaches down, squeezing my hand.

"And I may be agreeing to this, but that doesn't mean Axel will.

In fact...I'm going to head to the restaurant for a bit and try to see if anything is needed. "

The restaurant. "Is it okay? How have you been running it?" From what I gathered when I woke up, he had barely left my side in over a month.

"It's fine, I was able to hire some help and a few of our veteran cooks stepped up to manage. With everything that happened, well to be honest...it's been more busy than ever because of what Darius did. There are people from all over the country coming out to support us."

My stomach rolls. I can't exactly describe the feeling of knowing that when I was at my worst, when I was bleeding out on the ground, that millions saw it, but I also know that if Darius hadn't done what he did, I would have died, and we probably would be right back in a new cycle.

And we would have to go through all of this again.

Grateful , but embarrassed.

“Go inside, check on Axel. See if you can convince him. I’ll be back in a few hours.” Grayson reaches out, gifting me a comforting hug. “And Sunday? I understand that this is ‘weird,’ but I accept that my brothers share your heart too.”

On that parting note, I smile at him before sliding across the seat and exiting the truck. The purple strand between Grayson and me pulses just as strongly as before.

But there are two more.

One leads inside the house.

But the other?

Grayson backs out of the garage, shutting it behind him, but as he does I can see the third purple strand sprawling outside the garage, past the truck, all the way to the woods. It is iridescent in the setting sun’s glow.

It is in the direction I know the Thorne’s house to be, and I want more than anything to chase it down. I know with certainty Darius is at the end.

But first, I need to talk to Axel.

To convince him to let me do the opposite of what he wants.

To let me run face first into danger, if only for his brother’s sake.

I owe it to Darius. To Grayson and Axel. To Tripp. To Auggie. To all of the victims of this town.

My heart pounds painfully in my chest as my vision blurs. Wiping the tears from my eyes and trampling down the crippling depression that threatens to consume me, I make my way into the house.

## Page 12

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 3:11 am*

What can I say to a man that has tried to keep me alive for years to persuade him that it is perfectly fine if I use myself as bait?

The idea sounds stupider laid out like that, but I know with certainty it is the only way Darius will come out of this unscathed. Nobody else cares if he is collateral. It is up to us to bring him home.

Axel and Grayson will be slaughtered on sight.

But me? Well, like Grayson said, the video Darius made garnered me fame. Surely, even the Thornes aren't stupid enough to kill me so shortly after that.

"Axel?" I call out, but he doesn't answer.

Walking through their house, I find my way to the stairs. There still isn't any sign of Axel.

The house's lights aren't on, but the AC is running and the cool air leaves goosebumps across my skin.

Slowly I make my way up the stairs. "Axel?" I call out again.

He still doesn't answer me.

Either he's ignoring me or he isn't here anymore. Except the purple light is still present, leading me further inside the house.

Annoyance and anxiety intertwine in my chest, rising to my throat, constricting my airway.

Maybe he's just being an asshole .

But surely Axel would know better than to fuck with me like this. After everything we have gone through.

“Axel?” I’m at his bedroom door now, the light shimmers in the center of it, pulsating. I raise my hand to it, but pause.

I’ve never actually been in his room before.

Instead of knocking, I twist the handle and push the door in. I don’t see Axel but the purple is no longer in front of me.

My attention flashes around the dark room. My breath stutters and I walk further inside in a trance.

One of the walls is covered in pictures.

Of me.

But they’re not all recent; some were taken while Axel was in prison, some before that, some after. Different angles, different days, different outfits. Some I remember being taken, but others are candid, from a distance.

So distracted by the sight, I don’t hear him until the hands have made their way around my throat and mouth.

One covers my mouth, the other squeezes my throat, tugging me back into a man’s

chest.

My heart pounds in my chest, my breath quickens. The goosebumps once caused by the cold are from something else entirely now.

The man tugs me backwards, towards the bed.

“This is what it would be like,” he whispers in my ear. “At the mercy of others. Unable to protect yourself.”

Axel shoves me down onto the bed and I catch myself on my hands and knees.

I look back at him, my eyelids are hooded, my tongue lashes out to wet my lips. “Axel,” I murmur his name.

Axel growls, “You aren’t supposed to like this! ”

That’s what it is. Some base primal part of myself is enjoying this. The way he takes complete control, how he handles me with reckless abandon. He treats me as an equal, as stronger than I am. It’s why I have always been drawn to Axel. He frees a part of myself I don’t want to admit I have.

He makes me want to run wild, to just live in every moment as if it were my last.

The irony isn’t lost on me.

I roll over onto my back and then he’s there again. Jumping on top of me, pinning me to the bed, pressing me down into the mattress.

His typical leather has been replaced with cotton.



Cotton shirt.

Cotton boxers.

He thrusts his hips into me, his hard cock rubs against me. I am acutely aware of the thin layers that separate us. How my skin is on fire. My nerves alight.

Before I was shot, I was already falling into the O'Brien brothers. I was already in love with them all.

They were already a part of my broken heart.

But this is different.

Grayson and me? There is a line that I can recognize between us, it keeps me from pushing him too far.

But Axel is different. Axel is the first that found me in this timeline. The first to leave his mark. The first to wrap me up into him. To twist me to the point of discomfort. To bring me back to life.

My memory splices between Grayson's words and when I was on the rooftop with Axel.

Has it been Axel all along? Is he the reason we all opened ourselves to each other?

"What are you thinking?" Axel grumbles, his eyes narrowing in distrust. "If you think there is anything you can do to convince me you aren't a Little Lamb, that you can handle the shit this would put you through, then you are wrong."

Again I take a page from Axel himself: I don't think.

My hands reach up, burrowing my fingers into his wet hair.

He must have showered before I came up here.

I tug him down to me, and for his part, he doesn't fight me.

And then we are kissing. His lips are harsh and cruel. They leave no space for me, so I make room.

Shoving my tongue into his mouth, I battle against him. I put as much of my emotions, my feelings into the kiss, and as I do, I roll my hips upwards against his length.

For months, Axel and I have been dancing.

Dancing around the truth.

Dancing around our pain.

Dancing around our feelings.

Dancing around the inevitable.

This. This is the inevitable.

The purple line between us is still ever present, but I do my best to block it out, how it brightens the longer we kiss. Even through my eyelids I can see it, but I focus on Axel instead.

On how his body relaxes against mine, on how even freshly showered he smells like leather, on the warmth of his skin. The way it ignites my belly to connect and

reestablish the feelings we both have. The ones that have been riding me for months.

The ones I'm finally following.

Axel pulls away first, panting . He hovers above me. "You think this is enough? To prove you're some tough girl? "

Axel moves one of his hands to my throat, he applies just a bit of pressure, watching my eyes, my face, my reaction.

I groan. I can't help myself. It feels good . His fingers are squeezing the sides of my neck, I can still breathe, but it's restricted. My head feels lighter. It's easier to not overthink when all of my effort is put into allowing air in and out of my lungs.

I reach up and I see the satisfaction on his face. He thinks he's won. But then my fingers wrap around his much larger hand, applying more pressure.

My hips undulate up and into his length. I need the friction, I need to feel him.

I want more.

I am going to have more.

"Axel," I moan.

"You stupid." Thrust "Idiot." Thrust. "Girl." Thrust.

Even with the material between us, I can feel his length, I can almost imagine what it would be like.

I haven't had sex since Tripp.

The thought is a glass of liquid nitrogen being poured over me. It is so cold it hurts, I freeze instantly.

It's only been months since he died. I can't do this to him.

Except...

Even as that thought forms, it is quickly discarded. It hasn't been months. It's been years. I may not remember all the time in the loops, but my subconscious does, my body does, my soul does.

And it is all of that which propels me forward.

I need to do this. For myself.

I want to do this .

Axel is unaware of the mental turmoil I have just jumped through, but the pressure loosens on my neck, his fingers unwrapping until just his thumb remains. It covers the spot where Grayson left his mark.

"Sunday." Axel stares down at me. "You can stop this, even if we get half-past the point, you can still stop this. You understand?"

I jerk my head.

"No, say you understand," Axel demands.

"I understand."

His eyes darken, his pupils are dilated and swirling in promise. "You don't." He

lunges.

His mouth latches onto the other side of my neck. Where Grayson was gentle, Axel is rough, carnal .

His teeth dig into the skin there, his tongue lashing out to soften the bite.

My belly is molten, my core throbs. It pulsates every time his tongue moves. It isn't long before I am squirming underneath him, desperate for relief.

“Axel, please. I need more.”

“Fuck!” He releases my neck and then he's shoving up my shirt, maneuvering it off of me.

I'm bare underneath and with gravity's help my breasts fall free, they are just on the cusp of too large, but I ignore that as Axel shifts his attention to them. His fingers kneed the nipple on one.

“Your mouth,” I beg. Ever since he sucked on them before, I have been craving for him to do it again.

He chuckles but acquiesces. His tongue lashes out, licking across my nipple and it pebbles up for him. He breathes on it a few times, his hot breath at odds with the cool air .

I am enraptured. He has wrapped me up in him so fast and quick, as if he knows exactly how.

Except they haven't gone this far with me before, not in any of the previous timelines. When I asked all my questions that was one they answered easily—that I

had kissed Axel and Darius but nothing more, but Grayson and I had never kissed before this one.

All the changes that perhaps led to them breaking the cycle.

The theory sloshes around my muddled mind, but then his mouth opens, and he is sucking and biting on my nipple while his hand plays with the other.

My body tenses, coils, I am beginning to tip-toe to an edge I have not gone before. I have come. But this is different, this is a full body pleasure. It doesn't feel like I am trying to find a finish line, instead I am literally along for the ride.

He hums against my nipple. I try to grab hold of him, to give him pleasure, but I can't reach.

Instead, I am at his mercy as he continues his assault. My mind empties, and I let myself live on this cusp of reality and ethereal.

On pleasure and pain.

And then Axel is releasing me, he is taking off his own shirt and boxers now and while he does, I rid myself of my shorts.

His attention follows mine, but he doesn't say anything, simply allows me to take him in.

My eyes land on his chest, on the rippled muscles, the scars, specifically the two thick puckered ones across his abdomen.

The ones he never really told me how he got. But I can guess. Axel isn't a Thorne. When he was thrown into prison, it wouldn't surprise me if he was tortured every

day, if they tried to kill him .

## Page 13

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 3:11 am*

He shifts and it brings my attention to his cock. It bobs up to his belly. A reminder of why we are naked, of what we are about to do.

He leans back, reaching into a drawer, pulling out a metal square. "Condom," he advises.

A flash of jealousy hits unexpectedly as I watch him open it with his teeth.

"Why do you have those?" I ask. The question burns on the way out.

He doesn't answer, instead Axel throws back his head and laughs.

My anger heats my skin. "Why are you laughing?"

"The fact that you think there is even the smallest possibility I bought these for anyone but you, is comical. Now relax Sunday. Let me fill that pretty cunt with my cock."

My heart beats in my chest, my nerves are shot and raw. "How did you know you would need it?"

Axel raises a cocky brow, settling between my legs. He brings my ankles up, one at a time he places them on his shoulders. "Sunday," he murmurs huskily.

His cock presses at my entrance. He has readied me for this, but I cannot help the flash of anxiety that shoots out.



“I told you before. You. Are. Ours .” He leans over, extending me and drives forward. Hard and quick.

He fully seats himself inside me and pauses, examining me.

“Good girl, that feels good doesn’t it? You like me stretching you, don’t you? But I told you.” He pulls all of the way out. “I won’t be gentle.” He bucks again, even harder, somehow deeper.

He is filling me past the point of comfort, and with my legs up, I can’t control the speed. He has left me defenseless, spread, and soaked.

I love it .

“Fuck. You feel... incredible.” That’s the last he says before he begins thrusting rhythmically, pushing and extending, taking and taking and taking. He flattens me to the mattress, my legs stretched as far as they will go.

“Axel,” I moan hoarsely. “Please,” I beg. But I don’t know what for.

He and I are crossing an unspoken line, it is leading me further and further towards the inevitable. Steering me towards the realization.

I am moving on.

Physically, it has only been months since my boyfriend, his twin, has died. But in actuality it has been years .

I am a horrible fucking person.

It is a war of morality as he continues to roll into me, leaving me boneless. Taking

from me only that which I want to freely give.

My pleasure is full body, morphing and twisting and transforming.

Axel slows his thrusts, bends down, and finds my lips. With his hot mouth on mine, he slams long and deep into me.

Axel is not fucking me.

He is making love to me .

He releases my lips, stills inside of me.

His bright eyes find mine, they are churning in distress and love. Blended together in a way that it leaves me breathless.

“Why is there so much pain in your eyes, Sunday?”

“Because I love you,” I gasp. “And it hurts Axel. It hurts so fucking much to realize how easy it was for me to fall in love again. How easy it was for me to move on from Tripp.”

Axel’s lips curl in understanding. “You aren’t moving on Sunday.

My brother will always have a piece of your heart.

We will always give you the space for him there.

You are simply allowing yourself to live.

To love again. But I wish I could take it all away.

I wish you never had to be hurt again.” Axel pauses, watches me .

He is overwhelming me. His cock buried inside, his skin against mine, his breath, his scent. Everything about him is strong and overpowering.

“Sunday, I would swallow every last drop of your pain. Even if it was poison. Even if it would kill me. You know that don’t you? As long as I am by your side, you don’t need to suffer. Let me take it from you.” He’s thrusting again, the angle lands him in a new spot inside of me.

Before he was lathering my pleasure up slowly and spreading it out all across my nerves. But now he is hammering it, finding the source of it, and beating into it over and over again.

He maneuvers between us, finds my clit. “Stop thinking, Little Lamb and just allow yourself to feel. To enjoy this.”

This time, I listen. Emptying my mind and allowing myself to just feel. To dissolve into this moment with him.

Axel is the chaos that I had spent so long hiding from, but no longer.

He pinches down hard and bucks into me again.

I don’t expect the dam to release, don’t realize how taut he has tugged my nerves, don’t notice the scream until after it leaves my lips.

Axel thrusts a few more times before he grunts and stills as he finds his own release.

Axel kisses me on the nose as he gently separates from me, careful as he places my legs back on the mattress. “I love you, Sunday.”

My pulse quickens, I reach for him, but my body is melded to the mattress. My legs sore. My shoulder aching. A boneless mess. Suddenly, I'm terrified that if he disappears from sight, I won't see him again.

He clocks my anxiety. "I understand, I don't like being away from you either but I'll be right back."

He gets up carefully, discarding the condom, his attention still on me.

But my eyes are on the thread that connects us. The purple light. Except now it isn't nearly as bright, but it still connects us .

"Grayson," Axel says as he goes to his bathroom.

My eyes flicker to the door. Grayson is inside and leaning against it. His attention hyper-focused on my naked form.

My cheeks heat in embarrassment.

"This isn't exactly what I meant." Grayson quirks his lips, but a wrinkle has formed between his brows.

I can't tell if it's worry or something else entirely.

"How long were you there?" I'm searching for my clothes now, but they aren't on the bed.

Grayson bends down, retrieving my shorts and shirt, he hands them to me. His eyes have been focused on my own, but they flick down for less than a second.

"Not long."

I'm not sure if I believe him, but I don't argue. My nerves are shot.

Now that the dust is settling, the familiar guilt wraps up my stomach.

I had sex with my dead boyfriend's twin.

The thought is paralyzing and I pause in my movements to clothe myself.

"Sunday," Grayson admonishes. He steps closer to the bed and with his help, I am able to tug up my shorts and pull on my shirt.

He kisses my forehead, tucking my wild curls behind my ears.

"It's okay. If this was too much, if you realize this isn't what you want, that we are too much for you, we won't ever push you. "

Grayson wraps his arms around me and my head buries against his chest. Axel has returned now, but he allows Grayson and me to have this moment.

"But that's the problem." The guilt that felt so tangible, so close moments ago has disbursed and twisted into something different entirely. "I just wish Darius was here. I miss him. "

And I do. Again I feel as if everything is going to suffocate and overwhelm me, but I allow Grayson's arms to keep me steady. They are an anchor I so desperately need.

"She has to go pee, so she doesn't get a UTI." Axel has thrown on a pair of boxers, but nothing else.

Grayson tightens his hold, squeezing me before releasing me. "Axel," he warns.

I don't exactly want to listen to Axel, but now that he's mentioned it, the urge is riding me hard. Untangling myself from the bed, I don't wait for how their conversation will play out as I make my way to the bathroom.

## Page 14

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 3:11 am*

W edged between the two brothers, I flip to my back.

My attention shifts to the lone window in the room, of the stars that fill it.

I have been tossing and turning for hours.

We are back in my bed now, the threads wrapping around us, but there is one more that is tugging me away from this bed entirely.

Darius's.

“Sunday,” Axel groans. “Go to sleep. You’re finally back home.”

Except I’m not, Darius isn’t here. I am in the bedroom they gifted me when I first moved into their house—their mother’s.

Their mother.

My parents.

“I heard my parents when I was coming in and out.” At least I think I did.

“You did,” Grayson agrees, his voice is laden in sleep and I feel guilty at waking him.

For keeping them both from much needed rest.

Before I can ask the question, Grayson continues, “You know this town. You know the Thorne’s own it.

They have blackmail on nearly everyone in it.

And if they can’t find it on their own? They fabricate it.

Your parents are no different. They were given travel contracts and told to leave town.

They advised they weren’t to make contact with you.

They tried to come see you at the hospital, but it wasn’t safe for them to stay until you woke up. ”

Rolling towards Grayson, I nuzzle into his bare chest, his arms bring me closer to him, his chin resting on the top of my head. His heart a quiet comforting rhythm.

A moment later, Axel is flipping and cuddling me from behind, his head moving to nestle into my neck.

“I’m going to be the bait. We’re going to get Darius back,” I murmur softly.

But I know they both hear me. They both grunt in disagreement. Axel louder than Grayson.

“Axel.” It’s easier to say this with my head buried in Grayson’s chest, where I don’t have to look at him.

“Darius doesn’t have anyone else that can help him.



And it's my fault that he's there in the first place.

You both said it yourself, my near death was witnessed by millions.

The Thornes know that if I mysteriously disappear there will be a public outcry.

Even with their story of how the night unfolded. ”

Earlier Grayson had returned my phone, and when I turned it on, I had an influx of messages from Veronica...but nothing from Carrie. The worry sits heavy across my skin. Another reason to find Darius. To take down the Thornes.

After searching through my messages it wasn't hard to locate the video Darius made. It was slapped with all sorts of titles, put on all the main media sources. His quick thinking was probably the only reason we all escaped as unscathed as possible.

The gunshot to my shoulder had taken time to heal, but now it was just a dull throb I could ignore.

Untangling myself from the brothers, I get up and walk to where I have Auggie's giraffe stuffed animal hidden, in a box just inside the closet. Retrieving it, I maneuver back into the bed between them, sitting cross-legged.

“That's Auggie's.” Grayson watches in curiosity.

Without delay I unzip it and empty the contents onto my lap.

Axel laughs sarcastically. “Of course, that's where you kept it hidden. The one place we wouldn't dare look. One hundred lifetimes and it was in the fucking giraffe the entire time.”

He and Grayson are sitting up now, still observing me.

“How did Auggie get this?” I ask. Because it was in his room , behind his desk. Hidden in a spot he didn’t tell anyone about.

Grayson picks up the polaroid, his eyebrows furrow together, and he rolls his lips in anger. “You know what happened to Carrie.”

I nod.

“He suspected she wasn’t the only one. But after Axel’s sentencing they let it go. For a while at least.” Grayson drops the photo, picking up the phone next.

Where the photo didn’t have any threads attached to it, there is a bright shimmer when he touches the phone. It is a different color than I’ve seen. It’s pure white.

“The lights, the threads I’m seeing. There’s one that’s attached to that phone.” I decide it’s best if we all know as much as we can.

At this point keeping anything from them would be a mistake, just as it always was. I just didn’t have the wherewithal to realize it before.

“Interesting,” Grayson says, and he means it. He continues examining it. “The charger isn’t something we have.”

“You’ve never seen these items?” I ask.

“No,” Axel confirms. “You would always sneak and find them and then hide them before we could. We just know they existed because Auggie told us they did. A phone and a picture. Damming proof.” Axel rakes his fingers through his tousled hair.

“But if they took the pictures, why didn’t they stop it? Why couldn’t they keep the girls from being assaulted.”

Grayson drops the phone in shock. “Sunday, they did.”

“What?”

“Right after this picture was taken, Tripp and Auggie jumped from the closet to pulverize Maxwell into a bloody pulp, and they managed it. But then the next day Axel was shanked. Left for dead in his cell. We guessed they kept him alive if only to continue to keep the boys in check. To remind them how far the Thorne’s influence extends.

” Grayson reaches a hand up to cup my face, the rough pad of his thumb stroking my lips.

“Tripp and Auggie took the other pictures not knowing what it meant. They just wanted to see if the others were up to anything nefarious. Unfortunately, they didn’t know until too late that Julia was a victim in this too. ”

“Tiffany?” She was the third girl in the pictures on the phone. The one William drugged.

“For what we have found, she was brought into their organization very shortly after,” Axel confirms.

“If–” I organize my thoughts. “If they knew investigating further would get Axel killed. Why did they do it?”

“For me.” Axel snorts sardonically. “Tripp’s goddamn guilty conscience weighed him down too heavily.

He knew I was in jail because of him and no matter how much I told him it was okay, he didn't believe me.

I just wanted my brother to live out a normal life, at least as normal as he could in this town.

But he was stubborn. Just like Auggie was.

Just like you are. All of you on a mission no matter what. ”

It sounds like the truth...except not all of it, and I don't quite believe him.

There's more to it than that, but before I can demand a better explanation, Axel's fingers find their way into my curls, tangling further into the mess.

He jerks me out of Grayson's hold until I am looking up at him upside down.

He slams his lips to mine. This angle is different, his bottom lip on my top. It's easier to bite down on his.

He growls, but then Grayson is swatting him away.

“Stay focused,” Grayson admonishes.

“So what did they do?” I ask breathlessly.

“They went to the goddamn FBI.” Axel jumps up from the bed. I can feel his anger, the tension that has formed. He kissed me to calm himself, but without the outlet his emotions are bubbling to the surface. “Nobody would listen to him. Until Agent Franz found the file. Saw her lost daughter.”

“Then why wouldn’t the FBI listen if her daughter was taken?”

“Because her daughter wasn’t even missing in their minds.

There was evidence she had gone on a trip out of the country.

That she was just living her best college life.

That she was a part of an exchange program.

” Axel sneers. “The Thornes know how to cover their tracks. They have been doing this for years. Decades and decades.”

I swallow down the bile that has threatened to come up.

Acidic and fermented.

The thought of countless victims.

I was born and raised in a town built on the suffering of others.

“Then what?” I ask.

“Then Agent Franz , offered the brothers a deal they couldn’t refuse,” Grayson murmurs, his arms wrapping around me.

I can tell, in this moment, he needs me. That this is harder for both the brothers than either expected .

My arms reach around him, squeezing him to me, my fingers stroking his back.

“What was it?” I’m not sure I want to know.

“That if they could secure more evidence, find where her daughter was, they would reduce my sentence,” Axel answers. Except, again, I can feel it isn’t the whole truth, but I don’t push him. Not yet.

I contain the well of emotions that attempts to bubble up as his words sink in and understanding slaps me across the face. “She used two teenage boys to find her daughter. Threw them into the lion’s den. She got them both killed.”

Axel’s outburst in the hospital makes more sense now. How he blames her for everything that has ever happened.

She is the reason Auggie and Tripp are dead.

But no.

Even still, I can’t blame her.

“Who ran them off the road?”

“Mark and Maxwell. We found out with certainty about the thirtieth go round. They used Maxwell’s car, and then just replaced his vehicle with the exact make and model, but his crushed vehicle is in the sheriff’s garage too.

Sometimes you stumbled on it, sometimes you didn’t.” Grayson strokes my hair.

“Axel, we need to finish this. Once and for all. Maybe that’s why I was meant to live. Maybe fate is trying to help me wrap up what they started.”

Axel stomps back to the bed, he ignores Grayson entirely bending until his face is

inches from mine. “Or maybe you deserve to live. To not get caught up in the mess that you had no right being a part of.”

Except that isn’t true and we both know it. “If Auggie and Tripp didn’t do anything when they first found out. If they let it rest for as long as they did. What changed? What could have happened that would make them go to the FBI?”

Neither Grayson nor Axel speaks. In fact, they both freeze entirely.

Axel’s half-truths swirl in my mind and then it strikes all at once.

An instance of clarity.

“It was me.” I know it with certainty. “They were protecting me .” Maxwell’s threat makes more sense now.

No more big brother to keep her safe

It takes several heavy minutes before Grayson answers. “They were. They knew you were garnering interest. They knew that even if you escaped this town, its evil would follow.”

“Then even more reason to stop everything once and for all.”

Axel opens his mouth to argue, but I level him with my meanest glare.

“Darius is your brother. He is our family. You two are going to come up with some half-cocked scheme without me, just let me help. Use my temporary fame to our advantage and besides that...” Embarrassment shoots through me, but I continue on, “I know how to find him.” The third purple glimmering thread is leading straight through the far wall.

I want more than anything to chase it down, right here and now. But I know better.

“Yes, he’s with the Thornes. We know where he is too.” Axel narrows his eyes, clenching his jaw in frustration.

“Yes and no. The lights? The threads I’m seeing?

There’s three that won’t go away.” I keep my focus firmly above both the men.

“They’re purple, and they’re attaching us.

There’s one between Grayson and me. One between Axel and me.

And there’s a third...it leads to the Thorne’s.

I know.” I swallow thickly. “I know with certainty that it will take me directly to Darius. ”

Axel doesn’t respond, I can see the understanding as it washes across his face. The comprehension that arguing with me on this is pointless. He isn’t going to win this fight. And he knows it. He clenches his hands into tight fists.

“Darius knew what he was doing, and he did it to protect you. If you die Sunday. If anything happens to you. I hope you understand what it will mean. We may still be alive, but you are our soul. You will ruin us.” Axel spins on his heel, away from us.

“Call her. Call the fucking agent , but mark my words when this goes sideways, and it will go sideways, don’t expect me to play by the rules. ” Axel slams the door shut behind him.

Grayson doesn’t say anything, he just unwraps from me. For a horrible second, I



expect him to run from me too, but then he is offering me a hand. “Come on, Sunday, let’s go onto the roof. I’ll bring a blanket, we can watch the stars tonight.”

“You’re not going to leave too?”

“Axel isn’t going anywhere. He’s probably just outside the door, but he needs to calm down. He knows you’re right. Knows we need you to save Darius. But he hates it. We both do. But unfortunately we’re used to having to make impossible choices.”

Accepting his answer, I take Grayson’s hand and let him lead us up to the roof.

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 3:11 am*

Jane sits primly on the O'Brien's living room couch.

"I wasn't followed," she advises. "The reporters don't seem to have your home address either, or maybe they don't expect you to be here. In the O'Brien's home."

I am settled across from her in an overstuffed armchair, Axel is perched on the left, but Grayson stands off to the side between us, his arms crossed.

They are my support, my guards, my family.

Mine.

"Before we start this and go into the details, I want to ask you a question first." I level her with a stare. It has the full weight of my anger.

She doesn't expect it and her eyebrows draw up in surprise. "They told you."

"That you used my brother and my boyfriend as your puppets? That you put them in more danger than they had any right to be? Yes they told me," I confirm.

Now knowing what I do, I fully and completely understand Axel's deep-seated loathing of the woman before us.

She sent two teenagers on a suicide mission with zero backup or safety.

She is why Tripp and Auggie were killed.

She may not have run them off the road, but she played an integral part. They never should have been involved .

“Did they tell you why Augustus and Tripp approached me? Why they were so desperate for my help?” Jane leans forward in her seat. “That you were going to be sold?”

My heart beats in my chest, pounds up my throat, thickens my tongue. It takes a few seconds before I can speak again. “Not the specifics.”

Jane reaches behind her, tugging out a sheet of paper. “They purchase the girls and boys before you even graduate.” She unfolds the paper on the coffee table between us.

Ice and heat fight their way across my nervous system. It looks like a page from our yearbook...except that isn't quite right.

My face is on there, and the picture is from my junior year. My yearbook picture. Except my name isn't present, instead above my image is the word munchkin and below is a dollar amount.

A very high one.

But I'm not the only face, there's Julia, Tiffany, other classmates I recognize, but not all of them. As if we were all hand selected and compiled onto this sheet.

“Your brother found this, he gave it to me,” Jane continues. “He knew what it meant. That you were on their list, that you had landed on their radar. You might not be purchased, but you weren't safe. It was only a matter of time.”

My finger traces all the faces, most I know, but some I don't. They appear older, their

pictures not uniform as ours taken from the high-school are. “Where are these from?” I ask.

Jane folds the piece of paper back up, tucking it into her pocket before answering. “The college. This town isn’t that large, but the college nearby increases their options. It is a funneling system. If I had known that...maybe if I had gone before my daughter started there...”

Understanding snaps into place, how her daughter ended up in this mess. The Thornes throw all sorts of parties, for the high-school, for the college, for games, for events, for holidays. She ended up at one and it sealed her fate.

Before I chalked up all the parties to their rich and arrogant nature, a way to flaunt themselves, but now that the blinders have been taken off, I see them for what they are.

A place to create their next victims.

Gaining my bearings, I circle back. “My question to you is this. How far are you willing to go to save your daughter?”

Jane’s brown eyes darken until they are nearly black.

Her nostrils flare, her shoulders tense.

“Miss Sunday, if you help me with this, I will do whatever I can to bring down the Thornes.” She stares at me, as if she can see parts of my soul.

“Even if it means dying in the process. I will do anything to save my daughter from them. Anything for her to know I never gave up searching for her. Anything for her to know that she is going to be okay.”

The thread between Jane and me pulsates. It is red. Dark. Nearly the color of blood. And while I don't know what that means, I imagine it isn't good.

I ignore it. "Perfect."

"While the FBI had officially opened a case, unfortunately, due to the most recent press conference the Thornes gave, it has almost entirely been shoved to the side." Jane heaves a sigh. "I am here on unofficial business, but if we can garner any evidence, we can get their help."

Last night up on the roof, Grayson and I brainstormed the best way to go about this. To draw more of the public's attention, to get more eyes on the problem in this town .

Most issues go ignored and are forgotten unless they are shocking enough.

"Where can I go that will put me in danger?" I ask.

Jane cocks her head. "You?" Understanding flashes across her face, her lips tightening. "We can't use you."

"You just said that they wanted to sell me."

Jane looks to Grayson as if he will intervene, but when he doesn't, she turns back to me. "But your face is known now, they wouldn't risk taking you."

I shake my head. "I don't think that's true. They won't kill me. But I imagine if I am alone and just a sitting duck, they'll act. After all, they twisted the story to show Darius and I are together. They could easily come up with another lie."

"Then why wouldn't they just kill you?" Jane presses. "If they're willing to take you, what keeps them from killing you once enough time passes? Once the public's

interest dies down.”

Axel tenses, I reach out squeezing his hand. “That’s where you come in.”

And for her part, Jane listens to my entire plan, nodding her head occasionally. When I am finished she lets out a whoosh of air. “That just...that might work. And for your part, Sunday? This is all you will need to do...”

## Page 16

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 3:11 am*

“Runners!” I call.

Tonight is the night.

Operation Lure the Evil in this Town and Reunite with Darius. Even if Grayson and Axel are still not fully on board.

After I finish working.

Thankfully, the reporters have shifted their attention to the Thornes and they weren’t at the restaurant when I arrived.

“The servers are slow tonight,” Rick, one of the cooks, comments from across the line. He is the one I am used to working with. He still reminds me of an older Santa Claus. “You doing okay over there?”

The tray of food slides out from next to me. I offer Rick a small smile. “Yes, I just can’t wait to be off. I want to go out.”

“Go out?” Rick laughs as he cleans up his side of the line. “Grayson is going to let you do that?”

I poke my cheeks out. “I am an adult!”

Rick just chuckles again.

The remaining hours pass in a blur, my anxiety skittering higher and higher as it

approaches closing time. I know what will happen after.

But what if our plan doesn't work? What if I go through everything and nothing even happens?

"Are you sure you're okay to help close up tonight?" Rick asks. He eyes the other cook warily .

"I'll help the kiddo. Don't worry too much," the other cook, Scott, says. He is the one that is close to Axel.

Rick rubs his beard thoughtfully. "If you say so. Keep an eye out for her, the boys aren't here tonight."

Scott inclines his head as he continues to break down the equipment. "Sunday, why don't you head out then? It's getting late."

"I told the brothers I would be staying til close too, that I wanted to help as much as I could. It was the only way I could get them to agree to let me go out tonight. I have been cooped up in the house for too long, and the hospital even longer before that. I'm practically healed now, but neither of the brothers will listen to me, so I'm going to prove it. "

Scott grumbles, but doesn't argue.

"Good night, Rick!" I call out over my shoulder before continuing the task at hand.

He offers a wave as he leaves through the backdoor, locking it behind him.

And then I get back to work breaking down my station, wiping down the cutting board, spraying off the trays. Time passes in a blur as I methodically make my way



through all of the tasks, my anxiety coiling tighter and tighter in my chest.

“Kiddo, it’s getting late. You really ought to get going. Don’t you have plans tonight?” Scott heaves. He’s on his knees now, spraying out the floor, cleaning out every nook and cranny.

My eyes find the clock. He’s right. It is nearing midnight.

“You sure?”

“I’m all set, I promise, I do this almost every night. I enjoy the quiet.”

Hanging up my apron, I take one last look around the kitchen.

This restaurant that the brothers built with their blood, sweat, and tears. And I am impressed, just as I was the first time I realized it was theirs .

But there’s no more time for nostalgia.

It’s time to follow through on my plans. It’s time to see if it works.

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Tugging the restaurant door behind me, I make my way down the steps to Darius’s truck. The brothers—very unwillingly—lent it to me. The three purple threads are still present, they are the ones that never disappear, but there is now a fourth one.

It is red and pulsating, it is in the direction of the truck.

Instinctively, I know my plan will work tonight. Relief and terror form in my gut, cycling together.

When I am on the last step, I sense their presence.

Goosebumps prick up and along my skin.

“Sunday!”

The man steps out from behind the truck.

“Hey munchkin! Just wanted to make sure you made it home safe and sound.”

When I saw the sheet with my face, with the word munchkin , it didn’t take long to put it together. To remember who had called me by that nickname. It was too much of a coincidence.

It was heartbreaking when I did. But it made sense.

The Thornes would keep a spy in our midst.

## Page 17

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 3:11 am*

“H ey Rick.” My smile is tight against my teeth. I know the brothers are just out of sight. I know Jane is with them. “What are you still doing here? I thought you left a bit ago.”

They promised they wouldn’t intervene. But I imagine if I put up a fight, they will. They won’t be able to handle it.

“I was going to, but then I was worried about you out here alone and wanted to make sure you made it home.” He lifts his lips in a way that I think is meant to be comforting, but the light shining off his yellowed teeth has the opposite effect.

“I appreciate it! But I’m all set! Thank you.” As best as I can, I walk casually to my vehicle. Rick’s SUV is parked right beside it, and he stands on the driver’s side of the truck, nearly blocking me.

Faster than I expect him to move, he lashes out.

A needle goes into my neck. My world twists and dims.

And just like that, I become the prey.

The Little Lamb.

## Page 18

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 3:11 am*

Blinking rapidly, my vision focuses on the sight before me.

I'm in a dark room, there is only one flickering light on the far bricked wall. The room is filled with buzzing and following the noise I find a grate above me, a fan behind it.

Confusion hits me in the temple, my eyes shifting around the space. This isn't a room, it's a dungeon. Complete with cobwebs, concrete, and two pallets on the floor.

The first one is empty.

The other isn't.

My body.

I lie face up on the mattress, my skin is a nauseating pale white, with pink splotches across my cheeks. My hands are reaching for the sheet that is wrapped around my neck. That is choking me.

Someone is still holding it.

She levels me with her attention.

Not my body that she has just murdered.

But me.

“There you are. I was getting worried. Too much time has passed.” Her chestnut eyes are empty, soulless.

I blink a few times, trying to understand what any of this is.

A glow shimmers between us. Bright and violet.

I recognize her .

“Luna?” I ask.

She curls her lips. “So, you’ve met my mom. That’s good. Maybe this time will be different.”

My hand reaches out to touch her. Jane’s daughter. The girl with the yin and yang tattoo. My murderer. But I pass right through her. “Why did you kill me?”

Luna narrows her eyes. “You don’t remember?” She lets go of the sheet, standing to her full height. “There are worse outcomes than death, Sunday.”

Stomping comes from above.

“You should leave before they get here. It isn’t pretty.”

I want to argue, but then Luna starts screaming. It is so loud that I cover my ears to escape the noise.

It hurts in a way I can’t explain. As if each second of her scream is a direct stab at my psyche.

The door to the prison slams open, and I catch sight of Rayden before screwing my

eyes shut.

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“You’re awake.” The voice is close.

Too close.

It is sickly syrup as it enters my ears.

I want to cover them, but I cannot move, my arms are restrained at my sides. I open my mouth to scream but it is garbled. I blink but my vision doesn’t clear.

The man tsks. “Settle down, girl .”

But his words have the opposite effect. I have never heard this man speak in person, but I have on TV, on the news.

Sterling Maxwell Thorne.

I attempt to thrash and break free from my restraints.

Being blinded, bound, and gagged in the presence of this man is terrifying in a way I have never experienced.

There are worse outcomes than death, Sunday.

The thought presses into my brain, but it isn’t my own. A distant memory that cycles through me a few times.

I still.

“That’s good, dear.”

Cold fingertips brush against my bare cheek, and I do everything I can not to flinch.

“You’ve caused quite a fuss. Stirred up the whole town.

” The fingers press further into my skin, their nails biting into the flesh there.

“My son died chasing after you. My other fell deeper into his addiction. And then I was forced to finally take ownership of my third. Quite the scandal. But you’re just a stupid little girl. ”

I contain the grunt of pain as a fist lands in my gut.

“I want nothing more than to toss you into a pit and leave you to rot, but first I need to use you. Show the outside that you weren’t a victim, but a naïve girl in love. That you were the unfortunate obsession of my eldest’s mental breakdown and got caught in the crossfire.”

Another punch, this time it lands directly where I was shot.

I cannot contain the gasp of pain.

“A gunshot takes time to heal, doesn’t it? First you were locked away in that hospital, and then the brothers kept you under lock and key. But finally, my patience won out.  
”

Lips press against mine. The smell of copper and decay makes its way down my throat.

Tears well in my eyes the longer the kiss continues, but I can’t do anything to stop it.

“Nothing special. I’ve done less for far prettier women. But you will work as an excellent lesson. A tool to break my bastard son. Because he cares about you. I wonder how that will go when you despise him.” The fingers on my face retreat.

I hear the sound of heavy footsteps receding, followed by the distinct noise of a door opening and then closing.

Stuck. I am stuck in place, at the mercy of whatever there is to come.

My body hurts, my head throbbing, and my skin entirely too hot.

My bravery has long since left me, and a thousand what ifs take hold as time passes painfully.

It is just my thoughts to keep me company and a memory of Axel springs forward.

What ifs are the most painful part of life.



## Page 19

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 3:11 am*

A xel rubs his bloodied fists, the anger he felt at not being able to stop Rick from taking Sunday. Of watching her fall into the disgusting man's arms.

Of the betrayal from having someone that evil so close to them.

It was nearly unbearable.

He didn't want to believe it. Hoped the plan would fall apart because of it.

But then he had watched Rick wait for Sunday.

And Axel knew. Knew that she was right.

It was only Grayson holding him physically back that stopped Axel from jumping out and beating Rick to death.

Axel sits at the end of Sunday's bed, tapping his foot and staring at the TV.

"She's going to be okay."

"Shut the fuck up!" Axel wants to jump up, wants to beat his brother to a bloody pulp, but he refrains.

His heart is a pulverized mess of longing, regret, and liquid rage.

But he isn't mad at Grayson. Only at himself.

That he wasn't able to stop Sunday and this half-cocked plan.

"Does she look okay?!" Axel screams.

He gesticulates, throwing his hands up and jumping to his feet .

Her face takes up most of the screen. This is her second interview she has been a part of. A united front with the Thornes. Except it is just her up there with Sterling.

Darius isn't anywhere in sight.

"We hope one day soon that she will join our family, but of course she needs to recover both mentally and physically from her unfortunate trauma caused by my eldest son's declining mental health." Sterling has an arm wrapped around Sunday as he speaks.

She hasn't said anything other than yes or no, but even still, the camera stays focused on her as Sterling continues to speak.

Most wouldn't notice, but Axel can see the way she flinches as Sterling squeezes her shoulder. Her injured shoulder.

The way her face is pale, her eyes lifeless, her lips chapped under the ridiculous makeup they put on her.

"They're draining her. They're hurting her. We can't just stay here and do nothing!" Axel turns his wrath on Grayson. "You saw what happened when they took our fucking mother, she turned into a husk. What if the same happens to Sunday?"

"Shut the fuck up!" Grayson yells back, a vein pulsating in his temple.

“Do you think I don’t see it? That this isn’t tearing me apart too?

Do you forget you aren’t the only one suffering!

” He breaks away, pacing the room instead.

After a few tracks, he pauses to glare at Axel.

“I fucking love her too. But we can’t stop her!

You know how many fucking times we tried to?

She’s actually trusting us, what were we supposed to do?

Lock her in a closet and never let her out? !” Grayson heaves in and out.

“Yes,” Axel says. “We should have locked her away.”

“Because that worked so well to stop the loops before.”

In the very beginning, Axel had made them try it, but it hadn’t worked. She’d somehow still managed to die .

Grayson falls onto the bed, his head in his hands. “Why? Why does it have to be like this?”

Axel’s fury leaves him in an instant. Grayson isn’t the enemy here. “We told her we would give her a week. In three days we start part two of this plan. And then if nothing changes, I am going to break down the Thorne’s door myself.”

Axel pictures the gun in his mind. Where he put it. Where to find more.

“Agreed.”

## Page 20

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 3:11 am*

“Wave goodbye.” Sterling bites into my ear as he tugs me into the back of an SUV.

I do as requested and plaster a smile across my face. Even as the movement causes my shoulder to ache.

“You said I would see him today,” I murmur once the door shuts.

Sterling sits across from me, his arms crossed over his chest, his glasses perfectly straight.

For all intents and purposes, he appears a perfect part of society, but I know better.

He unfolds his arms, leaning forward he places his hands on my bare knees and I flinch.

Since he kissed me when I first woke up, he hasn’t crossed any other lines, but I am on edge. Never knowing what to expect next.

“You will. I was just waiting for the bids to come in.”

Anxiety expands in my lungs. “Bids?”

Sterling’s eyes swirl, his fingers stroking my bare skin. Disgusting tendrils.

Before, I likened Maxwell to the devil, but I realize that isn’t true.

This is a devil. Pure evil.

Maxwell is a shell of this man.

I want more than anything to slap Sterling away, to spit on his face, to cut off his hands, to end him once and for all. To not have this man touch me, or anyone else, ever again, but I refrain. He is the one that holds all of the power.

Currently.

“Yes.” His lips curl cruelly. “Darius will find you this evening. You are to go with him.”

He offers no other explanation as we drive back to his home. To my prison.

I have been locked away in a room upstairs, mostly left alone.

When we arrive, my head shifts to the right, further into the woods.

Axel and Grayson’s purple strands are overlapped, appearing as a single thread, and pointing in the opposite direction, back on the road from which we came. But this one is Darius’s.

He isn’t in the house, but somewhere nearby.

I just hope he’s okay. That I will in fact see him tonight.

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Alone in the bedroom, with just my thoughts, the hours pass endlessly. A million scenarios running through my head.

What the bid could possibly be.

If Darius will actually come.

If this entire plan was pointless.

If Axel was right and I am just a stupid girl.

My mind wanders to them, to what Grayson and Axel are up to. It has been four days apart. Three more until the next part comes into play.

But will that even be enough?

Hopelessness grinds its dull teeth into my gut .

My eyes cast a glance around the room I am in. I was shocked when I first was shoved into it. When I realized it was the exact same room I was in when Maxwell tried to feed me drugs months ago.

The room Axel rescued me from.

So caught up in my thoughts, I don't hear the footsteps until the door swings open.

And there he is.

"Darius!" I shoot to my feet.

The air in the room expands as I rush towards him. It propels me further and faster.

We are two atoms that have been held apart for too long. Bound together by fate and love and chaos.

And one hundred lifetimes.

“Sunday,” Darius gasps. He was frozen, but now he is eating up the space between us. We meet halfway into the room. Coming together in a way that heals us both.

“Darius,” I sob. My arms wrap around his neck, tug him down to me. He bends, scooping me up and I wrap my legs around him.

“I missed you, Wildflower.” He buries himself into my neck, his nose nuzzling my sensitive skin there.

For a few minutes we just stay like that, reestablishing our connection, soaking up each other’s warmth.

I do my best to ignore the bags under his eyes, the bruise marring his jaw, the new scar across his cheek.

It’s worth it. No matter what happens, if I can rescue Darius, it will all be worth it.

“How sweet,” Sterling says.

Tensing, Darius drops me carefully to the ground. Before spinning around, he puts himself between Sterling and me .

“What is this?” Darius demands.

I can’t see him, but I hear Sterling snap his fingers. “Sorry to break up this heartfelt reunion, but you two have a curtain call.”

“What’s going on?” Darius hardens his shoulders, clenching his fists.

“Surely you can make a guess. You know the girl lost me money. It’s time she earns some of it back.”



I hear heavy footsteps on the stairs outside the room.

Darius curses, spinning to me. His eyes are wild, worry etched into the set of his jaw, the thinning of his lips. “Sunday, I’m so sorry. Why did you come here?” His voice breaks.

“Darius?” My happiness from seeing him is churning into a different emotion entirely.

Curdled.

He doesn’t have a chance to answer before large sweaty hands wrench him from me, another pair landing on my shoulders. I don’t have time to take in their appearances before a hood is thrown over my head.

“Lead them to The Play House.”

“The Play House ?” There is pure fear in Darius’s words. “You can’t do this. The FBI is already on your case,” Darius argues, his voice is fainter now, the thick black bag over my head muffling it.

Sterling laughs but doesn’t respond.

“Come on.” The man who is holding me applies painful pressure, shoving me forward.

I can’t see anything.

Not my feet. Not Darius. Not the purple strand that connects us.

But I can hear as we all make our retreat, feel as I’m pushed down the stairs, and I do

my best not to trip .

We continue marching until we are outside. The muggy air is still hot even in the beginning of October, but I ignore it. I try to focus on the sounds, on the direction we are going.

But it is impossible to tell; I am discombobulated.

“Sunday, when they take the hoods off, I need you to promise me not to look. Focus on my back, you need to block the rest of it out.”

“Shut up!” one of the men holding us barks, followed by a thud and a soft groan.

I want to reach out, to take hold of Darius, to use him for comfort.

But I refrain.

And so we continue our march through the woods, the crunch of leaves under my socks, the twigs occasionally poking up, piercing me.

Eventually, we slow, and a loud creaking metal door is tugged open. And then we are going down. And down. And down. The temperature decreasing with every step until I am nearly shivering.

A loud whirring overtakes my ears, painful and continuous.

But worse than that is the smell.

Copper and decay.

Feces and vomit.

Bleach and ammonia.

It is that and more, an assault to my nose. It takes everything for me not to gag. I want to breathe through my mouth and I try to, but then I am tasting it.

Bile.

When we finally come to a stop at the bottom, my hood is tugged off.

The sight isn't worse than the smell, but it tells a horrible story.

This is a prison.

There is a long hallway that leads to a door in front of us. Above us are grates that cover huge fans .

Air flow.

But on each side there has to be more than fifty doors. Over one hundred total. Cells . I can't see inside of them, but over the steady whirring, I can hear the wailing. The screaming. The sobbing. This is where they keep the victims.

The realization hits in two waves.

I can find Luna, but she's down here.

I am down here, how will I ever escape?

"Don't look around, focus on my back," Darius says and this time the men holding us don't stop him.

I stare at his back. The purple thread is now visible again, a comfort. It comes from my chest to near the top of his back. Connecting us by the hearts.

But there are two others.

One that wraps up and behind me, assumingly towards Grayson and Axel. And another...

My attention shifts to it. To where it leads. It doesn't go up at all. The thread is leading to something down here. Or someone .

"Move along." My captor's hold on my shoulders propels me forward, and I refocus my attention on Darius's back.

We continue our trek down the hallway, it is at the very end door on the left that the thread leads.

I want to investigate, to break free and throw the door open, but then what?

My captor shoves us through the door at the end of the hallway. I attempt to not let my curiosity take hold, but I can't help myself.

It's a mistake.

This area is different. It is shaped similarly to a horseshoe, on the outskirts are different rooms, but unlike where we came from, some of these I can see into. The rooms are either made up of clear or foggy glass. There are over twenty areas.

Some of them are occupied.

The clear glass leaves the inside's activities on full display.

This time I cannot swallow down the bile. I bend over, hands on my knees and empty the contents of my stomach. It lands on my socks, and my captors shoes.

He grunts in annoyance. “Disgusting.” He shoves me away from him as I continue to fall apart.

“Let me help her,” Darius states. “My father won’t be happy if she isn’t ready in time.”

A few beats later his familiar hand is on my back.

He bends over. “Sunday,” he whispers into my ear. “If they threaten my life, I don’t care. Whatever happens if you want it to stop you just tell me and I will do whatever I can.”

I don’t understand what he means, but I don’t have time to ask.

“Let’s go.” My goon tugs me up by the back of my shirt, nearly choking me.

Doing anything to not look into the rooms around us, I focus on the center of the horseshoe.

It isn’t a room but an empty area, there is glass that goes straight across, but through that and down below is a large space. Almost similar to a theatre stage, complete with rows of seats on all sides.

“This is my favorite view of The Play House.” My captor sneers. “Let’s go.”

## Page 21

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 3:11 am*

Grayson rubs his chest. An hour ago, a sharp pain started stabbing him over and over again. At first, he ignored it as best he could.

But not any longer.

He walks across the hall to Sunday's room. Opening the door, he finds Axel inside. Sitting on her bed, staring listlessly at the wall.

"My heart hurts," Axel says.

Worry, anxiety, unease.

"Call the agent." Grayson's palm flattens over his heart. "Mine does too. This has to be a sign. Something isn't right."

Axel's eyes whip up. "I already did." He reaches behind him. "Take this. We're going to need it."

Grayson steps forward, eyeing it warily before reaching out and taking the gun from Axel.

Sunday, I hope you're okay.

A million choices led them to this moment in time, Grayson isn't sure what all he would change.

Would he choose to never meet Sunday?

To ship her away?

To force her to leave them?

He wants to say he would, but he knows in his heart that Sunday has wrapped her way into their lives.

And he will never let her go.

## Page 22

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 3:11 am*

When Darius was ushered to the main house, he didn't know what to expect. He had been left in one of the cells with no contact with the outside world for over a week.

When he was hooded and dragged out of his prison, he expected the worst.

But somehow it was even more terrible.

How did my brothers let this happen? She should be safe.

"You need to give a good show, make it believable. The audience will have requests, and your job is to fulfill them." Sterling is folded on a leather chair behind Darius. This is where Sterling would watch the show from, through a TV screen.

Darius and Sunday had been separated into different changing areas. She would be bathed, cleaned, and clothed.

Just as he had been.

"And if I refuse?" Darius clenches his jaw, steeling his nerves.

Talking back to Sterling goes against the gradient. It is difficult, a physical challenge that Darius has to force himself to do.

"Then you will be replaced. Maxwell would be more than happy to do whatever the guests want. And it wouldn't be too hard to explain how she jumped from one brother to another to another. We'll just present her to the public as Maxwell's."



Darius stutters, he whips around to stare into Sterling's eyes. "What are you implying?"

"After this, she is going to become a Thorne." Sterling steeples his hands. "You just need to prove to me that you have the balls to do what needs to be done. And then you both can have your happily fucking ever after."

"But we'll still be prisoners."

"Yes, but you won't be kept down here. You'll be awarded a spot in the house. But that's if you can prove to me that I can trust you. That you can do what needs to be done." Sterling reaches out.

Darius wants more than anything to escape. To not be forced into what there is to come.

But he doesn't have a choice. He can leave Sunday to endure all sorts of cruelties.

Or—

Darius shakes the monster's hand.

## Page 23

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 3:11 am*

It's been hours.

Separated from Darius, taken by a guard further into the underground prison, I was thrown into a locker room.

Once inside, two women I don't recognize whisked me through another door into a cold cement bathroom filled with a grid of baths and a line of sinks.

The walls are a dirty white, each tub separated by nearly-clear plastic hanging from the ceiling, the ever-present fans above echoing around the space.

However, the smell was at odds, an array of floral and warm scents overlapping one on top of the other.

Stripped of my clothes I was forced into a tub and cleaned. The two women soaking and wiping and shaving and readying me. They remained silent through the entire encounter, their hair pulled back in neat, tight buns, their eyes dark and lifeless as they focused on the task at hand.

They treated me as if I were simply a job to complete, not a human being.

And then they dragged me out of the tub, dressed me, and left me without a single acknowledgement.

Now I stand in disgusting lingerie back in the locker room and with the crippling realization about what is to come.

I press my ear to the door to the outside, trying to figure out what is going on, how much longer I will be forced to wait.

Waiting. Waiting. Waiting.

For the endless. For the inevitable .

“Here she is,” a guard from outside speaks, causing me to jump back.

With my back pressed flat against the far wall of lockers, I use my arms to wrap around my front. Trying to hide myself as best I can.

“I won’t be long.” I recognize the voice, and it ignites my ire.

Jutting my chin out and squaring my shoulders, I attempt to appear calm. To pretend that I am not terrified.

That ever since I stepped foot in this horrible nightmare, I haven’t been one step away from a complete breakdown.

“Sunday.” William marches until he is right in front of me. He looks over his shoulder through the open door at the guard. “Shut the door.”

The sheriff’s son. Maxwell’s best friend.

William.

“Why are you here?” I ask. My hands come up between us, trying to push him back, but he catches my wrists.

He stares at me with a critical intensity. “I can’t save you too. I can’t save anyone.”

William's hand comes up to my throat.

Unlike with Axel, this doesn't cause pleasure. No, it's crippling fear that rolls throughout me.

But he doesn't apply any pressure, simply watching me. Staring into my soul.

"Why are you here?" I ask again.

"I fell in love with the wrong girl. Maxwell didn't like it and so he took her from me," William says, his eyes unfocused and bleary.

"What does that mean?" My terror twists to confusion.

William isn't hurting me, he never has.

In fact...

"You were trying to keep me safe."

His focus snaps to my face, zeroing in on it.

"I told you not to go to the river party, I told you to stay away from all of us. To let it go." His voice cracks.

"But you wouldn't listen. Just like your brother wouldn't.

Just like Tripp wouldn't. And then Veronica helped Grayson.

Not even the sheriff's children are protected in a town as broken as ours.

It wasn't long before Maxwell found out. ”

The wool is pulled from between us and I examine William in a new light. He is just a boy that was dealt a losing hand. Doing anything he can to bluff his way through it.

He leans forward, and for a horrifying second I think he might kiss me, but he stops centimeters away.

“Maxwell sent me here to fuck you. To break you. To use you up before Darius touches you. I need you to act broken. I need you to pretend I did what he asked. Please?” William begs.

“He'll tell everyone what Veronica did. He'll take her next. ”

My vision blurs. “Okay,” I croak.

“And Sunday, I can't do anything myself. You need to help her. To save her.” His eyes turn glassy, tears he refuses to shed. “Because I know you're going to make it out of here. The other two brothers won't let you go without a fight.”

“Veronica?”

He shakes his head. “No, the girl Maxwell took from me.” He shoves something into my hand, before turning away. “Leave that here, hide it.”

“Who? Who am I saving?” I whisper.

“Luna.”

When I open my hand, inside is a key.

## Page 24

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 3:11 am*

It isn't long after William leaves that a guard enters.

"Let's go, it's time for the show." The guard drops a loose plastic necklace around me.

A microphone?

Except no noise comes out... is it not on yet?

Attempting to appear distraught, I play my part in the trauma that William was expected to have put me through.

It isn't hard.

At this point, it could be three in the morning. Or later. Or even earlier.

I wouldn't have the slightest notion at this point.

Outside of the room, the only source of light is a flickering fluorescent light.

It casts my skin in an eerie glow and shines through the purple strands that protrude from my chest. As we walk in the direction of one, we pass another door that is slightly ajar, bright lights coming from inside drawing my attention.

Before I can take a closer look, I am shoved further down the dimmed concrete hallway.

The loud whirring is ever present. At the end of the corridor he pushes me through a doorway.

I'm not sure what I expect on the other side.

But it is similar to walking out on a circular stage.

A stage with a leather bench, cuffs on both ends and a large wooden X with more restraints at the tops and bottoms. There's a table filled with toys; floggers, whips, and paddles .

A single bed rests in the center of the stage.

My arms fold across my chest, and I attempt not to shiver.

Before I can investigate further, a bright blinding light focuses on me, but through it, I follow the purple strand.

The one I now recognize as Darius's. They all shine in distinct degrees, pulsate in different ways, and I have slowly adjusted to the fact that they each represent one of the brothers.

Except the fourth.

Before, it had overlapped with Darius and I hadn't realized it, but now his strand is thinner, dimmer, slower.

"Sunday." Darius steps into my reach, he is clothed only in a pair of silky boxers. His chest and corded muscles on full display. A microphone around his neck. His sturdy hands find their way to my shoulders. "Do you understand what this is?"

I don't. Not exactly. But I can guess.

We are half naked on a stage after his father mentioned bidders.

In a room called The Play House.

"We're going to have to give them a performance." As much as I hate every second of this, of the sound of people surrounding us, the knowledge that we are about to be forced together in a way neither of us deserve.

I am grateful it's Darius. And not anyone else. Not even Grayson or Axel.

I love each of the brothers equally, but Darius is the gentlest. The most careful.

I know that he will do his best not to hurt me. To make this as manageable as he possibly can.

"Sunday?"

I realize I am so wrapped up in my thoughts I haven't answered him. "We're going to have sex," I say.

"Was Tripp the last—"

I shake my head, cutting him off.

"Axel." His lips curl in knowing humor. "Of course it was him. He always pushes you to your limits."

"I initiated it," I admit.



Darius shrugs, as if this were the most casual conversation in the world and we weren't literally being watched by what sounds like hundreds of onlookers.

“Welcome ladies and gents to tonight's performance in The Play House!

Your bids have been cast and you have secured these marvelous seats.

This show will be a bit different. While we will still direct the parties by popular demand, there will not be any visible injuries to be left behind.

This is my son and his future wife, after all.

Let's have fun with it. Once the votes are cast, we will turn their microphones on so that you can be a part of the experience,” Sterling's voice echoes around us, amplified by speakers.

I don't bother trying to find him, still blinded by the lights.

Future wife? I mouth.

Darius inclines his head, reaching out and gently squeezing my shoulder.

How twisted is it to make your son fuck a woman for sport? Except it was still somehow not even near the top of the evil Sterling has committed.

With the bright spotlight still on us, I can't make out anyone in the audience. Only Darius.

I hope it stays on.

“If this is your first time, welcome to The Play House!

You'll see the screen in front of you with different scenarios.

Please choose which one you'd like to see first, this is a democracy after all.

If you've been here before, you know the drill. Now cast your votes for the first scenario. Will he be fucking her bare or should we have my son wrap up for this affair? Can never be too careful after all. ”

There is jeering and shouting in the crowd as Darius and I lamely stand on the stage.

“This is so fucked up,” I whisper. “Think of all the people forced onto this stage.”

And it is. I am standing in the ghosts of hundreds, if not thousands, of traumatic events. It saps into the air, and I swallow thickly around it.

Gulp down the past and future suffering.

Could we have saved them before now? Could we have prevented this?

“I know,” Darius growls.

“We have to stop this, Darius. You understand that, don't you? No matter what.” And I mean it. My brother and Tripp died because of this town, because of this evil.

Not to mention the other victims.

Julia. Tiffany. Luna.

Carrie .

Because now that I know what Maxwell truly is, I know that she is down here

somewhere. And if she isn't yet, she will be soon.

Fending off the inevitable.

"No matter what," he agrees.

"Your votes are cast. It appears you want me to become a grandpa! No protection it is. Now some of us prefer to watch, but others prefer to direct. What will it be? Will we let my son fuck her how he wants the first go round?" There's booing in the crowd.

"But then you all get to pick how he does the second round?" The boos are replaced with disgusting cheers.

"No votes needed! Darius, you heard them! Give us a show!"

Even I can hear the threat in Sterling's voice. Broken through the speaker and echoing around us, but it is like he is standing right before us, as if he is physically pushing us together.

"Are you ready?" I ask .

"No," Darius responds. "Sunday this is..." He bends forward. "This is my first time. Ever . I don't want to hurt you. I know this is stupid fucking anxiety, but what if I'm awful? Please don't hate me. I couldn't live with myself."

The realization slices through me.

Darius is a virgin.

A wave of sadness pulsates through me. My hands reach up, cupping Darius's face.

“I won’t hate you,” I promise. “Do what you need to do.”

I am determined to block out the crowd. To pretend Darius and I exist in a bubble. I will not pay attention to the background jeering. To the bed in the center of the stage.

Darius breathes against my lips, his arms wrapping around me protectively. “Sunday, this round, they’re going to let me take care of you. But the next? However many more they make us go through? I might have to hurt you, to do things you aren’t comfortable with.”

“I understand.” And I do. As long as it is Darius and not anyone else, everything will be okay. We’ll make it through this.

“Let’s set the mood for them!” Sterling exclaims. “And turn on their mics!”

The light that had been so blinding before dims, but thankfully the onlookers are in complete darkness too.

But I still know that they’re there.

Will they simply watch us? Will they play out their own sick fantasies in the crowd?

Squashing the thought and ignoring them, I lift up on my toes and press my lips against Darius’s to press physically into him that this is okay. That I am here in this moment with him. That we will make it through this. Together .

Familiarity, comfort, warmth. It is as if my heart is suturing itself, as if he is a bucket that I am desperately pouring all of myself into.

He opens, his tongue coming out to tangle with mine.

The cool metal of his piercing is present as he loses himself to this moment. It is a reminder of who he is, of our connection. His hands come up, one catches in my hair, the other grips the back of my neck. Sealing us further together.

The sounds of our kiss echo on speakers around us, but I tune it out. When I first realized what this was going to be I promised myself that I would focus on Darius. That I would do anything and everything I could to enjoy this forced encounter.

He hums into my mouth before releasing me.

His eyes are swirling in anxiety and unease, but beneath it all is pure unfiltered lust and love.

Darius squeezes me reassuringly, wrapping around me, using his body to block out as much of the onlookers as he can.

Ready? he mouths.

I'm not.

I incline my head and allow him to lead me to the bed that is in the center of the stage.

It is raised high above the ground. Darius turns and, grasping me by the hips, he lifts me onto it.

I land on the edge of the bed, the silk sheets chilly against my bare skin. The sheer lace black lingerie does nothing to prevent the cold, and my nipples pebble to painful points as he settles between my legs.

Adjusting onto my elbows, I keep my attention on him. He stares up at me, on his

knees between my thighs, waiting for approval.

“Please,” I expel. The word repeats on the speakers a second later, much louder .

I want Darius. But I am scared, terrified, my body is not ready to take him. Not yet at least.

Without further ado, he sweeps forward. One of his hands flattens on top of my cunt, the other he uses to enter my core. Two fingers in and out. Slowly, methodically. His other hand pressing down, his thumb finding my clit.

For a moment, I can't focus on the pleasure, my mind wandering to the eyes. I imagine them, thousands and thousands. Oversized and unblinking. Bug-like.

Terror sharpens its claws into my gut, roaches crawling across my skin, but then Darius presses onto my clit rougher, harder.

“Focus on me, Wildflower. I've got you.” His voice is a comfort, even as it reverberates around us. He hums his approval as I relax.

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 3:11 am*

Shutting my eyes, I fall back on the bed.

Ignoring where we are.

Ignoring the attention.

Ignoring my anxiety and apprehension.

“This feels good, doesn’t it?” He is curling his fingers into me while his mouth replaces his thumb on my clit. “I’m going to make you as ready as I can.” His words vibrate against me before rumbling out around us through the static speakers.

It does feel good.

He hums again as I moan and attempt to arch further into his touch.

He continues. Pressing, and stroking, and licking, and overwhelming my senses. Shooting pleasure out across my nerves, a live wire.

Even as he works me over, I can tell he is cognizant of the crowd. It is in the way his body wraps over mine, in the way he keeps me covered as best he can, in the way he hums over my moans. He is building this moment out for just the two of us, offering the bare minimum to the onlookers .

“I need to add another now.”

This time, there is resistance to the intrusion, but his hand on my cunt holds me in

place. I let out the smallest whimper.

“It’s okay, you can handle this,” Darius promises soothingly, as he pushes another finger inside. “Just like that, look at you.”

With three I am too full, but I don’t argue. His mouth on my clit is quickly overshadowing the initial discomfort.

He is gathering all of me into this moment, tying me up so incredibly tight, further and further he goes. It is almost too much.

Nearly unbearable.

And just as I am about to beg for him to finish me, he’s expanding his fingers, stretching me further.

“I’m so sorry, Sunday, but I need to make you ready. I don’t want to hurt you.”

This time I can’t contain the loud whimper of distress, but I don’t tell him to stop. If Darius is doing this, I trust him. I know he isn’t trying to hurt me.

“Just like that, there you go, you’re doing so well.” His teeth scrape my clit, but his fingers are still, unmoving.

Wriggling against his hold, they shift a bit inside and I hiss.

“Just let me stretch you, you’re nearly there.”

Nearly there?

For the first time since this started, I come to the realization—while I have felt it, I



have never seen Darius's cock.

Before the thought can cause my concern to surge, he presses the harsh metal of his piercing to my clit and hums, vibrating the piercing in an addictive manner. Squirming, I attempt to contain myself, but breathy pants leave me as shockwaves strike out across my nerves.

Just as I am about to crash and fall and spill over, Darius stills .

My eyes flash open.

It is a mistake.

Far above I can see through the glass of the room I was in before. I can make out figures of those watching us.

A desperate screech worms its way out of my throat. But then Darius is moving up the bed, making his way on top of me, protecting me, covering me.

Blocking out my vision of the evils that lie outside of our little bubble.

“Focus on me, Wildflower. Just me,” he murmurs, his expression is soft, loving, but there is a fierce possessiveness in the clenching of his jaw.

His lips are centimeters above mine and my attention snaps to them before finding his eyes again.

He smiles, but only for a single instant, and then he is pushing forward.

So caught up in the outside distractions, I did not realize that he had shed his boxers until this moment.

Until his cock presses into me, perfectly aligned.

Until it stretches past the point of comfort.

“Darius,” I gasp. I want to tell him to stop.

It hurts. I can’t do this.

Even without seeing it, I can tell it’s going to be too much, that even though he stretched me, prepared me, I’m not nearly ready.

Darius, sensing my anxiety and discomfort, withdraws entirely. Readjusting to his knees he reaches above us, grabbing hold of an item on the table next to us.

“This will help.” He flashes me the bottle of lube before unsealing, opening it, and squeezing some into his empty hand.

I follow his movements in a trance. Leaning up a bit, I watch as he lathers the lube up and down along the length of his cock .

And I take it in. The cock which is threatening to split me in two. While it is nearly the same length as Axel’s, it is much girthier.

Boos chime through the darkness around us and I jolt, my attention flashing around the room.

“Eyes on me,” Darius growls. “Stay with me Sunday.”

Jumping back to him, I extend my fingers tentatively and touch the tip of his cock.

Darius hisses. “Fuck, just the smallest of–” He cuts himself off, his jaw ticking. “It’s

time, Sunday. This will help, I promise. Can you trust me?"

Instead of answering, I fall back fully to the bed and open my legs further for him. This time I know better than to look above.

"Give us a fucking show!" echoes around us.

Darius repositions, his cock at my entrance, his eyes find mine.

They are sad, disheveled, swirling in terror and lust.

I jerk my head. All at once, I mouth.

One of Darius's hands finds my clit, the other my hip bone.

He keeps his attention on me as he plunges as hard as he can into me.

The scream that leaves my lips is a mixture of shock, pain, and crippling hedonism. He has extended and stretched and plied me apart.

"Don't stop!" echoes around us.

My eyes are watering as I incline my head to Darius, as I open my legs further for him.

Darius keeps up his ministrations on my clit as he accepts what we must do. What he must do.

The lube has allowed him into my body, but nothing more, nothing less. He has to work himself in and out, has to continuously stretch and expand me. And every time he pauses, I can feel as my muscles tense attempting to go back to where they wish to

be .

It takes time, but eventually, my body accepts him much easier, and I find myself bucking up into him. Enjoying every thrust.

“Darius,” I mewl as he curves upwards hitting a new spot inside of me. “There, please, there,” I beg.

“Fuck, Wildflower. What are you doing to me?” He continues to grind into me. Into the same spot over and over again.

Each time he hits it, it is pure bliss, as if I am nearly floating.

Each time he falls away, it is as if a sack of bricks are landing across me. Weighing me down, scratching painfully into my skin.

He is giving and taking and making each second feel eternal.

It is addictive, heady, overwhelming. And before I can even grasp what is happening, how much time has passed, that we are still very much in the center of a stage, my body coils and springs out on its own. My muscles spasm as I arch off the bed.

“ Sunday .” My name leaving his lips is a reverent whisper.

Darius is nearly crying as he comes deep inside me.

I can’t tell if it is from emotion or from the fact of what we were forced to do.

“I love you, Sunday. I’m so sorry I have waited lifetimes to tell you.

Maybe this is my karma for being so stubborn. ”

The purple strand between us is steadier now, solidified. A connection that speaks to our souls.

My hand finds his jaw, stroking his skin there. I open my mouth to speak.

Cheering causes me to twitch back and pause.

I attempt to convey with my eyes what he means to me, how even in this disgusting atmosphere our connection kept me sane. How it was easy to block out the repulsive environment with him.

But then hands are grabbing on his shoulders, ripping him out and off of me. I wince at the pain of our separation.

His absence has left me empty. Devoid .

“Let me go!” Darius yells. He swings attempting to fight them off. It’s another goon. A faceless man in an overpriced suit. “Let me stay with her longer.”

“Settle down, son! You’ll be back out here soon enough. And the guests have even voted on what you will be doing to her next. I’ll keep it a surprise but suffice it to say, they want you to stretch her past her limits. Sunday, you will need to prepare for this next round.”

Horror fills my stomach, spreads in waves across my skin.

It’s okay. It’s going to be okay.

But is it? I promised Darius I wouldn’t hate him, and I won’t. No matter what he is forced to do. But if he is made to hurt me, will he be able to live with himself? Can I pretend well enough to enjoy it?

This wasn't how I wanted to be with Darius for the first time, but he was gentle, kind.

Because he was allowed to be.

Darius's eyes meet mine one last time before he is dragged off the stage and away.

But I will always remember the haunting remorse in their depths, the terror.

And I know, with certainty, Darius won't live with himself for it.

Perhaps Sterling did this to punish me, but ultimately, it was to break Darius.

To force Darius to become the evil he despises.

## Page 26

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 3:11 am*

Back in the glorified changing room, I want to fall apart. To come undone. To cry and scream and rage.

But I don't. Instead, I wait.

The bathroom door is locked so I am still basically naked, sticky, forced to sit on the wooden bench and lean against the cubbies as I wait. And wait. And wait.

Eventually I must fall asleep, but the sound of the door opening startles me awake.

Two women are pushed into the room.

“Clean her.”

I expect the same women as before, but it's two different ones. One is older and I don't recognize her, but the other...

Containing the gasp, I freeze in place zeroing in on the woman I know.

On Carrie.

Carrie pays me no mind as she makes quick work of unlocking the bathroom, and shortly after, I hear as a tub is filled.

The other woman guides me towards the running water, helps me out of the torn lingerie. “Come along sweetheart.”

Staring down at the tub, I freeze when Carrie guides me in.

A red thread wraps its way from my chest to her hands.

I see it, but unlike the purple lights, it doesn't linger. It disappears as Carrie releases me in the hot water .

My attention zeroes in on her face. On her listless eyes, her raw nose, her cracked lips, her greasy blonde hair.

“Carrie,” I whisper.

Her eyes widen in shock, as if she hadn't quite comprehended who I was, but she doesn't speak.

Instead, she and the other woman begin to clean me. And I allow them to.

I let them soak my bruised muscles. Let them scrub my sticky skin.

Let them reach inside to clean Darius out of me.

When they are done, Carrie helps me out of the bath.

She wraps me in a towel, hugging me to her.

“Not you too,” her voice breaks.

She releases me, handing me silk pajamas.

“Get dressed. They'll give you a few hours to gather up the next bidders.” She turns to the older woman as I follow her instructions. Once I have the clothes in place,



Carrie speaks again. “Henrietta, what can we do? She’s so young, so innocent.”

Henrietta’s lips flatten. And my attention focuses on her. She’s familiar, but not in a way that I know her. In a way that she reminds me of someone else. Her soft chocolate eyes darken in unease. “We can barely help ourselves.”

Carrie snuffles. “This is my fault, I should never have tried to bring you to Maxwell’s party. We should have just laid out and watched the stars.”

My heart breaks. “This isn’t your fault Carrie. We are all victims of this town.”

Carrie’s eyes are glistening, she reaches into her pocket and offers me a pill.

“Take this,” she says. “Just don’t tell anyone I gave it to you.” Her eyes are soft, but empty .

“What is it?” I ask.

She pauses, observing Henrietta warily. The two women have an unspoken argument before she responds. “It will keep you from getting pregnant.”

My mouth falls open, my eyebrows draw together. “Thank you.” I take it.

I love Darius, but I don’t want a child. I don’t want to bring someone into this horrible world. Especially if I am stuck here.

But maybe our plan will work.

“What day is it?” I ask. I gulp the pill down dry.

“October 6 th .” Carrie shifts from foot to foot, she runs a hand through her hair.

“You’re going to be okay, you’re one of the lucky ones.

They’ll let you out of here. You just have to put on a few more good shows.

But it’s going to be hard, Sunday. He’s going to have to hurt you.

To break you. You just need to disassociate.

You need to pretend you are staring up at those stars.

That you are at the planetarium again.” This time the smile she offers nearly makes its way to her eyes.

“Carrie, we’re all going to make it out of here.” I want to ask a million questions, but I also want them to leave. Carrie’s presence is both a comfort and a reminder of what is at stake. Of the countless victims. Of my brother’s murder.

Of how an entire town watches on in silence as hundreds, if not thousands, are abused and then go missing.

Is wealth all it takes? Is that all you need to spin your own narrative? To make the most absurd lies believable?

Disgust furrows and folds in my stomach. A washing machine that is off kilter, that doesn’t work properly and keeps cycling and cycling with no end in sight.

That is exactly who and what I am .

A broken girl in a vicious cycle.

What if I never escaped the loops at all?

The thought slams into me and lands harder than I expect. I let out a pained groan.

“I miss Auggie. And I made him a promise that I will do whatever I can to fulfill.” Carrie pulls me into one last hug, and I return it, wrapping my arms around her much skinnier frame.

Her bones poke against me as she squeezes me tighter.

“Sunday, take care of yourself, it will all be over soon enough and then this will just be a fading nightmare.”

Another reminder of Auggie’s lasting presence.

It nearly breaks my heart.

He is protecting me even after death.

Perhaps if I weren’t so distracted by my own spiraling, by the different pulsating strands of light, by the injustices of this world, I might notice how Carrie is saying goodbye.

But I don’t. And when she releases me, my mind focuses elsewhere—specifically on the key William gave me. The fourth violet thread has been pulsating, matching my heart’s beat exactly. But there’s another. It is white and bright and leading out of the bathroom and directly to where I hid the key.

“Thank you.” And I mean it. I imagine she isn’t supposed to do this, I imagine she doesn’t have to be kind. She could be apathetic. She could hate me and blame me. In some ways Carrie was used against me. But instead she’s risking herself for me.

Neither Carrie nor Henrietta speak again as they collect the cleaning supplies, my

dirty garments, and everything else.

“Keep your head on straight,” Henrietta advises over her shoulder.

And just like that, they are gone. My eyes scan the room, the blinding fluorescent lights catch on a lone metallic item .

A razor.

It is on the edge of the bathtub they just washed me in.

Leaning down, my hand wraps around it carefully, before exiting the washing area.

The silky pajamas have pockets, and I drop the razor inside as I make my way to where I hid the key. Outside the bathroom is essentially a locker room. It is filled with hundreds of cubbies, and I picked one far up and out of sight to place the key in.

My memory is a bit shoddy on its exact whereabouts, but I am able to use the white thread to find it. It leads me right to the key and as soon as I have it in my hand, the thread wraps around me, tying us together.

Odd .

But so is all of this. None of this is normal or okay.

These threads shouldn't exist. Just like I shouldn't.

Which serves to instill what I already know.

There is a reason I'm here. A reason I'm alive.

A reason for these threads.

If I haven't escaped the loops, maybe they will lead me to how I finally can.

My attention shifts to the key.

A single word is written across it.

Master .

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 3:11 am*

A xel marches his way out of his house, the gun weighing heavily in his pants.

There are a hundred different ways this scenario could play out, ways that would end in his death, but he doesn't care.

Not knowing what to expect is a difficult adjustment.

Sunday has been gone for too long. And he knows with near certainty.

She isn't okay.

Swinging into Darius's truck, he pulls his phone out of his pocket.

He finds what he is looking for.

"Breaking news! FBI Agent Franz is presumed dead after damning evidence was anonymously submitted. A full investigation has already been launched," blares through the speakers of his phone.

"Agent Franz was on unofficial business in the small town that made waves just under two months ago when police brutality was called into question. While the official story then was an attempted murder-suicide, others online have begun to speculate that there is more to it than that. Stay tuned as we—"

Satisfaction lands. "We need to hurry. Before they decide to pin this on us," Grayson grumbles as he makes his way to the passenger seat. "And you should really let me drive."

“This is a national news station.” Axel tosses the phone to Grayson. “They aren’t playing the video we sent in, there’s still time.”

“I still don’t understand why she had to die ,” Grayson says .

Axel opens the garage flipping the truck into reverse, the tires squealing as he slams on the accelerator. “Don’t you?”

He shifts the truck into drive and speeds down their neighborhood road. The sky is dark except for a sliver of moon and the stars that shine brightly above them.

Stabbing reminders of what is at stake.

“My heart still hurts,” Grayson whispers, his attention shifting out of the truck and upwards. “What if we’re too late?”

Axel grips the steering wheel tighter. “We won’t be.”

Something has happened.

I am still in the locker room; no one has yet returned for me. My hand is wrapped tightly around the key. The white thread tangling us together. I had tried to set it back down, but I physically couldn't.

Now that it is in my hand, it is here to stay.

And instinctively I know that I have to follow through with this. That I will need to ignore my crippling anxiety, the dread that slithers and crawls across my skin, the fear that sours my stomach.

My ear is pressed to the door that leads outside this room. Earlier, there was a guard stationed there, evidenced by only his heavy breathing, but now, there's a commotion.

Stomping, yelling, sirens. Chaos.

And in the middle of it, my guard left.

He still hasn't returned.

I hold my breath and wait. And wait. And wait.

I do not allow myself to think about Darius. About what we were forced to do. About the look in his eyes as he thrust into me for the first time.



The regret.

But I understand. He waited one hundred lifetimes to give me a choice. To choose him with the knowledge of all the loops and everything that occurred. But then that choice was taken from us both.

Stolen .

More time passes, and there is only silence. My guard still has not returned, so I use my free hand to jiggle the knob on the door.

It's locked.

Next, I attempt to use the master key that is attached to me.

It works.

My heart pounds as I slowly, carefully twist the knob. Peeking my head out the door, I cast my attention left and right.

Empty.

Everyone is gone.

I don't have time to truly think over what is happening, I need to move. Now .

And I know exactly where I need to go.

There are four pulsating purple strands that begin at my chest. Three are my men.

Two overlap and lead up and away in the direction I imagine the O'Brien's house to

be. One goes further behind me.

But the fourth? It is yanking me, tugging me, grabbing hold of my entire body, and physically thrusting me towards it.

As if it knows it's time for me to reunite with whoever is at the end.

It reminds me of when I chased after Julia...to an extent. But there isn't any apprehension.

As if where it will take me is exactly where I am meant to end up.

I circle around the dark hallway, back up the metal stairs to where the horseshoe shaped room was.

I am on alert, my entire body on edge, but everyone is gone.

The rooms that wrap around the area are now all completely see-through and noticeably empty.

But there is evidence left inside. Crumpled sheets, drops of blood, discarded clothes.

They must have left recently.

And in a hurry .

When I look down in the center of the space, I can see The Play House . The stage where Darius and I were forced together. It too is empty; there isn't another disgusting show.

Where is everyone?

My heart pounds into my throat. It is choking me. It is propelling me forward.

It is warning me.

But every movement I take towards the purple shimmering light is as if a weight is lifting off my shoulders.

For so long I was being crushed into the ground below and I didn't even know it. But now it is as if I am floating, each step lighter than the last.

Stepping into the hallway lined with doors, my vision blurs. It splices.

Déjà vu hits me in the face.

But I haven't been here before. The brothers never mentioned a death where they found me in this nightmare.

Surely they would have.

But what if...

What if I have been here before?

As soon as the thought manifests, it blooms.

My memory is percolating through. And I want nothing more than to stop it.

Pushing as much of the uneasiness down, I turn to the first door. To the one that the thread leads inside to.

This time I don't bother to twist it before using the key.

Slipping it into my empty pocket, I am not shocked when the handle twists for me.

But I am stunned to find the most unexpected person on the other side.

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 3:11 am*

The cell is dark and gloomy. Above, there is the familiar whirring and a grated ceiling with a fan on the other side. A single flickering bulb on the far brick wall provides just enough light for me to see.

“Carrie?” She is wearing the same outfit she was in only hours ago.

She’s on her hands and knees on the floor before me, her head bowed down as close as she can get to the ground.

“Carrie?” I ask again, louder, over the humming that echoes around the room. I bend down trying to tug her up, but another voice cuts through the space before I can.

“She’s dead.”

Jumping back, my head whips to the left, striving to make out where the voice comes from. Now that I am no longer distracted by Carrie, I can see that the strand wasn’t towards her.

Her words finally process. “Dead?” I drop to my knees. My hands find Carrie, attempting to desperately move her. To get her to react.

Carrie is colder than she should be, stiffer. I shuffle forward, the concrete scraping against my bare skin, attempting again to flip her over. But then I shift into something sticky.

Blood .

“They didn’t need her anymore. She was too much of a liability.”

“I just saw her! She was alive!” Guilt stabs me over and over again. She helped me .  
Is that why she is dead? Is that why they killed her ?

“She isn’t meant to live. It was her time to go.”

My attention whips towards the voice. To the purple strand connecting us together.  
“Come out of the shadows,” I rasp out. I stand unsteadily on shaky knees.

“Why Sunday? Do you want to see what you already know?”

Goosebumps prick up my spine, my eyes narrow, attempting to see the person– the woman –speaking. I don’t recognize her soft but stern cadence, but she knows my name. Knows who I am.

“Sunday, you stupid idiot. You made it too late this time. My mom is dead and now we’ll just need to start everything over at the beginning again.”

Realization strikes me in the temple.

As soon as I understand who she is, Luna is jumping onto me, knocking me back down onto the floor away from Carrie. Her long brown hair falls around us in a shroud, her knees press me into the cool concrete below.

Fingers wrap around my neck, squeezing, restricting my airway.

She’s trying to kill me.

Terror and panic.

“One hundred fucking lifetimes of this nightmare. And finally, when I think you are going to change our fates, when I think my wish may finally come true. My mom was murdered.” Luna’s chestnut eyes are wild, unseeing as she continues to strangle me.

I can’t speak, let alone think, as Luna constricts my airway, my vision darkening and stars shooting out.

Her words filter through.

One...

Hundred...

Lifetimes?

## Page 30

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 3:11 am*

Darius shoots up off of the bed. The last he remembers was being dragged off of Sunday and then...

And then his world went dark.

They must have drugged me.

Establishing himself in the here and now, Darius yanks the blankets back and attempts to get up.

He's fully clothed now and back in the main house, in a bedroom he had been thrown into before.

The curtains are drawn and the room is cloaked in shadows.

He appears uninjured, except for his heart, it's burning .

I need to find Sunday. Make sure she is okay. I have to stop this before I am forced to hurt her...or even worse.

Guilt slogs its way through his system. Dense and gritty. Darius knows Sunday would never fault him for what happened, but he can't help to blame himself.

He is a Thorne.

He is the reason she was brought here.



“They’re going to be here soon, you need to get it together.”

A familiar voice cuts through the dark room.

Darius reaches towards the lamp next to the bed, flicking it on. “Veronica?”

Veronica leans against the door, she’s sporting a black eye, a busted lip, and a bruised cheek .

“What the fuck happened?” Darius hadn’t seen her since before Sunday was shot. He never expected her to be here, never expected her to be hurt.

Veronica bares her teeth. “Mark got in a few good hits before I managed to escape him. He heard me on the phone. Deduced what I’d done,” she speaks in a hushed tone.

Darius is on his feet now, walking closer to Veronica. “What have you done? What’s going on? You need to leave and run and escape this town. It isn’t safe,” he matches her voice, attempting to keep his words contained to this room.

Veronica laughs, a soft grating noise. “No fucking shit, Darius. Your brothers are on the way. Along with the FBI. They’ll be here soon to end this once and for all. Just don’t let the Thornes use you as a scapegoat.”

Stomping and shouting from outside the room draws his attention. He doesn’t understand, but he knows there isn’t time.

“Where’s Sunday?” Darius asks, narrowing his eyes.

Veronica shifts from foot to foot. “I don’t know. Carrie was supposed to let me know when she made it back here...but she hasn’t shown up.”

Dread slinks into Darius's gut. "Sunday's still down there? We have to find her! What if they kill her? She can't speak if she's dead!" Panic muddles Darius's mind.

Before when they were in the loops he at least knew what to expect. But now?

If she dies...

He doesn't finish the thought.

Veronica flinches back further into the door behind her. Her hands clench into fists. "I won't let anything happen to her. I promised Auggie."

The panic dissipates and it is replaced with a whirring fan of anxiety and grief. "I'm sorry," Darius expels. "Now please. What is the plan? How are we going to get to Sunday? "

He doesn't know the way to the underground facility. Every time they had taken him down there, he'd been blindfolded.

The stomping gets closer and closer.

Darius tenses.

Neither of them have time to react as the door is shoved open. Darius can't catch Veronica before she's thrown to the ground.

"Fuck. Sorry sis." William pushes the door back into place, helping Veronica up. He stiffens at the sight of her face. "We need to leave before this gets any worse," he tells her, ignoring Darius entirely.

She pushes William away from her. "No, I'm done being a complacent coward. And

what about Luna?”

Darius recognizes the name.

He had met the FBI agent Jane Franz more times than he cared to remember. Learned of the woman’s daughter early on. Of what most likely had happened to her.

But it hadn’t been his sole focus.

That was Sunday.

“Fuck! And what happens when you end up killed?” William exclaims before turning his wrath on Darius. “If only you could have left us all well enough alone. Then you wouldn’t be here! Then Sunday wouldn’t be here!”

Darius’s nostrils flare in anger. “Then more girls and boys and everyone in this town could be raped and murdered! It’s not our fault this town is evil!

It’s not our fault that nothing is ever brought to light,” he whisper-yells, jabbing a finger at William’s chest. “That would be your dear old dad’s. ”

William opens his mouth to snap back, but Veronica steps between the men .

“Shut up! This isn’t helpful!” Veronica barks, throwing her hands up in the air in exasperation. “We need to hurry. William, you know how to get down there don’t you?”

William screws his eyes shut. After an eternity, he finally confirms, “I do.”

“Good. We’ll wait for his brothers and then we can go and find her—”

A distant bang echoes out from the woods. It's from the general direction Darius would assume Sunday is in.

A gunshot.

All three of them jump.

“There isn't time. We need to get to her, now .” Darius rubs his chest, a deep stabbing pain was present when he woke but now his heart throbs and aches in a way he has never felt before.

The sensation intensifies.

His knees shake as he looks down at his heart, expecting to see blood or some injury he had somehow overlooked, but there isn't anything there.

He stares a bit longer.

A light shimmers. A deep dark violet.

Darius blinks and it's gone.

What was that?

The wish he made so long ago flickers to the forefront of his mind.

I wish to know before she's in danger.

Before he can put any more thought behind it, William draws his attention.

“Fine, we'll go now,” William agrees uneasily, cutting through Darius's confusion.

“But we’re going the back way, I don’t want to stumble on any of Thorne’s men.”

Darius isn’t sure if he trusts William .

But he has faith in Veronica. In every timeline she always looked out for Sunday. For his brothers.

“Okay.” Darius reaches out a hand to shake William’s, but when he does, there’s another shimmer, except this time it’s crimson. Dark and bloody.

He withdraws, instead gesturing for William to lead.

William narrows his eyes but doesn’t remark before turning back to the door. “Stay between us Veronica,” he says.

Darius doesn’t argue as they carefully and quietly exit the room.

His heart continues to ache. He hopes desperately that wherever Sunday is she’s okay. But the pain in his chest is intensifying with every step he takes.

By the time they are out of the house, it nearly cripples him.

Hold on Sunday, I’ll be there soon. I promise.

## Page 31

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 3:11 am*

“This isn’t the right way.” Darius twists his head from left to right.

He isn’t sure what compels him to believe that.

They are surrounded by trees on all sides. It is dark, barely any moonlight filtering through the foliage, as they stumble their way around.

But he knows with certainty they aren’t going the right way.

“Just a bit further,” William mutters from the front.

Darius’s heart beats erratically as pain consumes it. Each step in the direction they are going causes it to hurt just a bit more than the last, until it is nearly unbearable.

They continue on for just a bit longer before Darius digs his heels into the ground. “You’re lying.”

Veronica stills.

William walks a few more steps before pausing, he twists around.

“William?” she asks. “We’re going towards Sunday, aren’t we? We have to save her.”

William’s face is barely visible, but Darius can make out the anxiety swirling in the man’s eyes. See the way his entire body is poised.

“We’re not. Are we?” Darius knows they aren’t. His body is tugging him in the opposite direction. Towards Sunday. Two magnets that drifted too far apart but still forever reaching for each other.

That is how he feels. Uneasy. Withdrawn. His nerves prickly uncomfortably .

“We need to keep going. We’re almost there,” William says with finality.

But now even Veronica is on edge. “Will, please be honest.”

William places his hands on her shoulders. “Veronica, trust me. This is the only way.”

Darius tenses. “What have you done William?” The longer he stares at William, the more a light attempts to cloud his vision. He blinks a few times; red hues flicker and dance in the night.

His alarm ratchets upwards.

William’s eyes are glassy as he meets Darius’s gaze. “This place is going to be overrun with the FBI soon enough. You’re a Thorne, they won’t hurt you. You just have to go with Maxwell. Then they’ll let us go. Then Veronica and I can finally be free. We can leave this town and never look back.”

It is a bowling ball that lands in Darius’s stomach, but it is Veronica who twists and smacks William.

“What have you done?”

In the following silence as they all soak in the realization of William’s deception, Darius can hear it. Not too far in front of them.

The hum of running vehicles.

“Darius, go!” Veronica turns and pushes him. “Do whatever you can. Rescue her. Save our fucking town and our goddamn souls. You’re the only ones who will!”

Darius doesn’t wait, he twists and sprints away. Even in the night, his body is innately telling him how to avoid the fallen logs, when to duck, when he needs to turn.

His soul is chomping at the bit. It is suctioning him closer and closer to its missing piece.

It is directing him to Sunday.

“No!” William’s shout reaches his ears followed by Veronica screaming .

Darius falters in his stride but doesn’t stop.

His heart hurts for them both. He understands why William was so desperate.

It is the same reason he is. Protecting someone he loves.

And Darius’s love for Sunday is fire and gunpowder. And he is willing to do anything he possibly can to allow it to ignite.



## Page 32

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 3:11 am*

B ang!

A distant gunshot causes Luna to startle, for her grip to loosen.

It is all I need, I buck up from below, wriggling against her as best as I can.

Luna isn't large, she's small and malnourished and clearly weak.

With her off balance, I manage to flip us until I am on top of her.

My hands find her wrists, pinning her down.

It is the wrong move to make—before, Luna was a dead-eyed girl, but now she is a wild creature.

She screeches and shakes, her panic overwhelming her system.

I jump off of her, my back hitting a wall, knocking my breath out of me.

Panting and coughing and heaving, it takes me a few minutes before I can finally get a grasp on what is happening. On Luna in the corner, arms wrapped around her knees as she rocks herself.

“Luna?” Confusion and uncertainty splice in my gut. I want to go to her, to comfort her. I want to run from her, to never see her again.

My empathy wins out.

“Are you okay? What’s going on? What do you mean one hundred lifetimes?” I think I know the answer. But I need her to say it. To confirm.

Luna remains silent for so long, I almost expect her not to speak at all. My ears hyper fixate on all the other sounds instead. I expect more signs of chaos after the shot went off, but it’s silent again, save for the fan above us .

A single jolt in an otherwise still chest.

Finally, she stops rocking, unwraps her arms, and unsteadily makes her way to her feet.

I stiffen, my hand attempting to find the razor in my pocket. I don’t want to hurt her. But I will if I have to.

Except it isn’t there.

I try to locate it in the dim light.

Should I run from her? What is going on?

“Sunday, this isn’t the first time you have been here,” Luna tells me.

She straightens, making her way to the wall the bulb is on, she cranes her neck all the way up towards it.

The light ignites her. The purple thread tangles around her several times, it pulsates and breathes. But underneath it is another thread.

Red.

As the purple moves, I can see it. A crimson cloak that shrouds her.

Dread wells inside of me.

I don't know what the red means exactly.

But it isn't good.

"Several months ago. Years? A decade? However you want to say it. There was a falling star. And I made a wish."

My heart pounds into my throat.

"When I was little, my momma promised me that no matter what happened if I was ever in trouble she would come for me. She promised me, Sunday. And why wouldn't I believe her?

She was larger than life. An FBI agent." Luna spins on her heel.

"And so, when I was taken out of this cage, when I was given my first fresh air in months, when I was hurt in a way I wouldn't wish on my worst enemy, when I was lying on my back, staring up and wanting to be anywhere else, I saw the shooting star.

And I made a wish. I wished for us to be reunited.

I wished to return to her. I wished with all my might. To escape this hell."

Luna opens her hand to reveal the razor. I tense.

She flips it over and over in her palms. "I kept them from touching you. Whenever

you made it here, which was more and more as time progressed, I kept you safe.”

Tears well up, blurring my vision. My mind races.

“You...you remember everything, don't you?” I ask.

Luna narrows her eyes, she squares her shoulders.

“They couldn't kill me, Sunday. But there are worse things than death.

I remember every time they came for me. And then the timeline would restart, but it didn't mean anything.

I couldn't change anything. I just had to wait and wait and wait and know .

Know that it would happen over and over again.

It didn't take long to find out your death triggered the restarts.

It wouldn't be immediate but usually within a day of it.

” Luna's voice is eerily steady as she continues.

I don't know what to do. What to say. And so I listen to her pain, her suffering.

“Sunday, I have been stuck in this hell in this horrible prison for years. I have done everything I could to help you remember. To be rescued. Anything I could fucking do. But I am a girl stuck in a cage in the pits of an inescapable nightmare. All because I followed a boy I loved to a party.” Luna tightens her hold on the razor blade.

I want to go to her, to hug her, to reassure her.

But if I were Luna. I would hate me.

Despise that I wasn't trapped here, that I was making her go through this over and over again.

"You found me the first time pretty early on in these loops, and it made me realize what would restart them. Your death. But I don't want to restart them anymore Sunday. I'm tired. I want to finally end this. I want to fulfill my wish. I want to reunite with my mother."

"She never stopped looking for you." I make my way to my feet. "We can leave. We can escape and never return here. We can end this."

A red thread wraps around the razor blade, it reaches out to Luna, spreads across her skin, a sinister crimson netting that covers the purple entirely now.

"We can't," Luna attests. "My mother is dead. And I've decided, I don't want to keep trying. I don't want to go through another loop. Another possibility."

Understanding hits me.

The boys carried out the plan early, they must have. That must be where everyone went, why this place is a ghost town.

At what Luna must think.

At what she is going to do.

I need to stop her. I need to stop all of this.

Because, in this moment, I know with certainty.

If Luna dies, we will have to go through all of this.

Again and again and again and again and again.

And again.

And again.

And again.

And again.

A series of bangs and crashes sound outside our cell, but I ignore them. Focusing on the woman before me.

“No Luna!” I’m jumping forward now.

I want to save her. I want to stop this loop. I want to march to my own beat.

To escape this insanity .

My head bangs against the brick wall as I fall onto her, the razor bouncing along the floor.

I register that Luna is okay as my vision darkens.

And just like that, I forge my own path.

The Wildflower.

## Page 33

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 3:11 am*

Rain falls around me, in large piercing pelts, it bounces off the road, but not my skin. Instead, it goes straight through me, onto the ground.

I can't exactly feel it, but my mind plays tricks on me and it isn't long before I am crawling out of my skin.

My head pivots, searching for clues of where I have landed this time.

A single flickering street light blinks through the otherwise darkness. The moon is covered by clouds and the storm that rages on around me.

A flash of lightning in the sky illuminates the area.

Déjà vu swallows me whole.

A flickering light. A bend. One side is a forest, the other is an embankment. The guard rail is bent.

It still hasn't been fixed.

Why am I here?

Why of all places am I where Tripp and Auggie were killed?

The questions move my feet closer and closer to the edge.

Just as I am about to look down, hands land on my shoulders.

I feel them. How cold and stiff they are, the roughness of the fingers digging into my shirt; they cause me to jump out of my skin.

“Sunday, you shouldn’t look.”

Flinching, I twist around. “Why are you here?” I ask.

It’s the last person I expect to see.

They raise their lips in a knowing smile. “One of us is going to die. ”

Staring at the space between us, I wait for a light to form, for it to guide me in this instance, just as it has so many times before.

It takes only a few seconds for the red strand to shine brightly through the darkened skies.

It wraps around us both, covers us in its weight, douses us in its essence.

I must have been dazed not to see it before, but now that I do, it nearly blinds me.

“What is going on? What is this? When did this happen?” My hands stretch out around me. “And why are you here?”

“It hasn’t happened... yet .” The hands that I had knocked from my shoulders, pull back further. The person steps back. “But we can’t stop it.”

“What does that even—”

They push me with all of their might, the red explodes around us, a million ashes in the sky tossing and tumbling.



I lose my balance, falling back, over the guardrail.

Lightning ignites around me as I tumble to my demise.

Down and down and down.

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Slap!

“Wake up you stupid girl!”

Slap!

“You’re not going to fucking die on me now! You idiot.”

Slap!

“Childish!”

Slap!

“Undeserving brat! ”

My eyes flash open, but it is nearly just as dark. It takes a few beats to understand where I am.

What’s going on?

I am somehow in Luna’s lap, her hand poised to hit my face again, my cheeks throb from her previous assault. My head pounds from where I hit it.

Seeing my eyes open now, she wraps her arms around me, hugging me to her. “Thank god. Thank god.” The red that shrouded her before has been completely replaced with purple ethereal threads.

“Luna, your mother’s alive,” I blurt out. “She isn’t dead.”

Luna flinches, her jaw clenching. “You don’t have to lie to me, Sunday. I heard the men shouting about it as they left. Carrie saw the news—” She pauses.

My heart climbs its way up my throat. My attention flashes to her body.

Carrie is dead.

That is a fact that I cannot change. But it hurts, nonetheless.

She didn’t deserve this. None of us do. I want to go to Carrie, to wrap her in my warmth, to shake her awake.

But I don’t. I need to focus on us. On the future. Need to figure out how Luna and I are going to make it out of here.

“We have to escape.” The crashes I heard before are gone now. “How long has it been? Has anyone come?”

Luna rolls her lips between her teeth, she bites down. “Half an hour, maybe. I was afraid you weren’t going to wake up at all. That this was all going to restart again.”

I can taste her terror. It suffuses into the air, it mixes with her pain and trauma. It crawls its way into my mouth, scurries along my tongue, slithers down my throat.

I gulp .

This poor fucking girl has been in this disgusting place for too long.

All because I was a stupid child.

All because I kept following the wrong strands of fate to my demise.

All because of a wish I made.

A wish with a horrible intent. I knew exactly what my desire meant. Knew exactly what I was longing for.

I had never admitted out loud, at least not in this timeline, but the truth of it is...

The wish I made?

It was to die.

And because of my own selfishness, because of that single wish, I had changed the course of all our lives.

Of Luna's.

Of Axel's.

Of Darius's.

Of Grayson's.

Of Julia's.

Of Carrie's.

Of Veronica's.

Of mine.

The guilt swallows me whole. My vision darkens at the edges again as my anxiety and panic consume me.

I am a vacuum taking in all that Luna expels. I owe it to her. This is my fault.

All of this.

“Snap out of it!”

Slap !

My cheek stings, and I focus on it. Use it to stabilize myself. Breathing in a few more times, I do my best to suture myself back together again. To not fall apart. There isn't time.

“I'm sorry,” I wheeze.

Luna levels me with an impressive glare, she straightens her shoulders. She pushes me off her lap and gets to her feet.

I'm not sure what I expect, but it isn't the hand she offers.

“I don't want a useless apology. I just need you to do better. To fix this.” She pauses, her fingers wrapping around my wrist. “You promise she's alive?” she whispers.

“Your mom is alive, Luna, this was a part of the plan.” I try to put as much conviction as I can into my words and it must have the needed effect as Luna loosens

her hold.

She steps back, her attention dances around the room, skipping from the razor blade, to Carrie, and back to me. “Then let’s get the fuck out of here.”

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 3:11 am*

“The FBI is going to be here soon, the Thornes have to know they’re on the way,” Axel growls.

Grayson jumps out of the truck, his boots crunching on the foliage. “We need to find her first. Get her to safety.”

But how?

It’s just past midnight now and they are in the middle of the Thorne’s property. They drive up and through the woods as far as they can, but it is too overgrown to take the vehicle any further.

“Axel.” Grayson retrieves the gun from his pocket. It isn’t the first time he’s held one. In several of the loops he had killed men—Rayden, Maxwell, Mark—but this was different.

There would be no do-overs. The person he shot would stay dead. There would be real life consequences.

And he would burden them. It was his duty, his job. He should have taken better care of his brothers. He should have never let Sunday out of his sight. He should have steered Augustus away from this town’s evil depths.

But he had failed them. All of them.

It was time for him to change that.

“If anything happens, I want you to promise me you will find Sunday and Darius, you will take them and you will run.” He twists to Axel .

He and Axel had always butted heads, even in their youth. They strayed further and further apart, and it was only Sunday’s appearance that had kept them together at all.

Axel grunts. “Not this time, Grayson. This time it’s all of us together. No one is going to be left behind. We are going to finish this. And get our god damn happily ever after. We fucking deserve it.”

Grayson wants to argue, but he knows better.

“What if we’re too late?” he whispers, rubbing his chest. Every foot closer to the Thorne’s land, the pain had subsided ever so gradually. It still hurt, but it wasn’t nearly as crippling.

“You can feel her too, can’t you?” Axel follows Grayson’s movement.

“My heart aches for her, but it’s not as bad now and I think”—Axel pauses—“this sounds crazy, but she saw the strands connecting us. What if...what if we can see them too? What if we can follow them directly to her? I’ve been trying to see it, but maybe...

maybe I can just feel it, you know? Like my body is telling me to go further this way.

” He points in the opposite direction of the Thorne’s main estate.

Grayson takes it all in, lets the idea circulate through him and land with ease. “I think you’re right,” he whispers.

The impossible task of finding her feels just a bit less hopeless now.

Axel and Grayson both knew that there were countless victims on the Thorne's estate. Knew they would be hidden securely away. Knew they would be nearly impossible to find. They hoped she was in the main estate and with the FBI's help they could locate the others, but maybe...

"Let's go," Axel says, marching away.

Maybe we can save her without their help. Get her out of here before everything goes to hell.

Grayson follows him, and just as Axel said, each step feels better than the last. Easier to breathe, lighter, brighter .

It's as if I am fulfilling some cosmic fate.

Above them the stars shine brightly.

A reminder of what is at stake.



*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 3:11 am*

This day is endless—or has another day passed? Another rotation of the Earth.

Time is different below the surface with nothing to guide us in its passage.

But I know with certainty that I am exhausted. Bruised. Sore. Aching in places that keep reminding me of Darius, of how much he must be hurting and worried.

Unfortunately, there's still more to do before I can rest.

We have to escape.

We quietly shoulder open the door of her prison, both of us whipping our attention up and down the hallway.

Before there was chaos outside, but now it is dead silent.

Too quiet.

“Nobody is here. What's going on?” The question leaves my lips with my breath, but Luna still hears it.

“You said the FBI is on their way?” Luna asks.

Pushing a bit further out, I exit her cell. My nerves are shot and frayed, but I dig past them. Focusing my attention on the three pulsating purple strands.

The O'Brien brothers. They are nearly all overlapping now.

Hope fills my belly.

I hope they found each other .

A few flickering lights above provide just enough for me to make out all the way to the door to the outside. It is sealed shut.

All the other doors in the hallway are still closed too. And there are still faint sounds coming from inside, but outside of that this dungeon is mute.

“Yes.”

Luna walks out in front of me. “It’s too quiet.” She echoes my thoughts exactly.

She cranes her head up, and I follow her gaze.

The fans that had previously been moving were providing us air.

They are still now.

“They’re going to kill us all.” She whips her eyes to mine, and I can see the dread that settles in their depths. “Bury the truth. If the FBI is on the way, they need to cover up as much evidence as they can. And dead victims can’t speak.”

Understanding lands in my chest. Horror. “They’re going to suffocate us.”

We’re completely underground. There isn’t any air except for those fans.

And now they’re not moving.

The silence is louder than the whirring had ever been.

I twist around, stare down the line of hallways.

“They’re all occupied,” Luna confirms, matter-of-factly.

Tugging the key out of my pocket, I flash it at her. “We need to save them. All of them.”

Luna sighs and reaches up, rubbing her temples. “But what will that do? They’ve probably sealed us in here. That key might open the doors in here, but it won’t do anything with those leading outside. They’re thick, metal.”

Hopelessness filters through, but then the purple strands draw my attention. The three leading outside pulsate heavier, stronger. They remind me of my connection, of our plan, of the fact that the O’Briens will find us. They won’t stop until we’re reunited.

I know it with certainty.

“Our rescuers will come. We just need to get everyone ready to go.”

Luna doesn’t look convinced but she doesn’t argue. “Fine, unlock the doors and I will help them out. Some might not be able to walk on their own.”

With our plan made, I make my way to the first door.

While I know the O’Brien brothers will come for us, I’m not sure that it will be in time.

## Page 36

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 3:11 am*

It takes a long time to open nearly one hundred doors, and by the time I make it to the last few closest to the exit, I am out of breath, my head foggy, my vision wisping at the edges.

Behind me is a testament to the evil that this dungeon is. Hundreds of countless victims in various states of distress. Some seem like they have arrived sooner, but others?

I recognize faces from my youth who disappeared. Over a decade ago.

“Hurry up!” Luna expels. “You two go try to find anything that can help open the door.”

There is a heavy coat of unease in the space. Most have realized the air is no longer circulating down here, but they aren’t panicking. Years of abuse have forced them to accept the inevitable.

Unlocking the final door, I tug it open.

And gasp.

While I had recognized countless others, and many had known me throughout the years, there is one that shocks me the most. Tiffany.

Maxwell’s last girlfriend. A cheerleader at my school, in my grade.

She leans against the brick wall, her features gaunt, sunken in.

Her cracked lips lift. “Sunday?”

I’m shocked she knows my name. We didn’t run in the same circles, but I push the thought aside as I make my way into her cell .

I reach out, offering her my hand. She takes it, but her grip is weak, and I have to maneuver around to get her off the ground.

And when she is, her knees buckle.

My heart breaks again. Just as it had with every victim that appeared from their cell. For the realization that this vile place has existed well before I was born. That it would have continued to exist well after I died.

But not anymore.

Exiting her cell, we look around. There are several people trying to knock open the door leading outside with their bare bodies, but it does nothing. Some have swapped to shouting and screaming.

The sounds are desperate and heartbreaking.

What if we freed them, just for us to all die down here together? How cruel is that?

The doors are solid metal; there isn’t even a knob, just a track on the floor for them to slide open.

“They’re magnetic locks, there has to be a release, but I have never seen it,” Luna advises as she watches the scene play out. She helps me with Tiffany and lowers her voice. “We don’t have much time. There are too many of us, and with no air flow...”

She lets the truth hang in the space between us.

I know the brothers will come, but how can they make it down here? What if there isn't a way to open it from the outside?

We can't die here.

"I know where it is," Tiffany says. "When I was first put down here, Maxwell showed me the room. Threw it in my face of how close I was to being able to escape, but that I never would." She shivers.

"It's right next to where the women's locker room is.

They leave it unlocked, it feels like a type of psychological torture.

Waving freedom in our faces. But it's basically a control room and there's a big red circular button inside that will open the door. "

My memory flashes to the cracked door I saw when I walked to The Play House from the locker rooms. It has to be the same one. "I know where that is. I'll go," I say.

Everything is going to be okay, we're all going to make it out of here.

Alive.

"I should come with you," Luna argues. "You can't be trusted not to get hurt."

I catch her eyes, pushing Tiffany's weight fully on Luna and freeing myself. Luna nearly falls to the ground before another girl comes up to help her.

But my point is proven. Luna is physically weak, and we both know it.

“I need to get there as fast as possible, we’re running out of time.” And we are. A headache has slowly been forming as time progressed, and now it’s stabbing me in the temple.

I don’t know all of the signs of oxygen deprivation, but I imagine this is the start of it.

Luna frees herself from Tiffany with the help of another woman.

I expect her to argue, but instead she holds out her hand, as if to drop something.

Placing mine under hers, I feel the cool metal of the razor.

She bends forward whispering in my ear. “There’s no way this is the only way in, be careful Sunday. And remember if you die, so do we. Again. ”

“No pressure,” I murmur, wrapping my fingers carefully around the blade.

Side-stepping Luna I make my way down the hall, back to the horseshoe room .

“When the doors open, you all need to run. Do not wait for me,” I cast over my shoulder.

“We won’t,” Luna agrees. “But Sunday.”

I twist back to face her, she is watching me with a deep sadness.

“Please make it out of here too, okay?”

I don’t answer her as I continue my way down the hall. Most of those that we had let out are crowding towards the front, but there are a few stragglers that stand listlessly just outside their cages, as if they are dolls, empty and waiting for the next person to

use them.

The thought is nearly debilitating, so instead, I focus on the here and now. I am going to open the door. I am going to get everyone out of here. The brothers will find us. The FBI will keep us all safe.

I'm inside the horseshoe room now, sprinting down the stairs, making my way back from whence I came. Repeating my exact steps as before.

Down in the dark depths of the concrete hallway with the flickering bulb, I walk briskly to the cracked door. The same one as before.

My heart is pounding out of my chest, my forehead is sweating, my palms cool and clammy, my temple pounding with each step.

But when I make it inside the room, when I see the big red button, when I slam my palm onto it and watch through the CCTV as the metal doors slide open, all of my previous anxiety and unease filters out of me.

Until the door behind me slams shut, and I scream.



*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 3:11 am*

Where is she?

He has been circling the same spot for longer than he wants to acknowledge, but he can't find the entrance. But he knows she is nearby. Can practically feel her. It is causing his blood to pulsate with unused energy.

In the distance, sirens have ignited the night and Darius knows he's running out of time before this entire place turns sideways. Circling back one more time, he closes his eyes and simply allows his feet to guide him.

And that's how he finds the entrance. He runs into it, literally. Rubbing his head with one hand and drawing back vegetation with the other, a metal door reveals itself. It is built into a tree and is nearly impossible to find if you don't already know where it is.

Or have some innate power tugging me towards the girl I love.

Stomping behind him draws his attention, and he twists uneasily.

"You! What are you doing out here?" a guard yells.

Darius doesn't recognize one of the men that is pointing a gun at his face.

But the other, he does.

Disbelief and shock are knives that stab him over and over again.

"I'm Sterling's son." He puts his hands up, pretending he doesn't recognize either of

the men. “I’m here on his order. ”

The two men exchange a look. From this distance, Darius can’t tell if they believe him or not. It is too dark and the trees are much thicker here, leaving no room for the moonlight to trickle through.

The man he recognizes twists back first. “You and I both know better than that,” Rick sneers, leveling his gun at Darius. “No hard feelings boy. Surely your father will understand it’s better off if you don’t make it out of here.”

Darius doesn’t have the chance to think of an exit strategy before two gun shots ring out.

He winces, expecting pain, but when there is nothing, he rolls his lips and flares his nostrils, exhaling heavily.

The two men who had been questioning him slump to the ground and from behind them, Axel and Grayson step out.

A smile and relief spark to life.

“Thank fuck, I needed to see him die,” Axel exclaims, shifting his attention towards Darius. “There you are!” He runs up, gathering Darius into his arms.

“Darius,” Grayson says. “I’m happy to see you here, but where is Sunday?”

Axel lets go of him and looks around. “She isn’t with you? Where is she? Is she okay?” The questions are fired rapidly, growing increasingly desperate and their happy reunion is short-lived.

Darius’s joy at seeing his brothers transforms into guilt.

“We were separated after–” He can’t speak it into existence.

At least not yet. The others will need to know what he was made to do.

And if they can’t forgive him? Well, he would worry about that once they were reunited with Sunday.

“She’s down there, I just found the door. ”

He turns back and wastes no more time in opening it. Inside is complete and utter darkness, but Axel whips out his phone’s flashlight .

Down and down they go.

The stairs are steep, but they all move swiftly. They are shrouded in complete silence save for their footsteps. But the closer they get to what Darius thinks should be the end, they all start to hear it.

Distant screams.

The brothers exchange a look but continue on. Until they make it to the bottom of the stairs. To the locked and closed metal door. To the body that lies just outside of it. A hole in her chest from where she must have been shot.

Darius recognizes the dead woman. Sterling’s official wife. Maxwell and Rayden’s mother. She had never really been shown to the public, but Darius had crossed paths with her the first time he was taken down here.

Henrietta.

She was just another victim, and a reminder no one was safe here.

A wave of sadness pierces his heart. Followed by crippling anxiety.

Sunday is okay. She's okay. She has to be.

"Now what?" Axel yells. "The doors are sealed shut! What are we supposed to do? We can't open—"

And then as if by magic, the metal doors creak and groan as they glide open.

The brothers all step back, unsure of what is on the other side.

But then Luna walks into view.

"You must be the infamous O'Brien brothers." She lets out a sardonic laugh. "Took you long enough," she says. "Is the FBI here yet?"

"Where's Sunday?" Axel blurts.

"Answer me first," Luna snaps, wobbling on her feet.

"Yes, they're here," Darius advises. "Now please, where is she? Is she okay? "

"Go get your girl. She's in the control room. But there's no air down here, you need to find her soon. Get us out of these fucking loops!"

She steps aside, using the wall for strength, and gestures for them to continue. Her words hit him, the weight of what they mean, but Darius doesn't pause to question her, he maneuvers through the crowd of captives before he takes off sprinting.

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 3:11 am*

Whipping around I come face to face with Mark.

“What are you doing here?” I ask.

His lips quirk. “Little innocent Sunday School. What are you doing here? Do you know I was in the crowd when Darius fucked you raw?” He takes a menacing step closer, his greasy hair shifting into his eyes. “Listening to your moans.” His hand comes up, but I flinch back.

There isn’t much space in this room. Besides the CCTVs and the table with an array of buttons, there’s only a couple of feet.

He must have been waiting here for me, behind the door.

“I saw you coming,” he confirms. “The Thornes sent me to turn off the air and Maxwell told me to get you. But imagine my surprise when I watched on the cameras as you released all the prisoners. He would understand that I couldn’t retrieve you and I was just about to leave, but then as luck would have it, I saw you heading my way. ”

I haven’t ever spoken to Mark before, at least not that I remember. But he is the one who handed Julia that drink. He is the one who raped Carrie. He is the one who sent Axel to prison.

He is at the center of every single horrible instance in my life. And maybe in some ways he isn’t as bad as Maxwell.

But in others?

He's much, much worse .

"You're a monster." My fingers tighten around the razor as my vision fades in and out around the edges. My chest is heavy as the air is quickly stolen from this room.

Mark bares his teeth. "A monster that is going to stretch your holes and tear you open."

And he means it. It is in the set of his jaw, the smug pursing of his lips, the way his eyes trace my movements.

I can tell that Mark has been waiting for this, wanting me for longer than he cares to admit. Not because he has some obsession with me, no, because he wants to control me, break me. Ruin me.

Just as he has countless women before me.

But there isn't any time for this. To argue. "Okay, do what you want to me. But you have to promise to let the others go free."

Mark's cheeks tighten as his lips lift up.

He bends over until we are eye level. His slimy breath fans across my face.

"What a good little Sunday School. Maxwell was right, you don't have much fight in you do you?"

You're just a bitch in heat, forcing everyone else to protect you. But that's good because—"

I will never know what Mark was going to say, nor do I care.

The razor blade leaves a trail in its wake as I swipe it quick and hard across his neck.

The blood splatters across my face, clothes, and skin. A testament to what I've done.

It is with an odd satisfaction that I watch as the life drains from him, as the desperation in his eyes is replaced with terror and understanding. As his mouth twitches to scream, but he can't. As every piece of him dissolves into nothing .

It doesn't take long before he slumps to the ground, twitching on his way down. I step back as far as I can to avoid him. I do not focus on the immense satisfaction I feel as he stills on the ground.

Burying my emotions and paying it no mind, I twist around. I need to turn the air back on. The access may be open to the outside, but it isn't enough air for where I am.

Maybe if my mind were working properly I would open the door to this control room, but it isn't.

My head is filled with cotton balls, my legs are shaking beneath me, and my vision is fading in and out. I can't catch my breath, each inhale more difficult than the last.

I need air. I am suffocating.

## Page 39

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 3:11 am*

“ Sunday?” My name rings out in the air, distant and unsettling, but I am in a thick inescapable fog.

In fact, I could be imagining the voice altogether. Ignoring it, I continue to search for the button in this room that turns the air back on, but I am having no luck.

“Sunday?!” My name is more frantic this time and it nearly draws my attention, but I keep my sole focus on the task at hand.

My vision is darkening, my legs are gelatinous.

There are too many thoughts that I could have that would cripple me and there isn't time for any of that. Instead I focus on one.

I need to turn the air back on.

I need to turn the air back on.

I need to—

My knees finally give out and I have to hold onto the table to keep myself from falling onto Mark's body.

I need to turn the air back on.

Stretching, I desperately search for anything that would indicate it's for the air flow, but besides the big red button, I can't see anything.



I need to turn the air back on.

I need to turn the air back on.

My head is heavy and it lands on my arms as I slide slowly down to the ground.  
Landing on a cushioned surface .

Why didn't I want to be down here? It's so nice and comfortable.

What did I need to do again?

My mind is disjointed, nonsensical. It is an endless game of telephone echoing from one second to the next.

"She's in here!"

There's banging and crashing.

"There's so much blood!"

Sturdy arms wrap around me, cradling me in their warm and familiar embrace.

"Sunday?" The word should mean something, but it doesn't. It is absurd.

Laughter bubbles up out of my lips, echoes around us.

"It's not hers. It's his. Good fucking riddance. We need to get her out of here. The FBI is here. We can't let her get caught up in the system for his murder. Luna will lead them to this underground prison, to the evidence of all their mother fucking crimes."

I am moving now, or at least I think I am. It is hard to tell with my clouded sight. Perhaps I'm not moving but just dizzy. Maybe it's both?

“Can we just pretend we weren't here? Won't there be evidence? DNA?”

“There's too much to sort through down here. And if anything, Jane said she would handle it.”

The voices are more and more distant as they continue on, even though I know they're right next to me.

Does that even make any sense?

“We just need to leave and figure this out after. She will be okay once she's outside and rested.”

A familiar hum starts up, it is comforting and chaotic.

Reminds me of a happy time when I was much younger .

My lips lift on their own, and I snuggle further into the arms that hold me.

Nothing is making any sense, but that's okay, because I know with certainty.

I am safe.

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 3:11 am*

“ I f she doesn’t wake up soon, we’re taking her to the hospital.”

“So then the FBI can know she was there, so she can be interrogated and thrown into a fucking cell away from us? So she can go away for Mark ? Just get oxygen delivered or get a home nurse or some shit. We’re in modern times, why can’t we bring the hospital to our house?”

A warm hand is squeezing mine and the smells surrounding me are familiar. My head hurts , but it is manageable.

My body feels as if I have been compressed into a tiny foam ball and is slowly expanding back to where it needs to be. The sensation is nearly cathartic.

Blinking a few times, I find myself in my room at the O’Brien’s house. Axel and Grayson are at the foot of the bed arguing, but Darius holds me wrapped in his secure embrace. It is eerily familiar to so many months ago when I woke up just like this.

“The purple strands are gone,” I say, my voice cracking. They were a comfort, and I feel bare, lost, without them. A wave of unease and anxiety circulates through me.

Darius squeezes his arm tighter around me and Axel and Grayson whip around to face me.

Their faces are coated in concern, pinched brows, flattened lips, clenched jaws.

“I’m okay,” I say. “We’re okay. ”

Axel clearly doesn't believe me, but he remains silent. Watching me with a critical intensity instead.

"No, you're not okay, Sunday." Grayson stares down at me.

"Come on Wildflower, let's get you cleaned up." Darius readjusts, helping me out of the bed.

Neither of the other brothers move an inch, allowing Darius to physically lift me out of the bed, to carry me to the bathroom.

He sets me gently down on the counter, but I stretch out, grabbing hold of his shirt.

"Don't leave me." I'm scared.

Not of Darius, but of what will happen if I'm left alone.

But I don't voice that part. I don't want to admit it out loud.

Darius brushes my hair behind my ears, gathers my cheeks in his hands and stares directly into my soul.

"Sunday, I am never, ever going to be separated from you again. I love you, Wildflower. You are so brave and strong and you are everything I never hoped to dream of. But we need to get you cleaned up, get you out of these clothes. Are you sure you're okay if I help you with this part?

After...after what happened?" His eyes turn glassy as he speaks.

It's my turn to lift my hands up and cup his cheeks. "Darius, you made an impossible encounter as good as it possibly could be. I will never blame you for that. Never

blame you for who your father is. I love you.”

He breathes out, heavy and long. As if he were holding the air in his lungs waiting for me to abscond him of his guilt.

He drops his hold on me, but I focus on his eyes. How deep and dark the circles are under them, how he is clearly exhausted. “But you should blame me. I’m a Thorne. I fucked you on a stage in front of—”

Leaning forward, I cut him off with my lips. Pressing and pushing as much as I can into the kiss. My feelings, my emotional turmoil, how much I care about him, how I don’t blame him at all. And when enough time passes that I feel I have gotten the message across, I pull back.

“We’ll just have to do that again. Under better circumstances,” I say. Glancing down at myself for the first time, I see that I am still in the silky pajamas I was in before. Except now they’re sprayed in blood.

Darius follows my gaze and his lips hook downwards. “You shouldn’t have had to do that.”

It takes several beats to realize what he means. Even more to remember exactly what I had done. There is a thick cloud between the memory and me. As if I wasn’t myself in that instance, but someone else entirely.

“Can I get cleaned up now?” I ask in a small voice.

Darius doesn’t answer, instead helping me off the counter.

He turns to start the shower and I discard the offending clothes off my body.

I understand why they might not have wanted to change me while I was unconscious, but I almost wish they had.

The clothes themselves are an unwelcome memory and the blood spattered across them is even more so.

When Darius twists back around, I don't think he expects me to be fully naked, and his mouth opens in surprise.

"Wildflower," he warns. "What are you doing?"

"Shower with me?" I reach forward slowly so that he can stop me and tug up on his shirt.

Darius eyes me warily. "Okay, but just because I don't trust you to not fall in here. Since you have a habit of it."

A soft chuckle escapes me at the memories.

He's not wrong.

Shedding the rest of his clothes, he helps me into the shower, and I do my best to keep my attention on his face. I want more than anything to rewrite my first encounter with Darius, to supersede it with a hundred better ones, but right now I just want to get clean. To wash away the blood .

Mark's blood.

"I killed Mark," I say levelly. Testing the words as they leave my lips.

"You did," Darius confirms, lathering his hands in soap before using them to begin

cleaning my body, massaging my muscles, wiping away the horrible memories.

“Carrie was killed.”

Darius flinches. “I was afraid she had been. Veronica was expecting her to return, and she never did.”

“Veronica? Is she okay?”

Darius’s attention flicks above my left shoulder. “She is. She and William escaped before the FBI showed up.”

His words land uneasily in my stomach, but then he’s cleaning the apex of my thighs and it draws my attention.

Humming my appreciation, I lean further into his touch. I watch as his cock hardens to attention, as my body affects his just as much as his affects mine. It is a heady realization, but I push it down.

Later.

We will have endless time later.

But isn’t that the same thought that caused Darius and I’s first time to end up the way it did?

“Luna was caught in the loops too,” I say.

I expect shock, but instead his lips twitch. “That explains what she said.” He shrugs a shoulder, the water bouncing off his skin.

“I think we have finally escaped the loops. All of the threads are gone. I think...I think they were different strands of fate I was following.”

Darius smiles but doesn't answer, as he continues cleaning me.

His cock presses into my belly, my attention shifts to it. To how girthy and difficult it was to get in, to how deliciously full I felt when he was inside of me, to how we deserve to rewrite our first encounter .

Tentatively my fingers reach out on their own, finding the tip.

Darius hisses between his teeth. “Sunday.”

Spurred on by his reaction I continue my exploration up his length, and then back to the tip, tracing the end with my fingertips.

Darius is no longer washing me. Instead, his hands find my hips, squeeze onto them. His fingers digging into the bones there.

The feeling is exquisitely grounding. A reminder that we are alive. That we are here, together .

“Darius.” Releasing him, I look up at him through my eyelashes, the water from the shower catches and I blink it away. “I want you. I want to show you how much, without a crowd, without the pressure, without the force. Just us.”

Darius leans forward, his lips pressing to my forehead. “You don't need to prove anything.”

“Darius,” I expel. “I can't exist on your words. They fill me up with air, with wants and desires. But it's you who I need. I need you in a way that transcends the chaos



that enshrouds us.”

Darius groans. “What happened, Sunday? How did this all change so fast? When I left you were a grieving teenager and now? Now you’re ready? Don’t you understand why I wouldn’t believe you?”

Averting my attention, I focus on the tub; it's clean, the porcelain unblemished, a stark difference to the one in my childhood home.

The one where I first processed through my grief.

"But it wasn't quick or sudden. I think the lifetimes, the loops, it all caught up to me.

I still don't remember everything, I can feel parts of myself missing, but time has warped. It's stretched and extended. Auggie’s and Tripp’s deaths are both a recent and distant memory.

But I know in my heart that I'm not doing wrong by either. That maybe this isn't normal, but my love for you?

For Axel? For Grayson? It was inescapable.

After all, doesn't it feel like in some ways that's the only reason I'm alive?”

Darius's lips brush against mine. "Maybe you're right. But still—"

"No! I'm not playing this game with you anymore, Darius. I know you are sweet and kind. But I also can feel your cock pressing into me. Know that you want me. So be honest. Tell the truth, I fucking need to hear it!" The shower is blinding me, heating my icy veins, but it is Darius who ignites it. Who frays and tangles my nerves.

"You want the truth, Sunday?" And then he's on me.

The smooth tip of his cock pressing harder into my skin, his long fingers wrapping around the back of my neck.

"The truth is that I enjoyed every fucking second of your cunt soaking me. Of stretching you. Of your little moans and whimpers as I forced my way into you. Of breeding you . Of my cum filling you up. The truth? I wanted to run off that stage and pluck out the eyes of every person who caught a glimpse of you. The truth?" He slams his lips into mine, painful, harsh.

"I want more than anything to take you again. To have you here and now."

His confession is both shocking...and relatable.

Axel wears his crazy on his sleeve, but just as he said, they had to all be half mad to endure the time loops.

Darius may not portray it outwardly, but it is in his energy, the way his eyes never leave my form, the humming of his body as it leans further into mine.

"Then do it," I taunt him, rocking upwards, attempting to find the desperate relief I crave. "Fuck me, Darius. Exactly how you want to." I don't know where my courage comes from. But once the words bubble up, I mean them. "Use me. Freely. You have my consent."

"Wildflower," Darius warns. "You don't know what you're agreeing to." He cups my cheek with his hand, turning the water off behind me .

Instinctively, I know that if this moment ends, some fundamental part of our relationship will be flawed. An imbalance of power. A lack of equilibrium.

Darius will forever be guilty for what he did...and so will I.

We rescued countless victims so I can't truly regret it. But I can acknowledge I'm the reason he was forced to lose his virginity on a stage. I'm the reason everything went sideways. I'm the reason for his guilt.

With the water gone, we are just two naked adults standing skin to skin. Pushing from the wall, further into him, I jut out my chin.

"I do," I advise. And I do. I understand that allowing Darius to freely use me is terrifying, but it is also exhilarating . It is a gift I want to provide, it is a step in the correct direction.

A way to find our way back to each other without any of the guilt. A lifeline in an otherwise rocky boat.

"Sunday." Darius's fingers find my chin, he tips my head left and right, examining every piece of my face. "Fuck, what are you doing to me? I don't want to be like him. I don't want to hurt you."

Narrowing my eyes, I stare as directly into Darius's as he allows. "You are nothing like that man. This is consent. I am giving it. And if I say stop. That means I am taking it back."

Darius pulls away and turns to get out of the shower.

Rejection and anxiety twist a deep knife in my stomach. I didn't realize how much I expected— needed —Darius to agree until he doesn't.

He quickly dries off before twisting around with a towel, offering it to me.

Reaching out to take it, he catches my wrist, his eyes darken. “You say stop, or you tap me three times, just like this.” He offers a sample to my wrist.

Heat furls deep and heavy into me. A relief so sweet I nearly implode .

I jerk my head.

It’s all he needs, and then Darius drags me unceremoniously out of the shower, into the towel, into his arms. He wraps it around me, drying me, his strong hands repeating the motions of before when he washed me.

Except this time the intent is completely different. He is harsher, more sensual in his movements.

He pauses between the apex of my thighs, he watches me with a fierce intensity as he drops the towel to the ground.

As the rough pads of his fingers find my sensitive skin.

As his other hand moves to my ass, stroking it before digging his fingers into me and dragging me to him.

“Sunday,” he groans, cupping my cunt. “Do you know what you do to me? Do you know how much I have wanted to trace every piece of you, to memorize every blemish, to kiss away every bad memory?” Dropping to his knees and burrowing himself between my thighs, he plunges a finger into me.

Arching into him, I let out a mewl. My nails find his shoulders, digging into the skin there.

Darius is the sweetest, the softest of the brothers. But in some ways he is the most

broken, the most ruined. He has taken on the weight of a world that does not deserve him, on the guilt of his existence, and he has treated it as a challenge each and every day.

It is why he will always be my safe place.

It is why I trust him as he pushes another finger into me.

It is why I am able to relax even as he readies me for him.

And it is why I will always, always love him.

## Page 41

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 3:11 am*

“ Y ou’re still too tight, Wildflower.” Darius’s cock is hard as steel; it has been for longer than is comfortable.

But he isn't going to fuck her until she is ready. Until he can only hear her pleasure.

Darius wants more than anything to bring her to the edge over and over again. To memorize every spot that makes Sunday twitch. But right now, he is desperate to make her feel good on their terms. To make her come, just for him. Without a crowd watching their every move.

Hooking his fingers further into her, his teeth scrape against her clit.

She offers a soft groan, her legs buckling.

He files away the information, applying more pressure with his mouth, angling his fingers differently.

This time her knees nearly give out, and he reaches behind her, gripping her ass, keeping her up and pressed into him. Her nails dig deeper into his skin in an intoxicating manner as he rhythmically plunges in and out of her.

She begins to tense and tighten around him, and he knows it isn't much longer.

I should just leave her here, dangling on the edge.

But Darius doesn't have it in him, he would much rather watch her come over and over again than withhold it from her .

He lashes out his tongue ring against her clit and growls against it, a mimicry of what he did before.

“Darius!” she lets out a hushed scream as she convulses around his fingers. Tightening and squeezing them in a vice grip.

He imagines his cock in their place. Remembers how he felt buried inside of her. How it was more than he could have dreamed or hoped for.

Fuck.

Sunday’s mewls, the feel of her soft skin, the sight of her supple curves, the memory of being inside of her, it’s nearly enough to push him to his own release.

He's getting off on her pleasure.

He shuts his eyes, focusing on how she continues convulsing as he doesn’t let up on her clit. How her body trusts his implicitly.

Even if it shouldn't.

The thought is jarring. His guilt is a coiled snake deep in his gut. He does not regret his encounter with Sunday, he just wishes...

“Darius.” Soft fingers bury into his wet hair, desperately trying to pull him away.

He whips his attention back to the present. His guilt offers nothing for the beautiful woman before him.

The one who is practically begging. The one who is barely standing. The one who is drenching his fingers.

He unwillingly withdraws from her. He catches her attention as he puts his drenched fingers in his mouth. Cleaning off her essence with his tongue.

Sunday's eyes widen, her pupils dilating.

Darius's lips curve upwards mischievously. "Free. Use?" He places his hands on her bare waist. His rough fingers at odds with her smooth skin. He strokes her with the pads of his thumbs .

Her breathing turns more erratic as she waits for him.

He leans forward as if to kiss her, but then he lifts her and turns, placing her on the empty counter next to the sink.

"Stay right here," he commands her.

She puffs her cheeks in an adorable pout, her chest heaving as she comes down from her pleasure. Darius's attention falls to her full breasts, but he whips his eyes away, he opens the drawer beside her and pulls out a condom.

"Why are those everywhere?" Sunday asks.

Darius laughs. He's not sure how to explain Axel's insistence that they needed condoms in every room. That Darius thought it a ridiculous notion until this very instant.

But it turns out, he doesn't need to.

"Axel." Sunday's lips twitch. "He might be the most annoying, but I have a feeling you and Grayson needed it."



Darius quirks his lips as he slides the condom into place.

But then his memory catches on their first time.

“What if I got you preg—”

Sunday cuts him off, “Carrie gave me a plan B.”

Darius isn't sure exactly how to answer. On one hand he wants more than anything to fill Sunday with his cum, for her to be pregnant with his child. But they're so fucking young.

The loops were literal years, but it wasn't as if they were living. It was time for them all to slow down. To enjoy each other.

And then maybe down the road they could have the conversation, but the brothers already discussed they would leave it up to Sunday.

“The date.” Sunday is staring at his tattoos. Her hand outstretched towards it.

The wildflower and the date .

August 14th.

“It's not for Axel and Tripp's birthday, is it?”

Darius steps forward until she's brushing his skin. “No. It's a reminder of what we were fighting for. Who. ”

She traces the lines of the fourteen before skipping to the wildflower, beginning at the top and working her way down the stem.

His hand whips out, covering hers. “Sunday. I think you're ready, but if you need me to stop?”

“Stop,” she confirms haughtily.

Her attitude hits Darius in the gut. He takes it as a challenge.

His plan twists.

He yanks her unceremoniously off the counter and flips her around.

Now she's bent over the counter, facing the mirror. His eyes take in her breasts as they bounce from his jostling. He lines up behind her, bending his knees until he is the perfect height.

With the condom on, with how he readied her, with how drenched she is, it isn't as hard this time to work his way inside her. But with this angle?

She is suffocating his dick. It is the most earth-shattering feeling and it takes everything for him to not cum as soon as he is fully sheathed inside her.

She tries to escape him, but there's nowhere to go. She's trapped between him and the counter.

And the mirror.

Fuck , watching her from this angle is hypnotic.

The heat in her cheeks, her mouth opened on a silent scream, her pink nipples hardened to points.

“Rub your clit,” he commands her.

He allows her the space to do so, and then he finds his handles .

He digs into her hip with a hand and his other cups one of her heavy breasts.

He watches through the mirror as she does as he commands, feeling the evidence as she tightens around him.

He is still barely inside of her, seated, but not moving. He wants to give her time to acclimate, for her body to accept that he is going to do his best to ruin her.

“Are you ready?” he growls into her ear.

“ No .” The word is broken by him withdrawing and slamming back into her.

The garbled scream doesn't sound like the word stop.

And so he continues.

He thrusts into her, up and angled into the spot his fingers found before. He begins with small short bursts and then swaps to long hard snaps. He doesn't exactly know what he's doing, but he uses her body as a guide. The way she strangles his dick, her wanton moans, her unfocused eyes.

A delayed detonation.

His own pleasure finds him hard and fast. His desire hitting past the point of no return before he can catch it.

He stares into her eyes poised to plunge again. “Sunday, I love you.”

“I love you t—”

And then he is pounding into her, handling her as he wants, stamping into her. Exceeding their last encounter, dissolving any residual pain, he wants this to be more memorable.

She is attempting to mute her sounds, but eventually he has to release her hip and cover her mouth instead.

But still he doesn't let up. There isn't time. And just as he is afraid he won't get her there, her body tenses and spasms around his. Her eyes watering as she cries out in pure bliss. Her hot breath fanning his palm as he finds his own release.

For a few minutes, they stay just like that, with him buried inside of her as they pant into the air. Both sticky and naked.

He feathers kisses on her neck as he gently pulls out of her.

“One more quick shower to clean up?” He offers her his hand.

She takes it, squeezing him reassuringly, and then she dives at him.

Darius catches her. She peppers kisses across his skin. Offering him comfort and love and warmth.

More than he deserves. More than he is accustomed to.

She wraps her arms around him and rests her head on his chest.

“Yes, please.” She sighs softly.

Darius can physically feel as she heals a deep dark part of himself.

He doesn't truly forgive himself, not yet.

But he knows one day he will.

## Page 42

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 3:11 am*

The brothers are— thankfully —gone when we exit the bathroom. I didn't expect that from Darius, but it felt...fuck.

I don't even have the words. I never envisioned the sweetest of the brothers to handle me so roughly. It was hot, addicting, and I can't wait for him to lose his cool like that again.

My face is flushed, my skin scrubbed raw, a deep ache between my legs, and I feel a bit unsteady on my feet, but it's much better now. As if I am one step closer to being rid of the terrible nightmare I stumbled my way into.

Changing into comfortable clothes, I go to the box of keepsakes I have and tug Auggie's hoodie on. But then my attention catches on the rest of the items inside. On Tripp's and Auggie's.

My grief, which had for so long been kept at bay, hits me two-fold. Followed abruptly by guilt.

"I know." Darius steps behind me, wrapping his arms around my waist and resting his chin on my shoulder.

"I know on so many levels this is fucked up. And I know it's a cop out, but when Tripp knew everything was getting bad, he told us to be there for you.

Told us he wouldn't blame us if we fell for you.

We thought he was joking at the time, didn't take him seriously, but then...

well then he died. And I'll be honest Sunday, in some ways I blamed you in the beginning of these loops.

But then I saw what Tripp meant, and I couldn't help myself.

I fell so hard and so deep for you, it nearly consumed me.

Your deaths nearly destroyed me. And I wish we could bring Tripp back, wish we could bring Auggie back, but we can't.

We just have to keep pushing forward everyday and hold onto them as parts of ourselves. ”

“But why couldn't we save them?” It's only Darius's arms holding me up now.

My vision is blurry as tears drop to my cheeks.

“Why was it just me? Why did everyone else have to die? Tripp? My brother? Julia? Carrie? Countless others. Why was I the only one who got a redo? The only one who escaped unscathed?” I twist in Darius's hold, my face landing on his chest, my tears leaving a trail on his shirt.

“You aren't unscathed. But I know, Sunday.

I know it isn't fair. It doesn't make any sense.

And the more you try to think about it, the worse it is.

But I don't think you were ever meant to die.

And I think the universe knew that. Knew that you needed to live.

Knew that we wouldn't survive without you.

Some things are just meant to be. And you living is one of them. ”

“But I wished to die, Darius!” The confession is heavier than I expected it to be.

It is the weight of the world pressing into my heart and soul. It is the assertion that my selfishness caused the suffering of countless others.

Darius shifts his hold, grabbing me by the shoulders instead, and for a moment, I am terrified that he will discard me. That the truth of it all will be what finally ruptures us apart.

But instead he holds me in place just a few inches away. His eyes scorching mine.

“Sunday, you are so strong and so incredibly resilient. But when you made that wish? When you felt so low and so empty? You were an eighteen year old girl who had just lost her first love and her brother. You didn't know how all of this would turn out, you didn't know what it meant.

How can you blame yourself for the universe's fluke?

How can you blame yourself when you have sacrificed yourself over and over again to right the wrongs of this town? ”

“But I didn't die. I'm still here.”

“You did! You died ninety-nine times.” Darius is speaking against my lips. His hot breath fanning my skin.

“But I came back to life.”



“You did,” he agrees. “But you remembered. A piece or part of you always remembered the worst parts. There was one loop where I yelled at you, I screamed in your face. Not because it was your fault, but because I was angry at the world. And the next go round, you were terrified of me. Afraid I blamed you. Maybe you’re alive.

Maybe we all are. But you cannot say that you escaped unscathed. ”

I want to argue, to disagree. But he’s right. Pieces of myself are tarnished, blemished, unrecognizable.

“I—”

“What do you mean?!” Axel’s voice carries from downstairs, loud and angry, filled with venom.

Darius and I exchange a look before he crushes me to him one last time. “Come on. Let’s see what’s going on.” He pulls us apart, but takes my hand, squeezing it, and leads me from the room.

I may never forgive myself fully for my wish. I may never be completely assuaged of my guilt.

But I will do everything I can to right the wrongs of this town.

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The scene in the living room is not what I expected.

“Luna?” I ask, dropping Darius’s hand I run the last steps to her.

“Don’t hug me, you buffoon,” she says as I squeeze her in my arms. “You idiotic girl that can’t stay alive. You’re worse than a fucking dodo!” But her arms wrap around me, tugging me tighter to her. “But you did it. You finally fucking saved us.”

We pull apart, and my attention catches on Agent Jane Franz; her mother. Her eyes crinkle at the edges, and her lips lift in the softest of smiles.

“Thank you, all of you. Especially you, Sunday. I know you took a risk, but I am so grateful for it. I finally have my daughter back.” She pulls me into a hug next, but it is much briefer.

When she lets me go, I am wrenched backwards by another set of arms.

Axel’s.

He yanks me onto his lap, and I attempt to move, but he doesn’t allow me to.

“Stay right here,” he growls into my ear. “I haven’t forgiven you yet for this half-baked plan.”

Jane cocks an eyebrow but doesn’t speak as she settles onto the chair across from us, Luna remains standing, crossing her arms over her chest. Grayson stands opposite her, nearly replicating her pose. He offers me a reassuring smile .

Darius enters the room and casts a glance around before settling next to Axel, his hand landing on my bare thigh.

Once we are all situated, Luna is the first to speak. “Well as my mom was just saying, they haven’t found Maxwell yet, but they assume he is amongst the dead.”

Darius tenses next to me but remains silent, his rough fingers digging into my skin just a bit.

“How can we be sure?” It is Grayson who snaps this time. “Why hasn’t it been confirmed with the public if he was among the dead?”

Jane heaves a sigh. “This is an ongoing investigation. The names of the deceased will be released as soon as we are capable. But I am being kept mostly in the dark due to my affiliation.”

“What happened?” I ask.

“The Thornes got caught,” Jane explains.

“Finally. And not only them, there have been dozens implicated already and it’s only been a day.

We are working through the evidence, but they kept video of most of the crimes committed.

And it won’t be long before more witnesses and victims come forward.

The Thornes fabricated blackmail against most of this town, used it as a way to buy their silence, to continue on their nefarious ways, but now that Sterling is behind bars?

Federal bars? The threats that kept their silence hold no merit. We did it. You all did it.”

“How did the FBI come so quickly? What made them buy that you were dead?” My curiosity is stamping out my unease.

“Veronica,” Grayson says.

Darius’s fingers dig further into my thigh, nearly on the cusp of pain. I place one of my hands over his, giving him a reassuring squeeze. I’m sure this isn’t easy for him to hear either.

Jane quirks her lips. “The girl, Veronica, she called in the anonymous tip along with a video that appeared to show me shot down in front of the Thorne’s estate.

All a ruse that Axel and Grayson here played out perfectly.

When the backup arrived and they couldn’t find my body, but located my bloodied car, it caused them to search further.

When Axel and Grayson advised you were safe, I revealed myself.

Played off the video as one of his men attempting to gun me down.

No one was any the wiser, and we finally broke through the walls of their corruption.  
”

A light, hopeful energy finds its way into my heart. Maxwell is dead. Mark is dead. Sterling is behind bars. “And the victims? Those that were trapped for so long? Did they all make it out? Are they okay?”

“They were transported to various hospitals,” Jane explains.

“They’re not okay, Sunday,” Luna snaps.

I flinch back, further into Axel’s chest.

“But that’s not your fucking fault. And they’re going to heal. Just like I’m going to. Even if it did take you long enough to get me out of there.” Her lips twitch, but her tone remains scolding.

Jane’s eyes turn glassy, she reaches out grabbing her daughter’s hand. Their two tattoos are on display.

Yin and yang.

Balance.

“I’m sorry I didn’t find you sooner, sweetheart.” Jane’s voice cracks in the middle.

“I told you to cut it out, Mom. I’m going to go to therapy to emotionally dump all of this on them. You should go too.”

“What now?” Axel gripes. “Do we just return to life as if none of this happened? Is the FBI going to leave us the fuck alone? What about Darius?”

Jane whips her attention back to us. “Darius and Sunday have been painted as victims in this.” Her features soften, and suddenly, she appears much older. “They kept videos of all the, uh, victims. We started with the newest first.”

Dread and anxiety fold in my stomach. Darius’s nails break the skin on my thigh, but I can barely feel it.

“What are you talking about?” Axel bites out through clenched teeth.

“I’m sorry, Sunday. I didn’t know that you hadn’t told them yet.” Jane sounds apologetic, but the damage is done.

Grayson turns to face me, appraises me. “Sunday.” My name is a warning.

“All three brothers? Wow, Sunday,” Luna laughs caustically. “Cut her some fucking slack. Let her tell you when she’s ready. God damn, it’s only been a day.”

I am eternally grateful for Luna’s remark, but I know neither of the brothers will let this go for long.

Jane clears her throat. “All of that to say, you will be left alone, other than the inevitable media attention, but no charges will be filed. All deaths have been accounted for as accidental or self-defense. Including the two dead men outside of the imprison camp and the unfortunate suicide of one Mark Leetle will not be investigated further.”

My attention flashes up, I meet Jane’s eyes.

She gifts a knowing smile, getting to her feet.

“All documents and necessary items have been completed. As victims, you and Darius may need to be on the witness stand if this makes it to trial, but I imagine it won’t.

The lawyers have already begun throwing deals around for other names.

And so far, Sterling seems to be more than willing to turn on anyone and everyone for the chance at evading the death penalty. ”

“And Maxwell?” I ask, because even hearing that he is dead, I have a hard time believing it. Killing a cockroach is nearly impossible .

“He is gone, my colleagues have assured me. Please rest easy, and if anything changes, I will reach out.” Jane wraps an arm around Luna’s shoulders. “If you ever need anything, you have my number. But Sunday? Take care of yourself. Take the time you need to heal.”

Grayson’s attention is still firmly planted on me and I can feel Axel’s eyes boring holes into the back of my head, but I ignore them both.

“We’ll see ourselves out.” Jane offers a wave as she exits the room.

We all remain in tense silence for a period after her exit. I focus my attention on Darius, on his hand, on his knuckles, on the scar along his pinky, the burn on his index finger.

Cooking injuries.

“Sunday,” Axel grumbles.

“Axel,” Grayson warns. “She doesn’t have to tell us anything.”

Darius’s breathing is heavy, uneven. He finally glances up, finds my eyes.

They swirl in misery and anxiety.

“It’s okay Darius,” I encourage. “We can tell them. It isn’t our fault. It isn’t yours or mine. We did what we had to.”

And I mean it. I would never, ever blame him. And I will remind him of that fact

every day if I have to, because I can see the pain it has caused Darius. The heavy aura that wraps around him.

“Okay,” Darius agrees.

Wriggling off of Axel’s lap, I maneuver until I am straddling Darius. I rest my forehead on his chest, and he squeezes me to him. A sound of appreciation vibrates in my throat as I burrow further into his cotton shirt.

It smells like him. A warm, smoky sandalwood that wraps around us.

“It wasn’t Darius’s fault,” I start. “I need you both to understand I don’t blame him and I won’t forgive either of you if you do.”

“Little Lamb, you’re making me anxious. You need to spit it out.”

Grayson doesn’t speak, but I can hear his uneven breathing, sense him .

I don’t know exactly how to tell them this. It is a memory that is both profoundly special and outwardly horrible.

“Sterling made me fuck her. In front of an entire crowd of onlookers. They must have videotaped it too,” Darius confesses, a sob breaking through.

I snuggle further into him, providing and taking comfort in equal doses.

Axel swears loudly.

“Are you both okay?” Grayson asks. “Fuck, no of course you aren’t! You’re both so fucking young. How could they? How? How ?” Grayson’s voice breaks. “Fuck!”



I hear his retreating steps as he stomps away. As the side door slams. As Darius's truck rumbles to life. As it squeals out of the driveway.

"He blames himself," Axel informs, stroking my back. "He thinks that everything that happens to us is his fault. But he'll be back. It isn't either of your faults. It's just, we shouldn't have let you go, Sunday. We could have found another way. This didn't need to happen. What if--"

I cut him off. "What ifs don't help anything Axel."

He snorts sarcastically. "They don't." His hand drops.

"Jane returned my bike from impound, she's working on Grayson's car next.

I'm going to take it on a long ride, clear my head.

But neither of us blame you. Especially not you, Darius.

You didn't have a choice. But this is so fucked.

" Axel tousles my hair and gets to his feet.

"Just take care of each other. Relax. Grayson will be back soon, I'm sure of it. "

I don't argue. I knew they wouldn't be happy when we told them. Knew that Axel would regret letting me go. But we'll make it past this.

Snuggling further into Darius, I continue breathing him in. "I'm sorry Darius. If anything, this was my fault. Not yours."

His chest shakes, and for a second, I think he might be laughing, but then a sob

breaks free .

It takes time but eventually he brings himself together, winds his pain back inside for it to rest.

He squeezes me tighter to him. “I don’t deserve you, but I’m a selfish man. You promise to never leave? To never go off and run face first into danger again?”

“I promise,” I murmur, shifting in his lap.

My thin shorts rub against his hardening cock. I am sore, aching from our recent encounter, but I need him.

It feels as if we are making up for lost time, as if our bodies are two forces drawn together. Existing independently but shoved together by outside forces.

The sun and the moon.

And I know with certainty that Darius is the sun.

Darius’s eyes darken with intent. “Sunday?”

Rolling my hips again as my answer.

He bends forward, reaching for the coffee table. Opening the drawer, he pulls out a condom.

“What the fuck, Axel?” Because I know it was him.

I know he scattered them across the house. I'm grateful but also mildly peeved.

Darius quirks his lips.

Shifting to my knees, he reaches between us tugging down his shorts. I expect him to pull mine off, but instead he pushes them to the side, and then he's sliding back into me.

Slowly, lethargically.

The first time taking Darius was nearly impossible.

The second time, even after the help from the shower and his fingers, was still difficult.

But this time? This time it is as if he is made for me .

A glove filled entirely with zero excess room.

And then his hands find my waist and he's tugging me down onto him as he snaps up. My knees dig into the corduroy couch, scraping against the fabric. My hands go to his shoulders, holding on as best I can.

And then my lips are on his, rolling myself onto him as I find my own pleasure. With my shorts pulled to the side, it is nearly impossible to reach my own clit, but then as he moves, my shorts drift across my clit causing bursts of ecstasy to amplify his cock as he continues to pump into me.

“Darius,” I groan into his mouth.

His name is a siren and it causes him to ramp up. To build speed and pressure.

My nerves are frayed, my mind a muddled mess, but my pleasure?

It is a growing ball of electricity deep in my gut, and it doesn't take much more before I am falling again.

He has wrung the last of my energy.

“Made for me.” Darius nuzzles into my neck as he jerks inside of me.

He squeezes me to him, and I do the same. Filling him with as much love and affection as I can.

We are both empty batteries, charging each other instead of ourselves, but that's okay.

Eventually we draw apart. On wobbly legs, I make my way to my feet. “Meet me upstairs? Your room?”

“My room?”

“Like old times sake? Watch movies?”

Darius's eyes light up. “Please.”

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Cleaned up for the third time, I find my way to Darius's bed. He has left my spot open for me, and I crawl into it.

“Horror, right?” he jokes, and I give him a soft tap to the shoulder.

“I know, comedy it is. Let's watch the one about the spy that was frozen.”

And that is where we stay, until my eyes grow heavy, and eventually Darius readjusts

until I am laying on him completely, my head on his chest.

I make it through about ten minutes of the movie before I fall into a deep sleep.

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 3:11 am*

“How did I know I would find you here?” Axel shoulders open the office door.

Grayson glances up from the stack of papers in front of him. “Because there isn’t anywhere else I would be. It’s not like I have any hobbies.”

Axel steps further into the room, kicking the door shut behind him before settling into the chair across from Grayson. “She doesn’t understand when you leave like that. She’s going to think you’re angry with her.”

“How? How could I possibly be angry with her? The only person that I am upset with is myself. Not only for Sunday, but Darius too. All that they went through. Not only this lifetime. But all of them. I was always one step behind.” Because of their mother, Grayson has never drank, but right now he is craving it.

Something, anything to take the edge off. To provide a reprieve from the pain and guilt and grief that threaten to swallow him whole.

“It isn’t your job to keep us all safe Grayson.” Axel sweeps forward, gathering the papers into his hands, flipping through them. “Isn’t it lonely up there? You keep forcing Darius and me away. Making yourself nearly untouchable. Soon enough you’ll shove Sunday away too. And then what?”

Grayson narrows his eyes. “She’s too young. I should never have allowed myself to...to...”

“To fall in love with her? Well it’s too late now.” Axel’s lips quirk. “Looks like the restaurant is booming, even after you closed it for the last week, but we need to

replace a few hires. Fucking Rick. When he called her munchkin, I suspected, but I hoped it wasn't true."

They had decided to shutter the doors temporarily after Sunday was taken. "What are we supposed to do now?" The question tumbles from Grayson's lips before he can catch it.

Axel sets the papers down and levels him with a stare. "You need to pull the stick out of your ass. To stop getting in your own way. You need to show Sunday how much you care about her, how much you love her."

"But I don't deserve her!" Grayson jumps to his feet, the words echoing around his office. It is in the back of the restaurant. The place he always goes to get ahold of himself.

"None of us do! But all of us? All of us together? We can take care of her. Be everything she needs. And she will heal, she will make it through this. She's tougher than you give her credit for," Axel speaks levelly, reclining further back in the chair.

"That's rich." But Grayson doesn't argue, he rakes his fingers through his hair. "What if she doesn't want this? What if we're all too much for her? Fuck, I'm twenty-six years old and I've never had a girlfriend!"

"Technically you're in your thirties if we include all the time loops, which means Sunday is in her twenties," Axel jests, but at Grayson's glare, he puts his hands up in surrender.

"Jokes aside, Grayson, you need to just open your eyes. She cares about us. All of us. And she has for a very long time. Maybe not at the beginning of all of this, but along the way, Sunday has become ours."

“How are we supposed to share her?” Grayson responds.

Axel’s lips curl up. “Did you feel jealous when you watched me fuck her?”

Grayson hadn’t meant to walk in on them. He just didn’t know where they were, but when he did, when he found Sunday naked and being pounded into the bed, Grayson hadn’t even seen Axel or cared. His entire focus was Sunday. “Just that it wasn’t me,” he admits.

“And besides, you have always cared about her, maybe not romantically. But she was Auggie’s little sister, we all did what we could to keep her safe and even then she was a little spit fire.”

“She didn’t even notice,” Grayson recalls. On more than one occasion he had stepped in to keep the evil of this town at bay. To keep her out of Mark’s and Maxwell’s sight. To steer Rayden as far away as he could.

“No, she didn’t,” Axel admits. “But it’s better that way.”

“What about Darius? Do you think he will forgive himself? You know he’s blaming himself.” Grayson had always felt bad for their youngest brother. The one with the evil dad. The one who was the sweetest and kindest of them all. The one who finished school early to keep their family afloat.

Axel shudders. “Not for a while. And in some ways, he might not ever. But Sunday will help. It’s clear the trauma only served to push them even closer.”

Grayson casts a glance out the window, the sun is setting and it casts the sky in an ominous pink glow. “I miss them. Tripp and Augustus.”

Axel gets to his feet, walking around the desk and tugging Grayson into his arms.



“Me too, brother. Me too. A part of my heart will always ache from their absence, but we have each other. And we need to live, not only for our sake, but theirs too.”

“You’re right.”

Axel pulls apart, stepping back. “What about our birther? ”

“Our mother?” The question catches Grayson off guard, but he shakes his head. “She wasn’t down there. No evidence that she was with the Thornes.”

Axel snorts. “So she left us by choice.”

“You know she was a victim in this too.” But it’s an old argument and he doesn’t want to rehash it now. “She’ll return eventually.”

Axel heaves a sigh. “I’m going home, I don’t want to be away from Sunday any longer. You should come back soon too.”

Grayson tenses. “I will, but I’m going to give her time. As much as she needs to heal and recover from this.”

Axel doesn’t respond as he turns to the door, but just as he’s about to leave, he casts over his shoulder. “I really think you’re underestimating her.”

Grayson falls back into his chair and continues what he was working on.

He’ll return home, but first he needs to order inventory, get the “now hiring” ad up, check the dry stock, set up a staff meeting, figure out when to reopen the restaurant, and a million other pending items that had been thrown to the wayside.

It takes time but he slowly works through the list.

Grayson doesn't realize how exhausted he is until his blinking slows.

I'll just take a short nap and then I'll head home.

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 3:11 am*

It is past midnight by the time Axel returns home. He rode halfway across town and back before finally settling his mind enough.

Even with Sterling locked up—Maxwell and Mark dead—he still doesn't want to be too far from Sunday.

Memories of his dick sinking into her spur him on. Leaving his motorcycle in the driveway, he lets himself inside before making his way up the stairs two at a time. He goes to her room first but growls in frustration when she isn't there.

Checking her bathroom next, he glances and sees the condom wrapper in the trash.

Darius.

A mixture of jealousy and satisfaction cycle internally.

Axel accepts that Sunday will never just be his, and he has pushed his other two brothers towards her as best he can. They need her just as much as she needs them. But sometimes when he least expects it, his animosity will flare up. It isn't even directed at his brothers, just at himself.

I have never been enough.

He stares at his reflection in the bathroom mirror. At the jut of his nose, the angle of his jaw, the color of his eyes. The similarities between Tripp and himself are undeniable and sometimes alone like this the demons will fester .

Remind him that he is just the shadow of a better man. A disgusting replica. A heartless monster.

His brother's replacement.

I miss you Tripp. You deserve to be here.

Even after the equivalent of years, the pain of his twin's death had not dissipated in the least, he had simply shifted his concerns to Sunday. Put his energy into keeping her alive.

But now that they were out of the loops...

With nothing else to focus on...

"Axel?" Sunday's voice is gentle, her footsteps nearly silent as she pads into the bathroom.

Her eyes catch his in the mirror.

Whatever she sees causes her to step behind him, to wrap her arms around him. Her heart beats softly against his back.

"Are you okay?" she whispers, snuggling into him.

"No," Axel admits. "But I'm better now." He turns in her arms, allows her warmth to soak into him. Allows her to mend him.

She has always healed him, in every loop. He was a broken angry man before he found her. Pissed off at the world, hateful towards Tripp and Auggie, mad at himself.

Destined to repeat a generational curse, destined to exist in a broken system, destined to find the worst path and dive towards it. But then he set his eyes on her. He saw everything Tripp mentioned in the letters.

And then he got to know her. The stubborn, strong-willed, but idiotic girl that she is. He wanted on more than one occasion to shake her. To demand she follow and listen to him. But he knew better.

Sunday Masch is a force to be reckoned with .

Axel smiles as he rests his chin on the top of her head. Her unruly curls offer a cushion. Her floral scent suffuses into the air and invades him as she tightens her arms around him, burrowing into his chest.

He doesn't deserve her. He knows that. Just as he knows he will never let her go.

"Axel?" Sunday murmurs into him.

"Will you come on a ride with me?" The question springs on its own.

"Okay," she agrees without hesitation.

He doesn't wait for her to change her mind.

Untangling from Sunday, he grabs her by the wrist and starts tugging her out of the bathroom, towards the stairs.

"We should let Darius—"

Axel doesn't let her finish, she's moving too slow and suddenly he feels the need to hurry. He pauses only to lift her off her feet and throw her over his shoulder. "I have

my phone, I'll text him."

"Axel!" Sunday exclaims startled. Her small fists find his back, but he barely feels them as he quickly makes his way down the stairs and back to his motorcycle.

He is still in his full gear; she's not, but he will drive carefully.

Sunday will never be hurt on my account.

Placing her onto the pavement, she stares up at him heaving and huffing.

A street light, a sliver of moon, and stars are the only sources of light as he takes her in.

She's in a thin shirt and shorts, her nipples poking out of the material, her hair a wild mess, her eyes bright, her cheeks flush as she pants in and out.

Even in October, it is still hot here and he can already feel the sweat forming in his jacket.

"Axel! "

He doesn't give her too much time to argue. Lifting the helmet off his bike he places it over her, clipping it into place.

He throws a leg over the bike, twisting around to help her on.

"Hold on tight," he tells her.

She does as commanded, her small hands burying into his leather jacket, the helmet pressing into him from behind.

Once he is satisfied, he takes off. When this began, he didn't have a place in mind, but now he does.

He drives towards their restaurant, and then goes a bit further down a trail that leads to a private section of river. Trees surround them on all sides, and it's nothing but darkness in their depths. Crickets chirp and frogs croak loudly as they continue on towards their destination.

It's where he used to go when he needed a break from his brothers. He had never taken anyone else out here.

Until now.

Sunday's hold tightens on him as they make their way along the unpaved road and slow to a crawl.

Out here the only light is from his motorcycle, the moon, and the stars.

I want more than anything for the stars to just disappear.

In some ways they remind him of Sunday, but in others they are a constant reminder of the suffering they were all forced to endure.

The woods thin and then they come to an open area. He brings them to a stop.

"Did you drag me out here to kill me?" Sunday grumbles, shivering against his back.

"I wouldn't have gone through all this," Axel snarks, getting off the bike before helping her .

On two feet, she wrenches the helmet off herself, her eyes flickering around. They

land on the river only ten feet away, the moon reflecting in the water.

“It’s pretty out here, in an eerie and creepy kind of way.”

Axel laughs.

“It’s not funny!” Sunday turns to him. “I was half asleep, I heard a noise, and when I followed it, you were just standing in my bathroom all scary and sad-like. And then you dragged me out of the house in my pajamas to a wooded area, near a river, in Florida . Which, mind you, might have alligators in it! Or even crocodiles because those have taken hold here, too. And all of that after the fact that you up and disappeared along with Grayson after Darius and I told you what happened.” Sunday isn’t screaming, but the words are heated laced in anger and irritation.

Axel cocks his head as he watches her displeasure take hold, listens as her indignation raises her voice a few octaves, smells the air as her floral scent intertwines with the trees and water surrounding them. Not nearly salty but just on the cusp.

Sunday is still laying into him, but his mind has shifted. He lunges forward taking her cheeks in his hands, covering her lips with his thumbs.

“Do I remind you of Tripp? Am I his replacement?” The questions come from a very deep dark place inside of Axel. Each timeline, he had pushed them further and further down. Forced them to remain buried.

But out here? In his most sacred spot? Where he would scream his anger out into the world?

They come out easily.



Sunday's face slackens, her mouth opens causing his thumbs to shift across her soft lips. Her eyebrows furrow before her gaze meets his.

The next words she speaks are even. Level. "I loved Tripp with all of my heart. All of it," Sunday whispers hoarsely .

Axel's own heart has crawled its way into his throat as he waits for her to tell him the truth, that he will never compare.

Sunday raises up her fingers, finding his face, they trace along his jaw. "But he is nothing like you. I love you, Axel. Every single psychotic, chaotic, impulsive part."

Axel moves his hands from her face to her waist, and then he is crashing his lips to hers fervidly. The insecurities that he had kept at bay for as long as he could, dissolved in a matter of seconds.

That was the magic of Sunday. She held his heart and soul in the palm of her hands.

She was his literal lifeline.

His fingertips brush inside of her shirt as he grips her tightly, lifts her onto the back of his bike. Sunday's lips move against his, as if they are challenging him, as if they are accepting him, as if they are made for him.

Her hands drift from his jaw to his pants and then she is unbuttoning them, attempting to shove them down.

"Sunday," he warns, releasing her lips.

Her face is cast in shadows, but her piercing eyes hold his.

“Axel,” she dares him.

“Fuck!” His moves become more frantic. He raises her off the bike one-handedly to remove her shorts. Leaving her exposed, her bare pink cunt on full display.

He reaches behind her, to the storage on the bike and pulls out a condom.

She chuckles. “You literally left those everywhere,” she says in explanation.

Axel narrows his eyes at her as he kicks off his pants, as he frees his cock from his boxers, as he puts the condom on the tip.

“Put it on for me,” he demands .

Her attention is focused on his cock as her hand moves cautiously forward.

The first time he had her, he was in no rush. But right now? He is aching for her. To re-establish their connection, to put all of his worries to rest, to stamp himself deep and firmly into Sunday.

She pauses with her hand touching the condom, her eyes flash to his. “I had sex with Darius earlier today.”

“I know.” Axel flares his nostrils.

“And again, downstairs on the couch.”

“Then I guess I’ll just have to make up for lost time.” He thrusts forward into her hand, the condom sliding into place. “Good job, Little Lamb.”

She bristles at the nickname, just as she always does. But that is exactly what she is,

what she will always be.

He positions between her legs, his hands making their way back to her waist. He isn't sure if the bike will be sturdy enough for this, but he's going to try.

"I still haven't forgiven you for being the bait." And he hasn't.

Sunday glares at him. "Everyone is safe and unscathed. You can't possibly still be upset."

He lines himself up, and thrusts hard and fast into her. "I can."

Sunday lets out a startled moan.

She is warm. Wet. Tight. Constricting.

She strangles his cock, a vice, and his balls tighten as the pleasure nearly engulfs him. One of his hands moves to her neck, his other remaining on her waist. And then he rocks into her, the bike attempting to fall out from under them as he continues.

"Axel!" She reaches between them, rubbing her own clit .

Axel is both annoyed and satisfied to watch her find her own gratification around him. This began with an interest to punish her, but it quickly shifted to a desperate need to drown himself in her.

He is frenetic as he continues to pour his anger into her. And she takes it, thrusting back into him as best she can.

They are two polarizing forces doing all they can to come together, and it isn't long before the bike falls out from below them.

It is only Axel's hold on Sunday that keeps her from going with it.

Still buried inside her, he carries her to a patch of grass before dropping them down to it.

Her hair spreads out below her, a bright scarlet halo.

Her shirt is a nuisance that he pulls up to show off her unblemished breasts.

"Axel," Sunday begs him.

He knows what she wants, and he bends down to take one of them into his mouth, sucking and biting and swirling his tongue. Sunday attempts to ride him from the bottom, lifting her hips up and down as he remains still, focusing on her breasts.

He growls against the one in his mouth as her hand buries in his hair.

"Just like that," she says as she continues to rock up on him.

And Axel allows it. Allows the little spitfire to use his body to her liking. He reaches between them, blindly finding her clit, he plays with it.

She tightens around him, moaning as her movements become more frenzied and hectic. And then she reaches with both hands, tugging him and his cock as far inside her as he can. Deeper than he had been before.

And then she is screaming and pulsating around him. Her nails digging into him, her breasts arching up further. He releases the one in his mouth and begins to pound into her. Forcing her to ride the wave as long as he can, until static and fire fight their way down his spine.

And then he follows her off the precipice .

Panting breathlessly, he finds her eyes, cups her cheek. “I love you, Sunday.”

“I love you too,” she says.

And Axel believes it.

That is where they remain for several hours, until his phone rings with a livid Darius on the other line.

They ride back on the motorcycle just before the sun rises.

Axel is the lightest he has ever felt, but even so, there is still an uneasiness in his gut.

That something...isn't...right...

I need to go home.

The thought circulates Grayson's mind for the thousandth time. He has been holed up in his office, sleeping at his desk, organizing the restaurant as best he could, throwing himself into the tedious work.

Axel continued to barrage him with angry messages, but he ignored them.

Grayson tells himself again that Sunday needs time. That Darius and Axel deserve to comfort her and be there for her. Except every time he repeats the mantra it feels weaker than the last.

Where do I fit in this?

And that's the problem.

He doesn't.

I don't deserve her. I couldn't keep her safe.

He doesn't want to admit it, not even to himself, but the trauma that Darius and Sunday were forced to endure affects him more than he initially realized. And the longer he keeps away from his family, the more self-deprecation nearly swallows him whole. Self-doubt nibbling away at his psyche.

He wants Sunday more than he has ever wanted another woman, and Axel made great points, except...

Isn't it selfish?

Fuck!

But even if it is the most selfish thing in the world, it is too late, and Grayson knows it. He won't be able to leave Sunday. Won't be able to separate himself from her. She is an integral part of his very existence.

I need to go home. I need to see her.

Anxiety hits him hard and fast. Of how he could leave her alone when she is at her most vulnerable. How he pushed her away. The look on her face when he fled.

And what about Darius?

The last few days catch up to him. The aches of his body outshone only by the throbbing in his chest.

I miss her.

Mind made up, he organizes his desk and searches for the keys to the truck.

It is when he is in the middle of that, that he hears the distinct sound of the side door opening and closing.

No one should be here.

The restaurant is still closed; he plans to reopen once the dust settles.

Stiffening, he slides the drawer of his desk open, he grips the gun inside but keeps it out of sight.

It is only three beats later he hears her.

“Grayson!”

Grayson chuckles, his anxiety vanishing, he releases the weapon pushing the drawer shut.

“I know you’re here!”

The stomping is getting closer now. Grayson leans against the far wall behind his desk and folds his arms across his chest, waiting for her to find him.

The door slams open as she kicks it in .

Her curls are a wild mess, her cheeks a bright pink, a wrinkle present between her brows.

Sunday.

The sight of her alone affects him in ways he doesn’t want to admit to himself. He has buried his feelings so deep for the woman before him that it is nearly painful .

And while they had been playing a dangerous game of cat and mouse, he is done.

Too much has happened.

He isn’t going to have any regrets.

Not anymore than I already do at least.

“–and you run away! Just as you always have!” She’s in his face now, he can see a



sheen of sweat on her forehead, hear the anguish and concern in her voice.

Why did I leave again?

His brain short-circuits as her honeysuckle smell envelopes him. Subtle and sweet. Just like the woman before him.

She's still laying into him— rightfully so —but he interrupts her.

Lashing out, he grabs her by the hips. He doesn't even clear his desk as he plants her on it. And then his lips are on hers.

And she melts into him. As if her body were made for his, as if even on a molecular level they were meant for each other.

Fate.

Sunday is his fate, no matter how much he has attempted to deny it.

No matter how much he lies to himself.

Keeps her at arm's length.

She is his .

And he's tired of pretending she isn't.

Her soft lips drift apart, and he swipes his tongue inside, invading her .

She is so pliable, so receptive, so obviously made for him.

Eventually, he pulls back and stares into her eyes. “You can stop this, you know that, don’t you baby girl?”

Her curls cover half her face, and he reaches out, tucking them behind her ears. Her bright eyes find his.

He isn’t sure what he expects to find swirling in their depths, but it isn’t annoyance.

“Oh no you fucking don’t! You call me baby girl, but I am a grown fucking adult, Grayson!” She puffs her cheeks.

He doesn’t argue, doesn’t advise how she is the most precious piece of his life. How she is his to protect and keep safe.

She lunges forward, wraps her hands around his neck, drawing him closer to her.

“I’m tired of you running, Grayson.” She pants, attempting to catch her breath.

“I’m tired of playing this game with you.

” Her fingers find his shirt, digging into the material.

“I keep thinking you don’t want this, don’t want me—” She rolls her lips between her teeth, her eyes flashing in concern.

He goes to cut her off, to assure her that is not the case, but she glares him into silence.

“Just shut up and listen to me. What happened to Darius and me was fucking tragic, but we’re going to be okay.

This whole town is going to be okay and I would do it over and over again if it meant ending up here.

If it meant saving all of those that had been taken captive.

If it meant breaking a cycle of abuse and death.

” Sunday is nearly yelling at him, but his body doesn’t understand that.

His cock is becoming more and more uncomfortable against the zipper of his jeans as she continues.

“And do I think dating three brothers is a good idea? After being with their fourth brother who died ?” Her voice cracks around the word.

“ Do I think that this is going to be easy?” She exhales, her nostrils flare.

“No, I fucking don’t. But Axel assures me you all agreed to this, that you all know what you’re getting yourselves into.

And maybe in the beginning I didn’t believe him.

Or maybe I just wasn’t able to think about the future.

I was so caught up in the past. So caught up in hunting down my brother and Tripp’s killers. But we’re done. We’re finally done!”

“Sunday–” Grayson wants to reassure her. To stomp down any of her remaining worries, but she treks onward.

“And I’m not leaving here until you prove to me you actually care about me.

Until I wasn't just some mistake. Some means to an end.

That you weren't just keeping me safe for the sake of the stupid loops.

That I'm...that whatever is between us is just as real for you as it is for me. ”  
Sunday's voice wisps off at the end.

All of her steam and anger suffuses into the air and Grayson's heart aches for her. He cups her face in his hands. “Is that truly what you think? Sunday, oh my sweet baby girl.” He pushes forward, capturing her lips with his again, rubbing his cock into the thin material of her shorts.

He wants to take her. Here and now. But he won't push her. Just as he hasn't. He's treading at her speed, no matter how fast or slow that takes them.

Releasing her soft lips he offers her a gentle smile. “Of course I care about you. But I'm not going to sway you. Not going to take things further than we should, we have all the time in the world.” He separates from her, attempting to ignore the frown that slaps itself on her face.

He turns to find the truck keys.

“I finally get it,” Sunday whispers. “You're scared.”

Grayson flinches, but he doesn't acknowledge her words .

“I remember when you choked me, I remember when I took your dick in my throat, you lost control. You don't trust yourself around me,” Sunday continues.

Grayson doesn't look back at her. He focuses on finding the truck keys. They can go home and join Darius and Axel.

He hears as she jumps down, and a few beats later, items drop to the floor, the unmistakable jingle of keys.

“I’m done with the line between us, Grayson. Either you are in this. Or you’re not.”

She’s right.

Grayson breathes in and out a few times.

Finally, he whips his attention to her. To Sunday holding the keys. To her naked form. To her pink nipples on full breasts. To her hips and unblemished skin. To her creamy thighs. To the freckles leading up to her—

“Sunday.” He clenches his fists. “What are you doing?”

Her eyes hood, her tongue lashes out, licking her lips hypnotically.

“Forging my own path.” And then she jumps forward, wrapping herself around him. Every piece of her bare and begging for his attention.

He wants to run. He wants to fuck her. He wants to yell. He wants to bend her over his desk and mark himself inside of her.

And this time when their lips meet it is a flurry of nibbles, tongues, lips, a clashing of teeth.

Sunday may not be Grayson’s first, but she will be his last. She will be the only one to ever matter.

“Sunday,” he growls around her lips. “You should leave. You should stop me. You just went through a traumatic experience.”

“No!” She bites on his lip, hard . “I want this. I want you. I’ve held back long enough. I’m not making the mistake of waiting again. ”

“You don’t know what you’re doing to me,” he warns. He is quickly losing his temporal lobe, all of his blood has long since rushed south, and now Grayson is simply acting on instinct.

On his primal needs and urges.

“Yes I do!” Sunday is breathless as she continues her argument.

Grayson isn’t sure he agrees with her, but he is distracted by his hands gravitating on their own to her breasts. Of how soft and smooth and heavy they are in his hands. He wants to worship her. To write poems and name lands after her.

Her hands finding their way to his jeans jars him from his mind.

“What are you doing?”

She doesn’t answer as she undoes the button, unzips them, and then her smooth finger tips are stroking him.

“Let me get you there first.” He groans as her fingers grip him tighter.

She strokes his length now tracing a line to the sensitive tip. “No, I want you.” She speeds up her pace, revving up the intensity, pushing him past the point of rationale. “Now.” She rocks up towards him.

“Fuck!” It is in a lust-filled haze that he flips her around, that he pushes down his jeans, that he tears open a condom from his wallet, that he grabs her by the wrists and pushes her over his desk, that he lines himself up to take her.

It is only her soft mewl that causes him to pause.

“Are you ready for this Sunday? After this, there will be no turning back.”

## Page 47

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 3:11 am*

Why was I angry?

“Yes,” I moan, attempting to shift backwards.

Bent over Grayson’s desk with him pinning me over it, with his cock poised, with him holding my arms behind my back.

I can’t even remember why I was.

Because now? I am anything but angry.

“This is what you do to me, Sunday!” Grayson growls. “I don’t think, I just act. You’re making me lose my mind, but I don’t”—he slams all the way in and I let out a garbled scream—“even care!”

He is unyielding as he thrusts me relentlessly into the desk, my knees scraping against the wood, my arms tugged all the way back, as he uses them as leverage, my clit rubbing on the edge.

The stimulation is jolting, unexpected . I tense as it ramps up the intensity of this moment.

Of fucking Grayson. Of Grayson losing his cool. Of popping the balloon of our connection.

A balloon that was filled with helium and the residual is making me mindless, giddy.



This is momentous.

His cock curves upwards, into a deliciously pleasure-filled spot as if it were made specifically for me.

“Fuck!” The word is a prayer he expels as he continues his relentless beat .

Over and over. My skin pressing into the hard edges of the desk below. My desire filters heavily through the discomfort.

And just as I feel my legs might give way, he is withdrawing entirely.

A disgruntled hiss is all I have time to make before he is flipping me over, leaning me back on the desk and slamming into me again.

This time, face-to-face, I am able to take in the intensity of his gaze, the clenching of his jaw, the tattoos that litter his skin.

He reaches out one hand, bracketing around both my wrists, his other wedging between us for my clit.

Slowing his pace, he switches to long hard snaps of his hips as he rubs me. Watching for my reaction, it doesn't take long for him to ramp me right up to the edge.

I was on a perilous cliff of unease when I first ran into this room and now he has thrown me onto a vastly different one. When the pressure is nearly to the point, he stills inside me.

Grumbling, I attempt to find my own relief, but he pushes me down, using his weight to his advantage.

“You are breathtaking.” He rolls his hips, pinching my clit simultaneously. “For the first time in my entire existence I don’t feel alone.” He thrusts, pushing down onto my wrists, bending over me, his lips centimeters from mine. “And it is because of you ,” the last word is a growl.

And then he is consuming me.

Rocking into me with a delicious rhythm, his lips hot and chaotic as they fight for control.

It doesn’t take long for it all to become too much. For my body to spring. And then I am screaming into him as my pleasure explodes throughout me. Over and over again, the waves of ecstasy roll through me, but he still doesn’t let up .

And just when I think I may hit a point that breaches my bliss, he stills inside of me, his cock pulsating.

He appraises me with soft intense eyes. “I love you, Sunday. My baby girl. The most stubborn and ridiculously bullheaded woman I know.” His eyes are warm as he offers my nose a gentle peck. “I’m not going anywhere. I promise.” He places a chaste kiss on the tip of my nose.

My heart expands in my chest. “I love you too, Grayson.” And I mean it, even if there is still a layer of guilt, I do love him. I am in love with him.

He releases my wrists, gently tucking my hair as best he can behind my ears.

Tears form in my eyes. At the realization of what this means.

It feels as if, in this moment, Grayson has broken through all of my doubts and worries of how a relationship with all three brothers would work.

And now all I feel is hope .

Hope that we will finally have the happiness we all deserve and spend the rest of our lives in each other's arms.

## Page 48

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 3:11 am*

We are still a panting sweaty mess when Grayson finally and carefully withdraws from me, he gently lets go of my arms and helps me up off his desk.

Bending over, I gather up my clothes.

I'm ready to go home.

He smiles fondly down at me. "The bathroom is through there." He points to the door next to his desk. "How did you even get here?"

Appreciative of him and with Axel's advice in mind, I march to it. "Axel dropped me off and told me to get through to you, that you were being stubborn."

Grayson chuckles. "Of course he did."

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Stepping out of the bathroom, I can feel a change in the atmosphere.

Grayson is turned away fully, his phone pressed to his ear. "I'm not bringing her down there with me! My brothers and I don't even need to be there!" Grayson is pissed, and it is apparent with his tone. "Arrested if we don't comply? You have got to be fucking kidding me!"

Gravel forms in my throat, and I swallow around it uneasily. Walking up behind him, I place a gentle hand on his shoulder .

When he turns, his eyes are red, glistening.

“What’s going on?” I whisper.

He tries so desperately to put a mask in place, but I can see right through it. I know with certainty something isn’t right.

“Fine,” Grayson agrees to the person on the phone. “I’m at the restaurant, I’ll be ready in five.” He disconnects the call.

“What is it?” I ask.

“Sterling Thorne was let out on bail just a bit ago.”

Bile forms in my throat. “How? How could they? With all of the evidence against him?”

Grayson exhales, his hand comes up, catching in my curls, he tugs me to his chest. “He’s dead.”

Grayson squeezes me tighter to him, clutching me as close as he can.

“Isn’t that good? I don’t understand.” My words are muffled against his shirt. Relief intertwines with anxiety. Why is Grayson so upset? Why won’t he just say it?

“Our mother shot him. She killed him. My brothers and I have to go in for questioning now. Jane couldn’t prevent it.” Grayson shakes as he continues to hold me to him. His heart is beating fast and quick in his chest.

I don’t struggle or attempt to pull away.

“I hoped after Sterling was sentenced she would finally come home, that she would have the closure she needed to get past him. Of what he did to her.” Grayson’s voice is gruff, saturated in a plethora of difficult emotions.

Understanding sparks in my gut.

When Grayson took on the role of protector, of head of household, he did it with the hope that one day she would relinquish him of it. That he would be able to relax and simply exist .

But then she never returned, and for years, Grayson was forced into a role that wasn’t his to take.

He helped raise his three brothers, kept a roof over their heads, food in their mouths.

Watched as this town gobbled them all up and spit them back out.

But what about him? Who had ever taken care of Grayson?

There aren’t any words I can say to make this better. Instead, I simply keep my arms tightly wrapped around him. Encompassing him and doing my best to support Grayson as he processes the news that his mother will most likely not ever be coming home now.

She may have killed a horrible man, but the law won’t see it that way.

Time passes endlessly before there’s a horn honking outside.

“They’re here to take me. I haven’t been given any choice in the matter.

” Grayson places a kiss on the top of my head, finally untangling us.

“Thank you, Sunday. You don’t know how much it means to me to have you.

Your support. This is going to be hard—on all of us—but we’re going to get through it. ”

“Should I come with you?” A familiar strand of light flickers when I ask the question, and apprehension washes across my skin.

“Jane said you could stay behind.” He runs a hand through his hair, a nervous tick.

“Fuck, I wish I could just take you home, but no, you shouldn’t come with.

Shouldn’t be put in the public’s eye anymore than you already have been.

” Grayson levels me with an intense stare.

“I need you to stay away from the police station. All three of us are being taken there. You have your phone?”

I withdraw it from my shorts pocket and click it on to show him. The light that shimmered before is now gone, but in its wake is a deep unsettling feeling of déjà vu .

“Good girl. Jane is sending Luna to come get you and keep you company. And we’ll meet you at home once this mess is sorted. Please just stay safe for me?”

I go to tell him, I need him to know what I’m feeling, but the horn outside is relentless now as they lay on it.

Grayson pecks me on the lips before turning to leave. “I’ll be back soon.”

And then he is out the door, slamming it shut behind him.

He doesn't even realize I haven't agreed to wait for him here.

No, I have entirely different plans.

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In my gut, I know that I shouldn't be apart from the three brothers. That I should join them, even if it means waiting outside of the police station.

Less than two minutes after Grayson leaves, I find the keys to Darius's truck. But when I do, I see the light again, it's unmistakable, and this time when it flickers, it stabilizes. Red and purple and white, all swirling together wrapping around the keys, encircling my wrist, tangling up my arm.

I try to drop the keys, but I no longer can.

What is going on? Why are the strands back?

What has changed?

My vision clouds, it darkens, and I want nothing more than to run to my men—which was my original plan—but now I'm not so sure.

The red never leads to anything good.

My attention shifts to my phone in my hand, a second later it lights up, but not from the strands. Someone is calling me .

What is this?

Veronica's name flashes across the screen, but it only causes my confusion and



anxiety to ramp up.

I haven't heard from her since before everything went down at the Thorne's. Darius said she and William made it out...maybe she heard the news of Sterling Thorne?

I go to answer it, but then the stringed light that held the keys to my hands jumps from them to the phone, and the keys clatter to the ground with a loud clack!

I didn't want to answer it, but it's too late.

"Sunday?" It's William's voice on the other side. I will myself to end the call.

I instinctively know something isn't right. This isn't going to go well.

But whether it is fate or something else entirely, my phone is frozen and I can't end the call.

"Sunday? Please talk to me." The desperation is evident in his tone. "Please, it's about Veronica."

Shakily, I bring the phone to my ear. "I'm here," I say. "Where is she? Is everything okay?"

"No it's not. I need you to just listen please, just hear me out and then I'll let you decide." There's arguing in the background. "I'm going to tell her! She gets to make the choice herself!" William shouts away from the phone, his voice breaking. "Sunday, it's Maxwell he has—"

There's a loud thud followed by a grunt of pain. My ear is filled with a whoosh, a crash, and then continuous static.

For a minute I think the call may have disconnected, but then the static is replaced with his words.

“Sunday School. ”

Luna said they thought he was dead, and maybe for a single instant I believed her. Or maybe I just wished for it to be true. But in my heart I think I knew he made it out.

Knew that he would return.

Knew that we weren't done with him yet.

Placing a hand over my erratically pounding heart, I inhale deeply before answering.  
“Maxwell.”

## Page 49

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 3:11 am*

The police station's front door whips open, whooshing in a fair amount of humid air. Florida still manages to be hot in mid-October. Darius looks up from the bench he has been waiting on.

"Where have you been?" Axel pushes off from the wall he had taken post against.

Grayson's attention flashes around the police station eyeing the spectators warily. The sheriff is noticeably absent for the foray.

Jane steps in behind Grayson. "Now that you're all here, let's get this over with. They just have to ask you some cursory questions."

"But why?" Darius speaks up, getting uneasily to his feet. "Where's Sunday?" he asks, looking around for her.

Grayson's face changes colors, he tenses his shoulders.

"You fucked her," Axel accuses, smirking at him. "Finally. Now where is she?"

"Safe," Grayson states, but he doesn't elaborate.

Darius doesn't like the answer, but he knows better than to demand details in the middle of the police station.

A deputy that Darius recognizes walks up. The one who informed them of Tripp and Auggie's death.

“Hey there boys, follow me back please. Drop your phones in the box on the way.”  
The Deputy gestures to a wooden crate next to a steel door .

Darius casts a glance to his other two brothers. They both seem just as uneasy as he does, and it does nothing to assuage his nerves.

Why does it feel as if this is a trap? As if following this man is going to end horribly?

Are they true feelings? Or just the anxiety of Sunday not being with us?

“Do as he asks,” Jane encourages with a reassuring smile. “You won’t be in there long and you aren’t under arrest. They just need to go through a procedural list of questions. There’s no doubt of the guilty party, there were witnesses.”

Axel snarls, “I will, but we can’t be gone long.”

The deputy doesn’t wait any longer, opening the steel door and gesturing again for them both to lead the way.

It physically hurts Darius to set his phone in the crate, but he does it, against his entire psyche telling him not to.

What is going on?

If Grayson says Sunday is safe then she has to be.

When they have all fallen into line behind the deputy, the steel door slams shut behind them.

“Sir, I have a question,” Grayson says.

“What is it son?” The deputy doesn’t turn around.

“Will Maxwell’s death be released publicly soon? I know he died at the estate, but what does this mean for Darius as the last Thorne?”

The deputy doesn’t answer until he is pushing them into an interview room.

It is bare except for four metal chairs and a large oak table in the center.

“Wait here, I’ll be back after I gather all the documentation.

Shouldn’t take more than an hour.” He goes to close the door, and then furrows his brow, Grayson’s words finally landing.

“Maxwell Thorne? He isn’t dead. In fact, he was up here just before you three.

He’s the reason we had to bring you in. He was throwing wild accusations around.

We know there is no merit to them, but we still have to investigate. ”

The door slams shut and the deputy is marching away before the brothers can comprehend what he just said.

Darius is the first to break out of his stupor. He jumps forward, but the door is locked.

“No!” Axel yells, he lunges next, banging his hands against the door. “You have to let us out! Jane!”

Grayson slumps back against the far wall, his eyes widened in horror. “Oh god.” He presses his hand onto his chest. “My heart is on fire.”

Axel turns from the door and marches over to Grayson, shaking him. “Where did you leave her? Is she safe? You fucking idiot! Why would you leave her behind?”

“I didn’t want her to meet our mother. Didn’t want to—”

“You were ashamed,” Darius states, pressing his head to the cool wood of the door. He brings a hand up to his chest, his fingers digging into the material of his shirt. His heart is burning him from the inside out. “You left her at the restaurant?”

“Yes, I told her Jane was sending Luna over and to sit tight. They were going to meet us at home.”

Darius breathes out, turning to face his brothers. “I think—I think Maxwell has Veronica and William. They were supposed to lead me to Sunday, but William decided to lead me to Maxwell instead...I can’t imagine he was happy when I didn’t show up.”

Axel whips around, turning his full wrath on Darius. It is the first time Darius remembers being on the receiving end of it.

“You. Fucking. Idiots.” Axel swings back as if to punch Darius, but then he pauses.

“Sunday wouldn’t want me to hit you. But if she’s injured?

If she dies because of you keeping this from us?

” Axel swivels his attention. “If we went through all of that. All one hundred fucking lives for this to be her end?” Axel’s voice raises, his eyes darkening.

“I hope you are ready to lose me too, because I won’t be a man without her.

I will finally devolve into the monster I was meant to be.

” Axel lowers his hand and pushes Darius away from the door before grabbing a chair beside him.

He lifts it above his head and crashes it against the door.

It does nothing.

The door is reinforced metal, the room is made of cinderblocks, but Axel doesn’t stop his assault. He continues throwing the chair over and over and over into the door.

Neither Grayson nor Darius stop him.

Grayson still leans against the far wall, his eyes now screwed shut, his face white and strained.

Darius joins him, sinking to the floor, his chin landing on his knees.

He thought the worst part of today was the possibility of seeing his mother again.

But this is worse.

“She’s going to be okay,” Grayson murmurs over and over again.

Darius wants more than anything to believe the words, but the pain in his chest has nearly hit the point of unbearable.

Sunday. Please. Please stay safe. We will be there soon.

## Page 50

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 3:11 am*

“Don’t leave a message, I don’t check my voicemail.”

Axel’s voicemail plays out for the thirtieth time as I drive down the road. I have tried to reach all of the brothers, but none of them have answered the phone.

I don’t have much more time.

“Fuck!” I scream, throwing the phone down next to me.

My knuckles grip the wheel tighter in anxiety.

Each turn causes a flash of terror that I am going to somehow roll the truck.

I haven’t driven a vehicle since...well, since the short distance to the restaurant when I acted as bait.

And Darius’s truck is large, loud, and clunky.

But it is getting me there. Closer to Maxwell.

But then what?

The phone call plays over and over again in my head.

“Oh, so you do recognize my voice. You took everything from me, Sunday School. My brother, my home, my women. Even my fucking mother! She cared more about you than she should!” Maxwell’s voice was pitching in every octave, unhinged and



incredibly chaotic.

“So I took Veronica and her sniveling brother. I was just going to kill them both for their betrayal, but then I realized...you are the cause of every single thing in my life. I’ll tell you what church girl.

Meet me where Tripp and Augustus died. If you do I’ll let Veronica and William go. But if you don’t?”

The threat hung for just a few seconds before he continued.

“Tick-tock, Sunday. Before sunset.”

And then the call had disconnected.

“Fuck!” The sun was setting, slowly sinking down and down. Barely any light was visible as I made my way towards where it all began.

Towards where Rayden shot me.

Towards where Auggie and Tripp died.

Towards where I found Julia’s body.

When I am five minutes out, the sky opens up, rain begins to pelt the windshield and my ability to see diminishes.

At a stop light, I shift my attention to my phone.

Grabbing it, I dial the number that had been calling me on repeat.

“Where the fuck are you? I showed up at the restaurant to get your ass and you were gone.”

“I need your help,” I say as I turn on the bend of road I will be parking on.

“Of course you fucking do. What have you done this time?”

“Listen, Luna. Maxwell, he called me. He has Veronica and William.” My voice is panicked, erratic.

Luna goes silent. The air in my lungs is expanding painfully as I wait for her response. I pull off on the shoulder of the road, putting the vehicle in park.

Lightning illuminates the sky.

“Sunday,” Luna’s tone has changed. “I’ll call my mom. Where are you? We’ll be there soon.”

She doesn’t even bother mentioning to call the cops. Even if William and Veronica are the sheriff’s kids that doesn’t mean anyone in town will help them.

Sterling was able to get out on bail.

I tell her where I am exactly .

“Wait for us.” Luna’s voice is more distant now and then I hear tapping away.

It’s my turn to go silent.

“You’re going to storm in there, without a weapon or anything, aren’t you?”

With my free hand, I dig into the glove compartment, pull out the gun I found in Grayson's desk drawer, and set it carefully on my lap.

"I have a weapon. I just really don't want to have to use it."

Nor am I exactly sure how to.

Luna curses. "Sunday, please girl, don't die. What if it restarts everything all over again? What if you aren't meant to be there?"

"Luna, I'm sorry, but"—I open the door to the truck, the rain is falling even heavier now and it is nearly covering the sinking sun—"I have to go."

Disconnecting the call, I create a group text with my three men.

This is reckless and stupid and I promise I tried to call you all to join me, but I can't let Veronica die. I wouldn't be able to survive it. I love you all. I'll be at the bend. Where Tripp and Auggie died. I'll be okay, I promise.

With the rain continuing to ramp up, I drop my phone on the car seat and grab the gun.

Jumping out, I slam the door shut and tuck the gun in the waistband of my shorts, doing my best to cover it with my now soaked shirt.

In the distance, nearly out of sight and around a bend, I can see a flickering light bulb of a street light.

Following it like a beacon, I make my way towards the end.

Because after this? It will all be over.

Once and for all.

## Page 51

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 3:11 am*

Not Her Day to Die

It isn't déjà vu but something very similar— a premonition —that I feel when I see Maxwell's car.

In my gut, I know with certainty that this is going to be the end. That I will not walk away from this unscathed.

He's parked on the edge of the road next to the bent guard rail. While this stretch of road is open, no one drives it much anymore.

The rain is nearly blinding me now, the sound of the thunder continuously echoing around me, lightning casting eerie glows across the sky.

Tentatively, I make my way closer to his car.

His front door whips open and then, there he is.

Maxwell Thorne.

He is too far away for me to truly catch his expression, but there is a sinister aura that shrouds him.

Darker than blood, nearly black. He is encapsulated in it and as he moves, as he jerks open the back door and drags Veronica out of the car by her hair and onto her knees, it settles around her too.

“Sunday!” she cries. “Please just leave! You don’t need to do this.”

“Shut up!” Maxwell’s hand comes up, a gun in it and I flinch as he shifts it to her. As he crushes the barrel against her skull .

My heart hurts for her, but I don’t move.

“Come on out too, William!” Maxwell shouts over the storm.

The passenger door opens, and William joins him. He places himself directly between Maxwell and me.

“Maxwell, Sunday is here. Please, let Veronica go. She isn’t part of this, she hasn’t done anything wrong.”

“She hasn’t?” Maxwell presses the barrel of the gun further into Veronica, his foot coming up and landing on her back, smashing her into the gravel below.

“She dated the enemy. She got into bed with Augustus and then he just so happened to know to take those pictures? To come to our parties? I didn’t see the patterns at first. But she was always lingering in the background when you came over. She was always privy to my plans.”

“Maxwell”—William’s voice breaks—“please. I have done everything you have ever asked. You promised you would keep her safe if I did. You promised she wouldn’t be caught up in this.” William falls to his knees, bowing his head.

“A sniveling coward.” Maxwell removes his foot from Veronica, but then he kicks her flat onto the ground. “Stay down there and keep your mouth shut for once .” He bounces the gun around, from her to William, before landing on me.

She whimpers but doesn't speak again.

I stare down the barrel at him and jut my chin out, squaring my shoulders.

I am terrified, my blood is frozen, and I want nothing more than to run. But I can't.

It's too late.

"I already murdered your brother here, wouldn't it be fitting to kill you in the same place?"

"Maxwell bares his teeth. His typical slicked back hair is pressed to his scalp by the rain.

"You know, Veronica here was supposed to join them, but then William begged me for her life. He didn't even ask about your brother once. Nor Tripp."

My hands clench into fists as Maxwell steps over Veronica and around William. Until he is inches from me. His eyes are unfocused, manic. He brings the gun up, puts the barrel against the bottom of my chin.

"It would be so easy to kill you, church girl. So fucking easy." His tongue lashes out, licking his lips.

Thunder booms around us, and I cannot help but flinch from it.

"You've grown up so much, trying to act all tough.

"He uses his free hand to lash out and grab my wrist, he tugs me until I am flat against him.

“If only my father had given you to me. We could have had our happily ever after.”  
The laugh that leaves Maxwell is grating, a rake on a chalkboard.

“Or maybe I would have just fucked you and then put you in a shallow grave.” His dick hardens disgustingly between us. “ Fuck. ”

He shoves me just a bit away before dragging me behind him.

I turn back, trying to catch William’s eyes. But his attention is focused below my head.

On my ass?

Before the thought can circulate, Maxwell is shoving me to the edge of the cliff.

To where Tripp and Auggie went off the road.

Where Maxwell crashed into them and forced them off the road.

“They screamed the entire way down, but I knew when they hit the bottom. It was just silent .”

My grief which had been shoved down for so long, hits hard and fast.

It takes several beats before I return to the here and now. To realize Maxwell is still talking.

“—and imagine my surprise. They died, but then we couldn’t find the fucking evidence anywhere. And then you clearly had found it. Like brother, like sister.”  
Maxwell pushes me closer to the edge, and I dig my heels into the ground.



There is barely any space between us, and I am forced to twist around and wrap my arms around him.

It is a horrible creepy feeling as his aura begins to sink into my skin.

Maxwell is no longer a human in my eyes. He is the epitome of every evil that has touched this town.

Perhaps it is the fact that he is clearly not fully here, but he hasn't noticed the gun.

But I remember it.

"Let me say goodbye," William calls out.

I find him over Maxwell's shoulder. He is closing the gap between us now. My attention flickers around until I find her. Veronica is further away, behind Maxwell's car, her eyes focused unblinkingly in my direction.

The rain is still pouring. We are all drenched. It is painful, uncomfortable, but not enough to stamp out the awful that is this night.

Maxwell steps back and my arms fall as I step away from the edge.

"Say goodbye to Sunday? How fucking sweet. Fine. Why the fuck not?" Maxwell huffs but steps away and allows just enough space for William to wrap me in his arms.

"Take care of Veronica. She is going to need a friend. Need someone to hold onto." William's words don't make any sense, but then he is reaching down. Tugging the gun from the band of my shorts.

Spinning around. Raising the weapon.

“Goodbye Maxwell.” William pushes me away from the edge, off and towards the guardrail.

“No you fucking—” Maxwell charges.

Bang!

The shot is loud, sharp, painful and I want to cover my ears, but I turn to face the men.

The scene plays out in a clipped burst of pictures.

William twisting Maxwell, pushing him towards the edge.

Maxwell reaching out, extending.

William side-stepping him.

Maxwell raising the gun, aiming it at me.

William diving towards him.

Bang!

This time I try to dive forward to grab hold of William’s shirt.

I miss it by inches.

And then they both are tumbling. Their screams are nearly drowned out by the rain.

Nearly.

Falling to my knees, I try to desperately see if William will make it.

Veronica's wail is piercing and sharp as I hear her footsteps behind me. But then she doesn't stop, passing me, and I have to catch her from launching off the edge.

"Stop! Stop!"

The screaming is gone now.

They're both dead.

And again, just like before...

It's my fault.

Veronica fights me for a few beats until she falls to the ground with me. Holding her in my arms, I clutch her as tightly as I can.

Lightning strikes in the sky as the rain puddles at our feet, we are soaked to the bone.

Together we fall apart. We grieve .

Veronica's sobs mix with the onslaught of rain and thunder. She shakes in my arms as we settle in this new world with one less person.

Another brother taken too soon.

I want more than anything to be strong for Veronica, but Maxwell has opened old wounds, and it doesn't take long for my grief to swallow me whole.

And just like that I become a broken sobbing mess.

The Baby Girl.

## Page 52

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 3:11 am*

Get up. They're going to be here soon. The words echo around us. You need to get up. Don't let them find you there.

Breaking apart from Veronica, I look around. Trying to find the source of the voice.

Get up! Now!

Jerking to my feet, I grab Veronica and haul her with me back to Darius's truck.

"We have to get dry." Casting my attention around the area, I don't see anyone else. But the voice was as if it were spoken into my ear.

As soon as we are in Darius's truck, I hear the sirens.

My breathing comes out in heavy broken pants and then there are four cop cars pulling up to Maxwell's vehicle.

From where I am parked, they can't see us, but even still, I lower further in the seat. "Veronica, I don't think they should know we were there."

That's correct. Stay out of trouble. Then you will be done with this. All of this. This time, when the voice wraps around me, I am able to recognize where it is coming from.

Me.

Except it's not me. I chalk it up to another part of dying over and over again.

Veronica is silent as she lowers down, hiding in the truck with me .

“Veronica, I’m sorry.”

She breathes in and out a few times but doesn’t reply. She stares blankly out the window in a nearly catatonic state.

Even as hypocritical as it is, I want to shake her out of it, but then my phone chimes loudly, causing me to jump and my head to hit the steering wheel.

Grabbing hold of it, I answer. “I’m okay,” I say. “I’m with Veronica, I’ll meet you at home.” Disconnecting the call before Axel can lay into me or pepper me with questions I don’t want to answer, I shift back up to my seat and turn the truck on.

Veronica doesn’t get up from the floorboard, and I don’t make her.

Putting it in drive, I keep the lights off as I turn around.

Away from the cops, hidden by the bend and the thick onslaught of rain.

The thunder drowning out Darius’s raucous truck.

The storm is still ramping up all around us, a match to the mood in the vehicle, and I drive extra carefully, maneuvering through it towards my home.

The O’Brien’s house.

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It isn’t but ten minutes after we have made it inside the house that the front door is slammed open. I have found towels for Veronica and I and we are in the process of

drying off when Axel marches his way up to me. He lifts me clean off the ground and forces me to wrap my legs around his waist.

“Never again!” he bites out. And then he is pressing his harsh lips to mine. Enveloping me in his leather scent, mixed with the fresh rain. He is soaking wet, but I ignore it as he fills me with his anger, his worry, his love .

Tugging apart from Axel, I stare into his eyes. “I’m sorry, I didn’t have a choice, but I tried to call you. All of you,” I insist.

Axel heaves a sigh, casting his attention to Veronica. “The police station took our phones and threw us in a locked room. Thank fuck you returned Luna’s call or I would have lost my damn mind if I were in there a moment longer. Fuck, you’re really okay.”

“Maxwell and my brother are dead,” Veronica states evenly, descending to the couch.

I wrestle out of Axel’s arms, but then Darius is there tugging me into his. He offers me a tight hug and a peck before Grayson takes hold of me next. He cradles me to him, apologizing relentlessly under his breath.

“It’s not your fault.” I squeeze him to me tight before releasing him too. My men and I will have our time to tumble into each other’s arms, for me to fall apart. But right now, Veronica needs me.

Spinning away from the brothers, I land onto the couch next to Veronica, this time I don’t break into a mess of sobs when I wrap her back in my arms.

“I’m sorry,” I say.

“If William would have just taken us to you at the estate. If he would have just

listened to me!” She is shaking.

“I should have let them know.” Darius is the one who speaks, and I whip my attention to him in confusion.

Angling my head, I watch as guilt settles around him; it is a weight that draws down on his face and body.

“William was supposed to take me to you, back at the Thornes, but then I knew something wasn’t right and I bolted.

I should have told you sooner. I planned to but then everything happened so fast here and I wanted you to have just a few days of happiness before having to deal with it.

” The words whoosh from Darius’s mouth, an unbroken chain of remorse .

“No, you did the right thing,” Veronica murmurs against my shirt, squeezing me tighter. I can feel how close she is to falling apart, it is in the way her fingers curl into my skin, as if I am the only thing keeping her here.

Mulling over Darius’s confession I decide I’m not angry or upset, I understand where he was coming from.

I attempt to portray that with my eyes as Veronica’s sobs intensify, as my shirt grows wet.

“My idiot fucking brother! He went through so much, for me. And then he had to go and die. And leave me behind,” Veronica exclaims.

Her words hit close to home.



Tripp and Auggie. I miss them more than I can even put into words. My guilt and grief will most likely always be unwelcome companions in my life. But I am also angry with them.

Angry they went off on their own and got themselves killed.

Angry and grateful.

Grateful that they kept me from befalling the same fate as so many others in this town.

“Where’s your mom?” I ask.

“She left town when we were young, she tried to take us with her, but our dad wouldn’t let her. Oh god, I need to call her. Tell her what happened.” Veronica is falling apart in my arms.

And I let her.

I feel the presence of Grayson as he walks behind the couch, standing guard behind us. Of Axel as he settles onto the arm of it, Darius as he takes up place at my feet.

I feed from what they provide.

Darius’s serenity. It is a welcome sanctuary after this brutal storm.

Axel’s chaos. It makes me realize it’s okay to not be okay .

Grayson’s power. It helps me to stand on my own feet when I can’t do it alone.

They are the pillars that have allowed me to exist without completely dissolving into

a puddle of disgusting mush.

They are all silent, allowing this moment between Veronica and me.

And that is where she and I stay for hours.

After a while, she unlatches herself from me, and then she tells me about William.

How he was always looking out for her; he was so guilt-ridden by everything in this town, but he didn't have a choice.

He eventually confessed to her that he knew what they were going to do to Tripp and Auggie.

She tells me how he never forgave himself...

how it ate him alive...that maybe, somehow, this was his way of making up for it. He sacrificed himself for her. For us.

William was still so young, but forced to make impossible decisions. And even through it all, I could recognize he tried to keep me safe too, at least to the best of his abilities.

And I tell her that. How he warned me away from the Thornes, how he never hurt me, how when he came to me in that disgusting underground prison, he was the reason I was able to escape.

William wasn't perfect, but he didn't deserve to die.

She ignores the men, gushing to me of her past, of memories of her brother, and I offer the same.

And then we move on to Carrie, on how she died, onto Julia and how long she must have been forced to endure alone to only then be cruelly shot. My heart breaks for my friends all over again.

They were taken too soon.

Then we move onto our parents and how it must be to live in a town so encapsulated with evil that they never truly had any choices either .

For hours we go back and forth, exchanging stories, igniting our anger, and eventually the brothers join in. Telling their own tales of Tripp and Auggie's shenanigans, of fond memories together.

Eventually the conversation turns darker, of how this all came to be. Of how it was under everyone's noses but nobody came forward.

They couldn't.

The room is heavy, filled with a barrage of pain and happiness.

Of the weight of those who we have lost, of the memories of their lives.

It's late, well past midnight, and I am exhausted—I imagine we all are—but that does not stop us.

We are grieving together, we are allowing ourselves to feel, to acknowledge, to tip-toe forward.

And the longer we talk, the closer we shift together, our voices lowering to near whispers.

As if we are a group of huddled children expelling our deepest secrets to our safest friends.

By the time we are finished talking, we are all yawning, but I am much lighter. Part of myself is healing, moving on, accepting that this world is horrible and also beautiful.

That I might not ever truly understand it all.

At the very end of it, I whisper, “I killed Mark.”

The confession is different in this open space, as if it has more room to spread and evolve.

“Good,” Veronica says, reaching out and squeezing my hand. “He was the worst of them all.”

“She’s right. If you hadn’t, I would have,” Axel confirms, wrapping an arm over my shoulders.

Grayson grunts his agreement.

Darius brushes the tears from my eyes.

After a few more beats of silence Veronica asks, “Is it okay if I stay here with you tonight? ”

I don’t confirm with the brothers. I know they want time with just me, but I need to be with Veronica. Be here for her. I don’t want her to feel alone right now. I know that in the middle of the night is when her grief will hit the hardest. “Please.”

It isn't much longer before I guide her to my room and offer her a change of clothes. When we get into the bed together, I squeeze her to my side and she continues on from before. But this time our conversation is hushed, whispers of dreams and hopes, and questions of why this happened to us.

A part of me wants to tell her about the loops, about my own survivors' guilt, but I don't. It would be selfish.

For their part, the brothers don't invade our space, but I can hear them all outside the door.

"All of them?" Veronica asks on the cusp of sleep. "If only Auggie could see you now." She laughs around a big yawn.

"Isn't it weird? You don't think Tripp and Auggie would hate me for this, do you?"

Veronica's eyes flutter shut. "No, both of those boys wanted you to be happy. Hell they even joked about you being with the other brothers more times than I can count. Maybe they knew they didn't have much longer and wanted to set you up for your own happiness.

Or maybe they were just—" A yawn cuts her off.

"Thank you, Sunday. For being here, for everything. I love you."

"I love you too." And I do. Veronica is someone who has risked herself time and time again and again for others. She is selfless. She is sweet and kind. She is strong. And I know that no matter what happens, she will always hold a place in my heart. I will always consider her family.

Soft snores break through my thoughts, and it isn't but a second later that I hear the

door open and close.

“Axel,” I warn .

“It’s me.”

Rolling carefully over, I find Grayson’s eyes watching me.

“Grayson?”

He leans down, gently brushing my hair back, before pressing his lips tenderly to mine.

Even outside of the restaurant, away from the water, the smell of the marina carries with him.

The salt and diesel swirling hypnotically.

He is trapping me in this moment with him, keeping my full attention, as his pillowed lips move against mine.

My heartbeat ramps up, my previous calm replaced by a frenzy of energy.

He separates, pressing his cool forehead to mine. “I won’t stay in here, I will give you two space. I’m making Darius and Axel get some sleep, God knows they need it. But I will be right outside. And I won’t go anywhere.”

I have my doubts that either Darius or Axel will listen to him, but I don’t argue. “Are you okay? What about your mother?”

Grayson gently pulls back. “We didn’t see her, but it sounds like she’s going to be

placed in a mental health facility.

That's the direction her defense will push at least. Maybe one day in the future I will go see her, but...

"He rakes a hand through his hair, standing back up to his full height.

"I don't think she will ever be a part of our lives again.

It's just the three of us now." He smiles down at me. "The four of us."

"What about..." I turn my head to make sure Veronica is still asleep. "What about my parents? The blackmail. Will they be able to come home now?" I'm not sure if I want them to.

"I called them earlier. Let them know that Sterling is dead. They're coming back. They love and care about you, Sunday. They checked in with me nearly every day about you. They were just scared to contact you directly. Afraid it would mean putting you in the Thornes cross-fire."

My stomach twists up into a painful cluster of knots. I don't know how I feel about my parents .

But I need to speak to them.

"Get some sleep. I'll be right outside if you need me." Grayson's lips brush my forehead before he walks silently out of the room, quietly shutting the door.

I don't think I'll be able to sleep, but it isn't but a few beats later that my eyelids grow heavy, my breathing evens, and the weight of the day catches up with me.

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 3:11 am*

“It’s time to decide.”

Blinking rapidly, I turn on my heel. Mirrors. They surround me.

My image reflected one hundred times. I am wearing what I went to sleep in.

Attempting to move forward, my face slams into glass.

“Patience.” The voice rolls across my spine, raising goosebumps in its wake.

My fingernails dig into my palms as I wait. The mirrors shimmer and shift. Now instead of my pajamas, I’m wearing a dress. The same one I wore to Tripp and Auggie’s memorial.

The image changes again. Now I am the girl who went to Maxwell’s party.

And it continues to flicker. Different versions of myself, different outfits, different expressions. On and on it goes.

“What is this?” Tears are clouding my vision, heating my eyes, but I blink them away.

“It’s you, Sunday. It’s me. We are alive and dead. We both exist and we don’t.” The words are an icy net as they tickle across my nerves.

Schrodinger’s Sunday.



The images continue to cycle through over and over again. Some of the outfits I don't recognize, the expressions, the faces. It is incredibly eerie to watch myself, but have no recollection of who the person is.

A familiar stranger.

"What is this?" I ask again .

Now the images shift. They're places.

The memorial, the upstairs bedroom, the river bend, the space center.

"Stop!" Dropping to the ground, I wrap my arms around myself.

"Get up! It's time, Sunday. It's time to decide."

A force tugs me to my feet, demanding me to stare down the mirror. There are now a hundred different images. One hundred different bodies. But all of them are me.

"Decide what?" I scream, circling around, trying to locate the source of the voice.

To block out the sight of my deaths.

When I spin, I just find a reflection of myself again. Of me in my pajamas.

But then their lips move. Speaking to me. "Sunday, you're braver than you give yourself credit for."

I cannot explain the eeriness of watching myself speak, of hearing the words, but knowing they didn't come from me.

Except they did.

“No I’m not.” I keep my focus on my reflection. Not letting my eyes wander to the other images. To the ones of me. Dead. “How did I survive this?”

“How?” My reflection cocks her head. “Why?” She puts a hand on her hip.

“Who are you?”

She curls her lips, baring her teeth. “I’m the version of you who remembers it all. Who took in all the memories of our past lives.” She lifts a hand and purple strands form from each of her fingers. She watches as they swirl and dissolve into the air.

“What if I don’t want to remember it all? Does that make me a coward?”

My reflection shifts her eyes to mine; she drops her hand, giving me her full attention .

“No. It makes you you . But even if you choose to forget. There will be times when the memories will hit you. A flash of déjà vu, a smell you can’t stand to be around, a barrel, a sound that soothes your soul. Each of these timelines are a part of you. Just as I am.”

The mirrors change all around us until we are cast in complete darkness. My vision goes black, but I am not scared.

And then two doors form out of the shimmering strands. One to my left, sparked in red and white, swirling and flashing, nearly blinding me.

To my right, the other is a bright purple, pulsating with my heartbeat, calm and serene.

“One is to remember.” The red and white one pulsates. “One is to forget.” The purple brightens. “Just know that once you make your choice, you can’t change it. You will have to live with the consequences, all of them.”

Unease wraps in my gut.

I want to remember every piece of my men, of our time together, of everyone who I know and love.

But I also don’t want to remember the pain of one hundred deaths.

But don’t I deserve it?

“I have a question.” I try to find my reflection again, the version of myself who kept the memories. Perhaps the one who provided the strands, who guided me towards safety. Who warned me of danger. Who forced me to walk on uncomfortable paths.

“One.” The voice is exasperated. Tired.

“If I...if I choose to forget. What will happen to you?”

“You stupid girl. We are the same. We are different. I will exist within you just as I always have, you just won’t know it.

Or perhaps I never existed, perhaps I am simply a figment of your imagination that you use to cope with the marks on your soul.

Because Sunday, your— our —soul? It was nearly black until those purple strands found you.

Nearly irredeemable. Nearly a void of emptiness. A dead girl with finite time.”

“Don’t I owe it to them to remember?” My eyes trace the two doors.

“Do you think they would want you to? To feel the pain over and over again? They have had time to process, but it would hit you all at once.”

But don’t I deserve it? Don’t they deserve to be with someone who remembers every memory with them?

Except...But...

FUCK.

“I’ve made my choice,” I say, turning to face the door.

“So you have. May you find peace in your decision.” And then there’s pressure on my shoulder blades forcing my body forward through the door. Hands pushing me . Not just two hands but dozens–hundreds.

The light explodes around me. Vibrant colors sparking across my vision in a nauseating kaleidoscope.

And then I am falling.

“ Sunday! Sunday! Wake up!”

“Huh? Wha—”

Arms wrap around me. “You scared me.” Veronica clutches me to her.

I’m still coming to, but I hug her back. “I’m fine, I was just dreaming.”

Behind us the door slams open. “What’s going on?”

“Nothing! Get out!” Veronica yells over my shoulder.

It takes a few, but I hear the door clink shut again.

“I’m sorry. Your breathing was so shallow and your face seemed extra pale. And fuck. William is dead.” Her voice breaks. “Does it get any easier?”

“Some days. You ready to get up?”

She drops her hold on me, getting up from the bed and appraising the room, her lips quirk at the sight of Auggie’s hoodie. “I miss him, too. He was the sweetest man, the best boyfriend I could ask for. He always put me first.”

“It sounds like he also put you in danger.” I grab the hoodie out of the box, offering it to her. “If you want it. I have a few.”

“He didn’t know how dangerous it was, he thought it was just teenagers drugging

girls.

And when we knew it was more, I wouldn't let him stop me.

"She takes his hoodie from me, clutching it to her chest. "It's just us now, Sunday.

And the other O'Briens." Her eyes crinkle in humor, breaking through her frown.  
"All three of them? "

My cheeks heat in embarrassment. "It's crazy, isn't it? I dated their brother . Their dead brother." I flinch at the words. At how they might land.

Veronica winces but doesn't react otherwise.

"It is a bit insane, but so is this town. So is what you have gone through. What we have gone through. If they make you happy, and it works? Then who fucking cares. God knows I wish I had that support system. But I called my mom. She's going to be here soon to pick me up. "

"Good. And you have my number, if you ever need me, I'm just a call away."

Veronica grasps the hoodie tighter to her. "Are you sure I can have this? I miss him too, you know? I was just beginning to accept a world without him, and now—" Her bottom lip wobbles. She breathes in and out a few times.

"Yes, I'm sure. He would have wanted you to have it." Turning behind me, I grab a change of clothes for her. "My clothes might not fit you exactly right, but they should make do until your mom is here. Unless you want us to take you by your home."

Veronica stiffens. "No, I don't want to see our dad .

Other than maybe to witness the look on his face when he realizes his son is dead.

That in some convoluted way it's his fault.

He never took part in the despicable bits of this town, but he turned a blind eye, he helped cover up their crimes, he fucking held onto Auggie's car.

And he is evil in his own way." She rubs her neck anxiously.

I can tell there's more to it than that, in the way her breathing turns erratic, in the cadence of her voice, but I don't push her.

"Bathroom is through there, take a shower, relax your body to make up for how bad your mind feels. "

"Yeah." She takes the clothes from me listlessly before walking to the bathroom.

Leaving me to my thoughts. Leaving me to the realization that it is finally.

Officially.

Over.

But now what?

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 3:11 am*

“Sunday? Can you come downstairs?” It’s Grayson outside of my room.

I cast a glance back to the bathroom. Walking to it, I yell through the door.

“Veronica, I’m going to go downstairs. Do you need anything?”

“No, I’m good, just having a necessary mental breakdown, but I’m managing, I promise.”

My mind wars with me, but I decide to leave her to it. She seems like she’s doing as well as can be expected. And Veronica was always strong, she always held herself together well. Even after Auggie’s death.

Throwing on my own set of clothes, I head out the door, only to find Darius on the other side.

He offers me his hand. “I’m sorry I didn’t tell you about Veronica and William.”

I take his, squeezing it reassuringly. “I understand, just don’t keep any more big secrets like that again, okay?” I look up at him through my lashes.

He is still broken up about what we went through, but I can already tell he’s healing. He’s more comfortable.

Tugging him to me, I use one hand to grip him by the neck, dragging him down to my level and then reaching up on my tiptoes, I push my lips against his.

Pressing my emotions into him. Showing him with my mouth how much I love him.



For a moment, he doesn't react but then his tongue tangles with mine, the piercing ever present, offering a cool reprieve in the fire he ignites inside of me.

His hand finds the small of my back, wrenching me up and closer.

A throat clearing has him wrenching back. I nearly stumble in the movement, but he stabilizes me.

"Sunflower?" Turning, I come face-to-face with my parents. My skin heats, a lead drops in my stomach.

"I told them to wait downstairs," Axel chuckles, slinking up from behind them on the stairs. He marches forward, heaving me into his arms before dropping a kiss on the tip of my nose.

"Axel," I warn.

"What Sunday? Just need your parents to know you're well looked after. Can't leave them thinking it's just Darius they need to approve of."

My mom's face is white, but my dad doesn't even react. "I told you this would happen," he tells her before offering me a sad smile. "We'll be next door when you're ready." He grabs hold of my mom's wrist and takes her with him down the stairs.

Grayson pops his head around the corner a few minutes later. "Why did they leave so suddenly?" He sees Axel with his hold on me and narrows his eyes. "Of course you would be the culprit."

Shrugging out of Axel's hold, I offer him an overdramatic glare before pecking Darius on the cheek. "I need to go see them." Turning to Grayson. "Will you come with me please? I don't...I don't want to do this alone."

“What about us?” Axel grumbles.

“They just saw you and Darius with me. I think it might be best to just bring Grayson.”

Axel grunts his disapproval but doesn’t argue. However, I know that he’s going to be just outside, but hopefully, he will stay out of sight.

Grayson furrows his eyebrows in confusion. “Of course, ready?”

I’m not .

My emotions are haywire and the sight of my parents has left me with more bad feelings than good.

But I want to speak to them, to hear them out, especially now that I know the extent of their suffering.

Know how little choice they had. How they tried to make the most out of the worst possible scenario.

I jerk my head. “Don’t let Veronica leave without saying goodbye?” I toss the words to Darius.

“Of course.”

Satisfied, I lead the way down the steps and next door. It isn’t my home any longer. And I’m not sure if I would have the strength to re-enter the space if not for Grayson’s comforting form following close behind me.

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 3:11 am*

Being back in the dining room where my parents tossed me aside months ago is a weird feeling. So much has changed since then; I barely feel like the same person.

I'm not the same person.

The thought is jolting as I drag one of the chairs out, it scrapes loudly on the hardwood floor.

When I am settled in, I use the last reserves of bravery to look at them.

At my mom and dad. My last connection to Auggie.

My mom looks... bad. Her typically neat appearance is worn and haggard. Her hair is in disarray, wrinkles are etched heavily into her skin.

My dad on the other hand...well, he appears tired too, but there's a light in his eyes that I haven't seen in longer than I can remember. And he isn't drinking, he doesn't smell of booze.

"You're back," I say, because there's nothing else I can think of. Nothing else that truly makes sense.

"Sweetie." My dad casts a look above me at Grayson who stands just behind me. "I'm not sure what you know. But..."

I stiffen. "Do you not realize that I was at the Thorne's when they were arrested?"

That I was in their dungeon?” The words escape my lips in anger before I can draw them back.

“The place that you all knew existed, but did absolutely nothing to stop?!” I’m practically screaming now.

My anger is hitting hard and fast, and I have zero chance to contain it .

My mother is crying now, horror has stricken my father’s face, but still I don’t want to stop.

But then Grayson places his hands on my shoulders and it’s as if a blanket of calm washes through me.

My dad watches the interaction with critical eyes and thin lips.

He reaches up, brushing some of his wayward curls from his face, before steepling his hands.

“We didn’t know you were there. We– I’m sorry, sweetie.

I’m sorry that we were cowards and took the easiest route to not get caught up in it.

I could say we didn’t know, and while we didn’t know the full picture, we did hear the whispers. The rumors.”

“No, this isn’t your fault.” My mother places a hand on my dad’s, squeezing it. “I’m the one that met you at college and forced you to move to this town. That didn’t warn you.”

My dad reaches over, wiping away her tears before kissing both her cheeks.

The image pierces my heart more than it has any right to.

“When we lost Augustus, I went to Sterling Thorne. I pleaded my case. Begged him to spare you. And he promised he would, but that we would take travel contracts and you needed to stay in this town. That we weren’t to contact you.

That I needed to pretend as if Auggie’s death was an accident.

” My mother catches my attention, holds it.

Her eyes are dark and stormy. “Still, we considered sending you to your grandmother’s.

Or running in the middle of the night. Fleeing and going as far as we could.

But I wasn’t sure how far we would make it before this town caught up to us.

And that’s when Grayson approached us. When he told us that he knew how dangerous this town was, but he knew how to keep you protected.

That he would do everything in his power to keep you out of their radar.

” My mother’s attention follows Grayson’s hands from my shoulders up to the man himself.

She offers a wistful smile. “But then you were shot. ”

“And you came back?”

My dad inclines his head. “We were going to break the rules. We were going to take you with us. But when we left the hospital, your mother and I were picked up by

Sterling's men.

We were offered a warning, shown surveillance of you in the hospital, and thrown back on the streets.

And so we left. But Grayson kept us updated.

He promised he was keeping an eye on you, that all the brothers would keep you safe.  
”

“They did,” I confirm, reaching up and squeezing Grayson's hand.

“Is that why you fell in love with them?”

My mother's question causes me to literally jump, my knee hits the top of the dining room table and I wince.

“What do you—”

My mom raises her thin lips tightly. “It only took a single instant to notice. It's just like how you were with Tripp.”

“You knew about him ?”

My dad laughs. “You aren't as sneaky as you think you are.

Augustus knew too. We all did.” My dad's attention bounces up to Grayson.

“I don't like this. Especially with how old he is.

And I don't understand how you think dating three brothers is going to work, but

Sunflower, you're an adult and I hope you're happy. You deserve it."

I feel Grayson move behind me, but I don't react.

Hardening my shoulders, I level both with a stony stare. "I am happy. Happy in spite of everything that has happened." Tears well in my eyes. "And I—" I break off in a sob, my hard facade withering as my emotions well up.

My parents jump to their feet and Grayson releases me, staying nearby but letting my parents wrap me in their arms. Allowing them the space to hug me .

"Oh sweetheart," my mom coos in my ear. "I'm so sorry. I wish I could change so many parts of the past, but I can only promise to do better by you going forward."

My dad remains silent, but I feel his hand on my back as he comforts me.

I can't remember the last time my parents hugged me.

The realization causes another wave of sadness. But my parents don't let go, even as I sob, even as I fall apart in their arms.

In some ways, I will never forgive either of them. For leaving me when I was at my lowest. For running from the truth. For accepting that this town was evil and doing nothing to stop it.

But in this time together I let some of the anger, the hate, fade from my heart.

They did the best they could given impossible choices. Just as so many before them had.

After finally breaking apart, I explain to my parents that I won't be staying, that I

plan to remain with the O'Briens for as long as they will have me.

Neither of them seem to agree with me, but they also don't argue.

Back in the O'Brien's home, I feel a wave of relief as soon as I step through the door. The house has quickly become my home.

"Veronica?" She's by the front door.

"My mom is pulling up, I was just waiting for you to come back." The corner of her lips tug up and she opens her arms.

I fall into them, squeezing her tightly to me. For a moment, terror strikes. "You promise you'll be back? This isn't goodbye?" I ask.

Veronica chuckles. "No, this isn't goodbye, Sunday. I'll be back and I have your number. I promise to text you everyday. But I need to leave this town for a while. For as long as I can. I need to see the rest of the world, that it isn't all caked in ugliness. That it can be beautiful. "

"I understand."

And I do. Except I don't plan on leaving.

Squeezing her one last time, we release each other. Veronica casts a look over my shoulder. "You three better take care of her for me. For Auggie. For Tripp."

They all offer their agreement. And then she gives me one last heavy look, before marching out of the door.

And then it's just me and the O'Brien brothers.



Alone at last.

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 3:11 am*

“Y ou can say no.” Axel walks up to me, tugging me to his side.

“No,” I say.

Darius laughs. “Good keep fucking with him like that, Axel needs a reality check.”

Axel ignores him entirely. “I’m going to remember that,” he whispers into my ear, before licking my lobe.

The electricity that shoots down my spine keeps me from responding.

“That’s better.” Axel reaches into his pocket before brandishing its contents.

Tickets.

“The space center?” My heart beats in my throat.

Grayson walks forward, cupping my cheek in one of his large hands. He bends until we are eye level. “If you don’t want to go, you don’t have to. But we thought it might be nice to do something fun . To finally just enjoy our time together.”

My attention flips to Darius, and he inclines his head.

“Please, can we? Just go and forget about the world for the day? Forget about our grief. The time loops. Everything.”

Grayson quirks his lips, placing a chaste kiss on my forehead. “Of course.”

“The loops,” Darius murmurs. “Did your memories ever come back from the other timelines?”

Unease wraps around my stomach, squeezing it uncomfortably. “No,” I say. It isn’t exactly a lie, but it’s also not the truth. “Sort of,” I splutter. “It’s complicated.” I let out an exasperated sigh.

“Your body remembers, but your mind doesn’t?” Darius asks.

I incline my head. Because that is the closest to the correct answer I can think of.

“Good.” Axel’s fingers dig into my skin. “You don’t need to remember everything you went through. You deserve a break.”

And maybe he’s right. But the guilt of not knowing furrows deep in my belly.

I ignore it, pushing it as far down as I can.

“Can we go today?” Now that they have planted the seed, I realize how much I need this trip. This distraction.

“Yes,” Axel chimes in first, twisting me in his arms. Planting his lips firmly on mine, searing me.

I’m not sure if I will ever get used to Axel’s brand of love. To his explosive and chaotic tendencies. But that’s okay. I need the shock to my system. Need the reminder that I’m alive.

And then he’s releasing me, and I’m twisting in his arms, breaking from his hold, escaping upstairs to change.

And then we all file into Grayson's car that Jane had returned yesterday.

I am excited to finally, after all this time, have some sort of semblance of calm.

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 3:11 am*

Watching Sunday enjoying the space center is always Darius's favorite memory. She had taken him here the most out of all the brothers in previous lives, but in this loop, it was Grayson she had dragged along.

"She's going to hurt herself," Grayson says worriedly as Sunday jumps from one station to the next, her dress fluttering around her. Examining all the placards, touching all the interactive spots, exploring all the areas.

"Let her have fun," Axel argues.

At one point in the day, Sunday needs to use the restroom and the air grows tense, but then she leads them inside to a central area.

The brothers hold their breath the entire time she's out of their sight. They all wait for her, expecting the worst.

But then she returns. In one piece.

"She's alive. And she's going to stay that way." Darius isn't sure if he's trying to convince his brothers or himself.

"She is. And this is going to work out. And you two will wonder why you didn't trust me all along," Axel replies snarkily, striding forward, wrapping an arm around Sunday's shoulders.

"Luna was a part of this, too," Darius blurts out. "She remembers everything. All of the loops."

Grayson flicks his attention over. “I heard. I couldn’t imagine her suffering. I hope she does what she can to heal. ”

Darius goes silent, his mind flipping and whirring in guilt and unease. In a lot of ways Luna reminds him of his mom. Caught in an endless loop of trauma.

“You know, I don’t blame you,” Grayson’s words hit Darius unexpectedly.

“You don’t?”

“No.” Grayson reaches out, ruffling Darius’s hair affectionately.

Axel and Sunday are arguing now, she’s trying to drag him onto a simulator ride and he is having no part in it. But then she whispers in his ear, and he launches forward with her.

Leaving Grayson and Darius to themselves.

“I’m the reason our mom left. Why she couldn’t stay behind.” Darius has spent years feeling unwanted. As the odd one out.

Grayson heaves a sigh, wraps an arm around Darius offering a half-hug.

“She wasn’t doing well before you were born.

It was only a matter of time before she stopped coming home.

And besides that. None of that is your fault.

You were the victim. Tripp and Axel always had each other, but you were always so alone.

I wanted to be there for you, but I was afraid I would overstep.

I was afraid you would decide to leave us.

To choose to be with the Thornes, and then when I realized you weren't going anywhere I was so terrified of losing our house that I forgot to check in with you. I'm sorry for that."

Darius leans into Grayson, watching as the simulator rides raises and lowers. Rocks side to side. He can almost hear a masculine scream from inside.

"You were forced to grow up too fast. You must have been lonely too." Darius pulls back from Grayson as the ride ends.

He waits with bated breath. And then there she is.

Sunday .

The dress she wears is bright and yellow, covered in sunflowers, it is a reminder of their past.

The promise of their future.

He watches as Sunday steps off. Sees Axel's eyes track her movements. Notices the way Grayson's body relaxes at the sight of her. Feels his own heart beat just a bit faster.

"But we won't be alone anymore. She is the glue that holds us all together. The piece we didn't realize we were missing. And maybe we don't deserve her, but I'm so glad she chose us. So glad that fate wrapped us all up together."

Grayson's attention doesn't shift from Sunday's form. "Me too."



*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 3:11 am*

It is late when we make it back into the car. Darius is in the passenger seat, Grayson is driving.

But Axel is in the back with me.

It isn't but ten minutes into the drive when he begins. His rough fingers trailing up my bare thigh, up and up towards the apex.

He leans over, whispering into my ear. "You should wear dresses more often. Are you going to keep your promise?"

In the space center, I promised him whatever he wanted if he got on the simulator with me. I should have known I would be paying for that sooner than later.

In the front, Darius and Grayson are quiet, I imagine they are exhausted after a long day of me dragging them in every direction.

Hopefully, they won't notice...

Widening my legs just a fraction, Axel accepts the invitation. His fingers trace the outline of my underwear before finding my clit through the material.

He begins to rub soft teasing circles, and I am forced to bury my head into his shoulder to contain the moan that attempts to escape me.

My nipples are painful points as he continues his teasing. He circles and circles and circles, causing my body to tense and wind and then he just completely stops for a

solid minute before restarting again .

Embarrassment blooms as I can feel a wet spot forming on my underwear.

“Axel,” I whisper under my breath.

Grayson is still fully focused on driving, and it almost appears as if Darius may have fallen asleep; his head is slumped against the passenger window.

“Take your underwear off and get on my lap. You can pretend to sleep there.”

Uncertainty washes through me, but then he begins the wind up again and my reservations go out the window.

Raising up just an inch off my seat, I silently slide out of my underwear with Axel’s help, kicking them carefully onto the floorboard.

Grayson is sitting directly in front of me, but he doesn’t move at all, still entirely focused on getting us home.

We are on back country roads now, there aren’t any street lights and the street is winding and thin. Grayson will need to give it his entire attention. He won’t turn around. He won’t notice.

At least that’s what I tell myself.

“Sleep in my lap,” Axel says for the entire car’s sake.

Grayson glances in the mirror for a second, meeting my eyes before focusing back on the road. “Axel, she needs to be buckled.”

“ Grayson ,” Axel snarks back. “She needs to rest, chill out.”

Grayson doesn't respond.

Axel drags me onto his lap, so that we are face to face. My bare cunt against his unbuttoned jeans. My dress fluttering around us. Even if Grayson and Darius were to turn around they couldn't see what we were doing .

They wouldn't be able to tell that Axel is freeing his cock. That he is reaching between us to tug on a condom. That he is sinking me down on his length.

He squeezes me to him as if I were in fact just going to sleep on him, but then the winding road causes us to bump a bit, and he rocks with it, burrowing into me further.

Providing the friction I so desperately need.

He has left me a wound up mess, and I want more than anything to ride him, to find my pleasure.

But I don't want Grayson or Darius to notice.

Except maybe some deep part of me does.

Shoving the thought down an unexpected bounce has him hissing below me and dragging me even closer to him. He burrows his face into my neck breathing me in.

“Just like that.”

## Page 60

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 3:11 am*

Grayson's hands clench on the wheel as his attention flicks to his stiff cock in his pants before returning to driving.

Does she think I don't know what they're doing? Does he?

Grayson finds another bump in the road accelerating onto it at just the right angle. He hears the small gasp Sunday releases.

Grayson is essentially helping his brother fuck Sunday, but that isn't how he thinks of it.

He is getting her ready, because as soon as they get home, she will be his .

His eyes flick to Darius, to the one that decided to feign sleeping.

He wishes he could have gone that route, too, because forced to drive? Without his eyes finding Sunday in the mirror? Listening to the sounds she releases as Grayson helps to find her pleasure? As the road bumps her up and down? The anticipation of what he plans to do to her?

It is nearly torture.

## Page 61

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 3:11 am*

A xel isn't letting me come.

The realization is both frustrating and confusing. I want more than anything to finish what he started, but besides the help of the road he is barely allowing me to move, keeping me in place. When we are nearly home, I realize I really need to get off.

Off of his cock.

But he holds me in place. "Just a bit longer," he whispers in my ear. "We're driving him crazy."

Stiffening, I know exactly who he is referring to.

Understanding circulates through me, Axel was playing another one of his games. His tumultuous psychotic games.

We whip into the garage and then Grayson throws the car in park. Less than a second later, he wrenches the back door open. He ignores Axel entirely, reaching over and plucking me off of him.

"You're an asshole." Grayson tells him as he tugs me over his shoulder. His hand landing on my ass as he marches us inside.

He doesn't stop until we are in his bedroom. He tosses me unceremoniously onto the bed, and I land on my back. Raising myself up on my shoulders I watch as he quickly relinquishes his clothes. He frees his cock first and it springs up towards his stomach.

He's already hard.

"Grayson?"

His eyes are dark, unfocused as he heaves in and out.

"Do you know what you do to me, Sunday? How that was literal torture listening to your muted mewls? Knowing what you were doing inches behind me? I wanted to take you off of him and have my way with you in the middle of the road. And that dress? That fucking dress, it's a snare.

"Fully naked, he marches to the foot of his bed, staring down at me.

Reaching behind me, I open up the nightstand, and just as expected, I find a condom, but I also find a small metal bullet. A vibrator. I throw both at him.

He catches them, smiling. "Good girl."

It is hypnotic how he rolls the condom down his length, how he keeps my attention, how the typical controlled Grayson is on the verge of erupting. Of letting loose the reins that he usually holds so tightly.

And it is because of me.

I do this to him.

My emotions blossom and billow. "Grayson," I murmur, looking up at him through my lashes, an invitation.

That's all it takes.

He wastes no time on formalities. Reaching out, he grabs hold of my ankles and tugs me to the very edge of the bed before forcing them to wrap around him.

He lines up and then he slowly works his way into me. One of his hands brings the metal bullet up to my clit. “I bought this for you,” he admits as he places it onto me.

The words are a mash as my mind turns into a muddled mess. Axel edged me in the car— and painfully so —it takes less than three seconds with the vibrator on my clit and his cock buried inside of me for my vision to blur and my body to shake and writhe in pleasure .

Grayson smiles down at me. Withdrawing the toy, he allows me to relax, for my orgasm to fade, and then he brings it back.

Hypersensitive, I attempt to wriggle away from it, but Grayson holds it in place, offering a knowing look, his eyebrows pinched in concentration. “I love watching you fall apart. I want to see it over and over again.”

His other hand finds my hip bone to stabilize me, to keep me in place.

“You truly are made for us aren’t you?” That is the last he says before he begins to rock into me, the vibrator amplifying the sensitivity of my nerves.

It is too much. It isn’t enough. I need more. I need less.

“Grayson!” The scream is harsh and biting, but I have been shoved unceremoniously off an edge again.

The buildup Axel created has left me poised and ready, my body eager to fulfill every missing orgasm it was denied.

And Grayson is here to wring each and every single one of them out of me.

He quirks his lips as I convulse around him again.

“Two,” he says. “You’re going to give me one more. You can do that, can’t you, baby girl?”

Whimpering, sweat has formed on my forehead, but he releases my hip to wipe it away.

“That’s a good Sunday.” Again he removes the vibrator, and in the interim he peppers me with kisses. Across my cheek, my nose, my forehead, my lips.

Then he is placing it back, and this time, it is nearly unbearable.

But then he is snapping his hips and his cock draws my attention, thick and hard, it is relentless as he pounds into me. He presses a button on the vibrator, and the speed increases.

My muscles poise and tighten, forcing me along towards another drop .

“Just like that, you can do it, can’t you?” Grayson’s gentle tone is at odds with the forced pleasure he is wringing from me.

But I am enjoying all of it. Every piece of this encounter will join my sacred memories.

Grayson growls and his movements turn frenetic.

“Cum!” he demands of me, less gentle now.



“I—”

He speeds up the vibrator again, and this time, my body listens to him. When the waves release from me, the liquid pleasure escaping, this time I know what it is. But my cheeks brighten nonetheless.

Grayson’s eyes light up, his lips lift in the most cocky of smiles. “You squirted all over me.” He praises me, “Such a good girl.” Bending over, he peppers me with kisses again. “Now let me get you cleaned up.”

And just like that, my shame is a distant memory as he withdraws from me before guiding me to his bathroom.

## Page 62

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 3:11 am*

Out of the shower, Grayson leads me back to my room.

“Why not your bed?” I ask.

“We agreed, you would always sleep in your room, barring when you were injured. We wanted you to always have your own space. And you can kick us out if you want, but we felt it was the most fair,” Grayson explains, taking my hand and kissing my knuckles.

Opening the door to my room, Darius is already in the bed, but Axel is sitting on the ground with his legs crossed. They’re watching a movie.

The sight is comical, and a laugh bubbles up from me.

The brothers both flash their attention to me, their faces lighting up.

“Come here,” Darius says.

Standing on tiptoes, I offer Grayson a kiss on the lips before making my way to Darius’s side. He opens the blanket for me, and I crawl into his waiting arms.

“Isn’t this weird?” I ask. Because again now that the dust is settling, I can’t help but to feel that way.

Axel chuckles but doesn’t get up from the floor. “Only you would think dating multiple men is weird after dying ninety-nine times. No, this is likely the most normal part of our lives, so stop worrying about it.”

“But what about rules? Boundaries? What if you all end up hating me, or worse, each other? ”

Darius squeezes me tighter to him. “Sunday, we hated each other before you fell into our lives. Since meeting you, we have spent more time together than we ever had before. And we have our own boundaries, we are all capable of expressing them to each other when and if the need arises. Just as you should to us.”

“But you’re all brothers and Tripp .” His name feels forbidden. As if speaking him into existence is going to cause our relationships to implode.

Grayson marches to the bed, bends at the hips, and stares directly into my eyes.

“Tripp will always be our brother. He will always be your first love. And maybe in a lot of ways, this isn’t right, but Sunday, I’m tired of running from our fate.

I’m tired of suppressing our feelings. I’m tired of denying that you are ours.

Tripp would more than understand, and we will always strive to do right by him.

Let me ask you this, do you love us? Will you allow us to prove to you the same? ”

My eyes are glistening by the end of Grayson’s uncharacteristic speech. Darius tightens his hold on me, pulling me further into him.

“Yes, I love you. All of you.”

“And we do, too.” Satisfied, Grayson makes his way to the other side of the bed. Sitting on it, he leans back and focuses on the movie.

He relaxes.

We all do.

Breathing in and out steadily, my grief and guilt wash in waves across my skin until they soak down deep into my bones, and I just accept that they are there to stay.

That my grief. My survivor's guilt. My guilt over the loops. My guilt over moving on. My guilt over the countless victims that came to be.

They are parts of myself that will not just disappear .

I don't want them to. They are reminders of who we lost, of our loved ones, of what was nearly stolen from us, of how easily evil can bleed into a town.

Darius snuggles further into me, Grayson reaches out, his fingers tracing my thigh, and Axel's hand finds my ankle, stroking my skin there.

Even through my guilt and grief I find solace in these brothers. In our fate that forced us together, in our stubbornness that kept us that way, in our love that anchored us in our sanity.

This is the first day of the rest of our lives together.

## Page 63

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 3:11 am*

The sun beats down on my bare shoulders, the humidity pressing me firmly into the plastic chair I am perched on.

An umbrella pops open above me.

“Axel.” I elbow him. “I’m fine. Put it away. It’s rude.”

Axel doesn’t move, but Grayson reaches out from behind us, plucking the umbrella from Axel. I expect him to listen to my request, but he doesn’t.

Grumbling, I lean into Darius on my other side. “Can we go home now, please?” I ask the youngest O’Brien.

“You wanted to come, it won’t be too much longer now.”

We’re at the same place they held Tripp and Auggie’s memorial. On the same day, but one year apart.

I thought it would be okay, that it wouldn’t hurt as much as it does, but the déjà vu hasn’t let up since I sat down.

Made worse by every passing moment, by every familiar face I see.

But this isn’t Tripp and Auggie’s memorial.

It’s Carrie’s. William’s. Julia’s. The countless others who were found buried on the Thorne’s estate.

We are near the back, but there are people surrounding us on every side. The family and friends of all the deceased. It's nearly the entire town that fills up the crowd. The victims had touched so many lives .

Julia's parents are sobbing in the front row. I had tried to tell them how sorry I was, to apologize, but her mother had fallen apart.

I didn't blame her. They were on a forced vacation while their daughter was being abused and murdered.

My parents are notably absent. They had asked if I wanted their company, but I declined. Our relationship is still rocky, but we are healing.

“ Is there anyone else who wishes to speak? ” the priest asks. He's the same one as before.

It is with shock that I see Luna jump to her feet. She was buried in the crowd and I hadn't seen her prior. She marches to the front, elbows the priest out of the way, and hardens her shoulders.

Even from this distance, I can see the glassiness in her eyes.

“Fuck, I loved you William. You did the best you fucking could.” She clenches her jaw, wipes away her tears, stares down her nose at the crowd, surveying them.

“He helped as much as this town would let him. He was young and did more than half of you were willing to do. So let this be a fucking lesson. Open your Goddamn eyes. Don't be complicit, because in my mind, it makes you just as guilty as the disgusting Thornes and their lackeys.

” Luna spits on the ground before marching away.

She passes us and finds my gaze. She inclines her head in greeting, her lips quirking before continuing her path to the parking lot.

There is a resounding silence followed by Julia's mom's intensifying sobs.

"Alright, let's go inside." Darius squeezes me, helping me up and out of my chair. Grayson and Axel closely follow us.

The men wrap around me, my protection, my strength. Time has passed and our relationship has grown, shifted . It took time for us to settle into it, to not always be waiting for the next shoe to drop, but now that we have?

It's peaceful. Serene. A warm bath after a very long, arduous journey .

"Wildflower, what's on your mind?" Darius's voice caresses against my ear as we walk inside the cathedral.

"I miss them," I say. "All of them. I wish—"

Axel cuts me off, sealing his lips to mine. "No more wishes," he warns humorlessly, breaking free and tugging me towards Veronica.

She's huddled with her mother in a corner.

Her father's sentencing is quickly approaching. Along with hundreds of others.

Our little town had made national news and the government was forced to step in. To smooth out the kinks left in its wake. Even still victims were being found and recovered throughout the country.

Complicit.

This town was complicit for too long, but now there is a noticeable change in the air. It almost feels lighter. The restaurant has been livelier. The crowd friendlier and jovial.

But there is also still a heavy shroud of pain.

Making my way through the people in the cathedral, Tiffany steps into my line of view. “Sunday.” It’s the first time I’ve seen her since the underground prison.

“Hi.” I am suddenly shy, unsure of how to respond. “It’s good to see you.”

And then she jumps forward, hugging me to her, thanking me over and over again. And when she releases me, there’s more faces that I recognize.

The ones who were trapped in there with us. That Luna and I worked to release.

For all intents and purposes, no one should know I was down there; Luna swore the other prisoners to secrecy for my sake. To ensure my crime couldn’t catch up to me .

But these survivors? The ones who nearly died? The ones who were forced into countless horrors?

They knew I was there. And here they are now. Thanking me, hugging me, wrapping me in their arms.

It is tangible proof that all the sacrifices were not made in vain. Even if my own guilt still envelopes my heart.

It doesn’t take long for me to turn into an emotional mess, for the brothers to recognize that I need to escape.

Grayson steps forward first, he offers gentle smiles to the crowd that has formed



around me. “Thank you all. We’re going to take Sunday for a bit, but we’ll return her later. Promise .”

And then Axel is taking my hand and tugging me further into the cathedral. I think he is going to go to Veronica, but he beelines to an empty space on the other side.

“Can we leave soon please?” Axel grunts, his hand squeezing mine tightly.

“You need to register for classes.” Darius rests his chin on the top of my head.

Grayson cuts his eyes to us. “You both do.”

“But I don’t want to be away from you and Axel,” I argue, leaning back against Darius. He wraps his bulky arms around my waist, his thumbs finding my hip bones, stroking them hypnotically.

“You’re going to school,” Axel states. “Besides, it will only be a few days a week and I am more than happy to camp out front the entire time.”

Grayson knocks a fist into his shoulder. “You will not, we agreed she needs this freedom.”

“No,” Axel grumbles. “You two outvoted me. I said she should just drop out of school and let us pamper her for the rest of her life. Hell, Darius is about to inherit a fortune once the legal system unfreezes the untainted funds. Even if he doesn’t want to take the blood money, I have no problem doing so.

It was earned through our own sacrifices.

Plus we can donate most of it towards the victims.”

“They should get all of it!” Grayson snaps back.

“Well since we are victims too, it sounds like we are in agreement,” Axel snarks.

Grayson rubs his eyes in annoyance.

The two bicker back and forth, but Darius remains silent and lets them hash it out.

“Are you ready for our future?” he asks softly. “For years of this? Of them driving each other crazy. Of the chaos that comes with being with all of us.”

I twist in his arms, standing up on my tip toes. Finding his eyes, I kiss him on the nose. “Yes, and I know it won’t always be perfect. But we have each other.”

He laughs, but then his face turns solemn. “For so long I believed we were star-crossed, destined for doom, but I don’t think that’s the case anymore.” Darius shifts his attention to his two brothers before pivoting it around the room, taking in the atmosphere.

“Maybe we were.” I lean my head on his chest, listening to his heart beating. “But at some point we managed to change our fate.”

And I believe it.

I think, in many ways, I was destined to die. I was destined to continue on the vicious cycle and become a victim of this town.

It was only luck and some cosmic irony that I escaped it.

That I was able to live my life.

And so I would.

I would live each day as if it were my last. My first. And my favorite.

For however many more years this world granted me.