

THE

Protector

Springbrook Hills - Book Two

MORGAN ELIZABETH

THE PROTECTOR

SPRINGBROOK HILLS

MORGAN ELIZABETH

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 Created with Vellum

To Alex who makes it so I can chase crazy dreams and make up wild stories.

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State of Grace - Taylor Swift
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Almost Maybes - Jordan Davis
Change Your Name - Chase Rice

ONE

-luna-

THE HAND on my back rubs in soothing circles as I squat on the pavement in front of my bar, trying to get air into my lungs and stop myself from hyperventilating. Daisy, my sweet young employee, continues to console me as I sit ass to the sidewalk, head between my knees. “Breath Luna. It’s going to be fine. They sent an officer over. Should be here any minute.”

An officer.

They’re sending over an officer to my bar.

Because someone smashed the window and spray painted *FUCK YOU WHORE* on it.

And I’m pretty sure that it’s the same person who has been *stalking* me for three months.

How did this get so far?

More importantly, why is this happening to *me*?

“You have insurance, right? It looks superficial, nothing crazy.” Daisy says, her normally cute, girly voice grating on my raw nerves.

Nothing crazy.

Yeah, it’s nothing crazy. Like a totally sane person just goes to a local business, vandalizes it, breaks a window, and stalks the owner, sending her increasingly creepy and threatening messages. That’s nothing crazy, right?

Why didn’t I tell Zee about this?

Of course, even as the thought approaches my brain, I already know the answer. Because my protective older brother, my protective older brother who is a *police officer*, would go insane if he knew. Because if I had told Zander that I had a damn stalker, I would constantly have him or his brothers in blue breathing down my neck at all times. And it *didn't seem like a big deal*. Definitely not big enough to take away from the town's precious resources. Too bad it looked like that was going to happen, anyway...

Six months ago, I got a message on Instagram from a random account. Being a woman in the age of social media, I did my due diligence before responding. I checked the account, which seemed legit - the profile picture seemed intentionally mysterious in that way guys like to be, the photo back of a man hiking in the woods. Probably should have been a red flag. But the about section seemed normal

33 - Springbrook Hills - loves the outdoors and my dogs

And he included a quote from my favorite song - "Love like there's no such thing as a broken heart."

Okay, so that should have been another red flag, right? For one, it might be a great line, but in hindsight, that's such a clear woman trap. And for two, wasn't it weird that he had my favorite song in his profile?

I'm an idiot, I know.

"Hey, gorgeous" is all that first message read. In a bored and admittedly incredibly naïve moment, I'd replied. At the time, I was internally wondering why I could never find a man and, having grown up with a mom who spoke about the universe giving you signs, I went for it. We went back and forth for a bit, but every time I asked his name, he changed the subject.

Red flag, red flag, red flag.

You're probably thinking I'm a moron at this point and I don't blame you whatsoever. I think I'm a moron. But in my defense, he did it so smoothly that it wasn't obvious. Not until I went back as things escalated, re-reading messages and realizing his aversion to revealing his identity.

A few weeks later, he got my cell phone number and texted me. He told me he got my number from my social media profile, explaining how he had my number without me actually *giving* it to him. While that part was weird, the conversation wasn't. Just chatting about things we liked, our day, that kind of thing. Honestly, I think that's how I was so distracted from the eeriness of it all.

As the sole owner of a small business, I spend my days talking to

customers and vendors, and employees. Having someone to talk to outside of work or family, someone who's seemed genuinely interested in me, unlike the losers I've dated in the past, was nice. We clicked in a way that I can see now was a completely contrived facade.

But, somewhere deep down I think the hopeless romantic in me was holding out for a sweet reveal, a love story for the ages.

Eventually, he kept avoiding any conversation about his name and my mental alarms finally kicked in and started blaring. When one last attempt at figuring out who he was failed, I cut all contact.

That's when things turned sour.

Call and texts of varying levels of urgency were made from a range of unknown numbers. Some were just questioning.

"Why won't you reply to me?"

Some were... less kind. He started calling me a tease, a whore, a bitch.

Stupid me, I just ignored the messages, blocked the numbers, and waited for the stranger to lose interest.

Except, last week, my phone pinged with a screenshot of my online dating profile.

The profile was made by my friend Sadie after a night of too much wine and one of her famous '*you need to get laid, girl*' rants. It featured a smiling picture she took of me, eyes slightly glassy with wine, my shoulder-length blond hair curled to look wavy and tousled, fair skin on display in a small t-shirt.

Honestly, it's a great shot.

"What's your plan for this, you whore? You're mine, no one else's." That was the first message that turned the blood in my veins to ice. That was also when I probably should have contacted the authorities.

But I'm an idiot who tries to do it all herself, which brings us here.

In front of my bar with a smashed window and bright red spray paint.

"Oh God, oh God, oh God," I say into my knees, hyperventilating and trying to figure out what to do next. Trying to pull air into my lungs to get my brain working.

Zander. I need to call my brother Zander. I need to tell him everything, to make sure he gets the call and not -

"Luna, what the fuck is going on here?"

Fuck.

Fuckity fuck fuck fuck.

The voice coming my way is attached to a tall, dark, and handsome man that is dangerously gorgeous, stubbornly protective, and 100% *man*.

Tony Garrison. Officer on the Springbrook Hills Police Department, best friend to my big brother. Also known as the guy I've had an insane crush on since I was seven and boys went from playmates to dreamboats overnight. Since the day he yelled at my brother for making fun of me playing with Barbies. That was all it took.

His strides are long as he approaches me in his navy blue uniform that fits him too well, perfectly tailored to fit his 6 foot 2 frame that never misses a gym day. I'd know because the single women in our small town flock there and gossip about it at my bar.

Ocean blue eyes that have always been able to see into my soul and pull out the truth stare into my green ones as I hesitate.

"Heeeeey, Tony. How are you?" I ask with an air of nonchalance, as if I have no idea why he's here. No idea why I'm sitting on the ground outside of my bar and hyperventilating. Maybe if I pretend this isn't happening, it... won't happen.

"Luna, what in the *fuck* is going on?" he demands, his face a mask of steely anger and frustration. Okay, that was a fail.

"Okay, so I know it looks pretty bad, but--"

"Luna, it doesn't 'look pretty bad'. The word 'whore' is spray-painted on your business and a window is smashed in." He's right, of course. Why am I trying to play this off like it's not completely freaking me out? *Because you're Luna and you don't let me figure shit out for you. Because he's Tony and you haven't spent more than 10 minutes with him in 10 years.*

"Hey, Tony. I'm the one that made the call. I came in about 10 minutes ago and saw this. It's just so crazy, right?" Daisy says, placing her hand on his forearm. Her eyes are wide and innocent, and her voice has taken on a breathy quality, reminding me of Marilyn Monroe.

My eyes roll so far into my head that I'm pretty sure I can see my brain.

This has happened my whole life. Being the sister to my older brother Zander and my younger brother, rockstar Ace, means I have spent many hours, days, years among women throwing themselves at men. It's safe to say both brothers run with a crowd of unbearably hot guys. All of which have been totally off-limits to me my whole life as their sister, unfortunately.

"Daisy, go call everyone on the schedule today, let them know we won't be opening today," I say to get her away and busy while I defuse this Tony

situation.

“But I don’t know who’s on today,” she says, which is infuriating since I texted it to her *last night*. A group of locals is gathering outside, whispering, and pointing, and causing a stir. It’ll be across our small town in no time.

“Here, take my phone. I texted the schedule to myself on Monday. Find it, call everyone.”

She stares at my hand for a moment before I wave it, the intent for her to grab it and go clear. With a small, irritated scrunch of her nose, she takes my phone and walks away. My eyes follow her, trying to put off turning back to Tony.

“Luna, do you know why this happened? It doesn’t seem like a random attack on a small business,” Tony says, his hand on my shoulder to turn me to him. I sigh. He’s right. Springbrook Hills might be in the busy tri-state area and just a short 90-minute drive from the city, but it’s small. It’s quaint, just over a square mile for town proper. It’s the type of place where everyone knows everyone. And hatred of a random small business just doesn’t happen here.

“If I told you I owed someone money, would you believe me?” I try, looking at the hand he has outstretched towards me.

“Luna,” he says, his voice a clear warning. I roll my eyes but grab his hand. It’s huge and callused with drips of white paint on it. He pulls my body up easily, which brings me way closer to this man than I need to be. Or want to be,

Right?

I take a step back.

“Okay, what about if I told you I stole a girl’s boyfriend, and she’s angry at me?” Fire flares in his eyes, a strange heat I’ve never seen before, but it’s out before I can pinpoint it.

“I’ve known you your entire life, Luna. Try again.”

A sigh breaks free from my chest, knowing that I can’t avoid it much longer. I screw up my face to make the sweet, innocent one that Zander and my dad always fall for before carrying on. “Well, you see, I may have a stalker?” I admit, my hand going into my hair and avoiding eye contact as I brace for the impending storm.

Four Hours Later

“Wait, wait, wait, make the face again,” Sadie says, wiping tears from her eyes as we sit in the sunny backyard of our friend Hannah’s new place. In response, my face screws up, getting red and angry before air escapes my lungs in a cackling laugh that’s fueled by residual adrenaline and the strong margaritas my best friend Zoe makes.

“Oh my God, I wish I could have seen it,” she says, laughing as she takes a sip of her drink. Zoe has been my best friend since birth. Our fathers have been best friends since high school. That being said, she knows all about Tony.

We’re sitting around a patio table with Sadie and Hannah as I fill them in on *everything*. My stalker, the vandalism, Tony’s reaction. All of it. And it’s exactly what I need right now. Hannah and Sadie are the life of the party in any situation and perfect for unwinding with. Unfortunately, the vandalism at my store didn’t stay a secret for long. Zoe heard the news from her dad, who is the SHPD’s Chief. She called up Sadie, who called up Hannah, and they decided drinks at Hannah’s were in order.

If you’re ever in need of turning a bad day around, these are the girls you need in your corner.

“I mean, it was funny but also terrifying,” I say, referring to the angry face Tony made when the word “stalker” came out of my mouth. God, was he pissed.

“What?!” he yelled, drawing any attention to not already glued to us. From the corner of my eye, I could see Daisy looking our way, her eyes wide. I’m sure the look was reflected on my face.

“Tony, it’s not-“

“Swear to fuck, Luna, you try and say having a fuckin’ stalker isn’t a big deal and I’m dragging your ass to your dads, see what he has to say about that.” Goddamn, I hate living in a small town where everyone knows everyone and everyone knows my dad never lets his kids get away with anything.

“There’s no need.”

“Luna, you’re telling me you have a fucking stalker. A stalker who may have vandalized your place of business. This is a big fuckin; deal.” He ran a hand over his short, dark, buzzed hair. “When did this start?” My stomach sank, knowing he was going to like this answer even less.

“Uh.. three months ago?” I say the words quietly, muffling them behind my hand to delay the inevitable.

“I can’t hear you.” His eyes are fire, anger, and frustration burning deep.

“Three months ago.” Once again I say it comes out quiet, my lips barely opening.

“Stop playing games, Luna.” His callused hand goes to my wrist, pulling it from my mouth and shocking me when he holds it gentle. My eyes meet his and I see the worry deep in there, buried beneath the anger.

“Three months.” The words are quick and clear. The game is over. Unfortunately, I think the fear and anxiety around my situation also come through clearly in those two words... The flames in his eyes flare for a moment before he curses under his breath. Instead of screaming at me for being an idiot like I expect, as I deserve, he uses the hand around my wrist to pull me into his chest, holding me tightly.

“I’ll keep you safe Luna.”

I don’t share this part with my friends. This strangely intimate moment with a man I haven’t been alone with in 10 years.

“Well, yeah, He’s hot as fuck, but he’s also a badass whose bad side I wouldn’t want to be on,” Sadie says and something icky creeps thought me when she calls him hot.

Nope, not yours, Luna. Not yours. “Okay, so you told him you have a stalker, and then what happened?” Sadie looks at me, invested in my story. I stick to my decision to leave out the hug, the comfort. I’m still not sure why.

“He yelled at me for a bit, saying basically what you’d expect - I’m an idiot, I’m irresponsible, why the fuck didn’t I tell him or Zee. Then Mitch showed up and calmed him down.” Mitch is Tony’s partner at the station. He was checking in with dispatch when Tony came over to see what was going on but came over when he saw Tony’s reaction. Zee and Tony were partners for approximately three days when they both joined the force before Chief Thomas made the wise decision that it would never work.

“Okay, but like, why *didn’t* you tell him?” Hannah asks, sipping her drink and flipping on her stomach. Fall is on its way in, but we’re experiencing a blissfully warm September day with the sun beating down. Hannah’s gorgeous olive skin tans in a millisecond, even with sunscreen. In contrast, my pale ass has to sit under a giant floppy hat with SPF 9283 to ensure I won’t be bathing in aloe for a month.

Unfortunately, while my brothers inherited my dad's rugged looks and golden skin, I got the full blast of my mom's Icelandic heritage. My hair is so blonde it's nearly white and pin-straight, stopping at my shoulders where it hits my pale skin in a shoulder-length bob.

"You don't have any brothers, but just think about how protective Steve and Hunter are with you. Now multiply that by 37," I say, trying to express just how bananas my brother would have been. "And *now* tack on an entire police force, many of whom you've known your whole life because your best friend is the chief's daughter. Plus an overprotective dad." Zoe eyes me empathetically, knowing my pain, while Sadie and Hannah nod, conceding to the fact that it would have been suffocating.

"Seriously, I don't blame her. In high school, a boy spread a rumor about me and half the station showed up at his house to 'talk' with him. When you have family like we do, you know to keep some things under wraps."

"Alright, I can see that. But once it tipped the scales on the creepy meter?" Sadie asks.

"I'm not saying I didn't make mistakes. Just that I made them for a good reason. Now I have Tony threatening to follow me around until it's handled. I don't think Zander even knows yet, or I'd be completely and totally fucked."

"Mmmm, fucked by Zander," Sadie says, wiggling her eyebrows. I gag.

"Oh my God, you are so gross!" Hannah cackles in laughter next to me.

"Okay, fine, but what about Tony? I wouldn't mind him following me around for a bit." And there it is. The part of this I was dying to avoid.

"Yeah, what's up with that? Why do you always avoid him?" Hannah asks, jumping on Sadie's train of thought. Zoe's knowing eyes meet mine. She's the only person on the earth that I've told the whole story.

"What's there to know. I've known the guy my whole life." *Deflect, deflect.*

"Uh-uh. No way, you're leaving something out and I'm not gonna take it." Sadie says, sitting up. When the girl smells juicy gossip, she does not let it go. "Didn't you have a huge crush on him in high school? I kind of remember being pulled into a few shenanigans with you and Zoe." I sigh, a rush of air puffing from my lips.

"Yeah. I did. And then... I didn't." I've never told my friends about that embarrassing afternoon when Tony Garrison broke my heart and crushed my little girl dreams. Yes, they were stupid and idiotic and romanticized, but they were mine and it hurt all the same.

“What happened?” Hannah asks softly. I sigh, knowing there’s no way out of this. My eyes meet Zoe’s and she dips her chin in a small, supportive nod.

“When I was 17, I tried to tell him how I felt and he let me down easy, telling me that I was Zee’s sister and like a little sister to him, nothing more.”

“Ouch,” Hannah says.

“!7? And what happened after that?”

“I’ve avoided him since then.”

“What, what?” Sadie says with a surprised laugh. “Aren’t your families super close?”

“Yeah.”

“How do you manage that?”

“Lots of planning?” I ask, biting my lip that’s already raw from chewing on it. It’s a habit I do when I’m stressed and to say today has been stressful is the world’s biggest understatement.

“But like-” Sadie starts, but at the same time my phone buzzes. Relief washes through me, grasping onto the distraction I need to avoid talking about Tony Garrison and my valiant attempts at avoiding him for 10 years.

A relief that quickly disappears when I see the name on my display.

“Well, fuck.”

TWO

-tony-

“SO HOW’S LUNA DOING?” I ask, raising my voice to be heard over the sounds at Hannigan’s, the pub on the edge of town. Unlike Full Moon Cafe, Hannigan’s offers dinner, brews, and televisions blaring sports, making it perfect for a night with the guys. Tonight it’s just Zander and me though, grabbing a quick dinner after a long, long fuckin’ day of work.

“Uh, fine?” he says, looking at me with a slightly furrowed brow.

“Where is she staying tonight?” She’d better not be at the fucking apartment. If she is I’ll head over there myself and drag her ass-

“I have no clue. Why would I know that?” What the... I stare at him, feeling as confused as he looks. Zander is a textbook-overprotective brother. Has been for as long as I’ve known him.

“I just really hope she’s not staying above the bar tonight,” I say, looking at him like he’s insane. How is he not worried about where she’s staying?

“Okay, why are you asking about my baby sister?” My head snaps back. Isn’t it obvious? “Are you... Look, I know you’ve always had a thing for her but-“

“Wow, wow, wow. Did she not call you today?” I cut him off, looking to avoid this very awkward conversation that I am far from ready to have. I’ll probably never be ready for *that* conversation.

“Call me about what?”

“Oh, shit. She didn’t. No one from the station called you today?” It was his day off today...

“Called me about what, Garrison? You’re freaking me the fuck out.”

“Okay, okay, don’t freak out, but something happened at Luna’s this afternoon. I would have thought she told you or the station did or I would have called myself.”

“Why do you mean something happened?” Zee’s face is turning red, anger boiling close to the surface with his short temper. It’s a temper that has gotten us both in numerous sticky situations over the year when I’ve had to take his back.

“Someone smashed in a window and spray-painted obscenities on the bar.” The words come out quickly, trying to rip the bandaid. And his temper explodes as expected.

“What? Are you fucking kidding me? Why wouldn’t she call me? I could have helped. Is the damage bad?” Zander is already pulling out his cell, ready to send a message to his sister. I sigh, realizing there’s no way to protect Luna from this backlash. I want to feel bad, but she’s an idiot for not calling him right after this happened.

“Probably because.. well, fuck, man. There was a reason it occurred. It wasn’t random. Wasn’t kids fuckin’ around.”

“What the fuck kind of reason would anyone have to do that to my baby sister’s bar?” Oh fuck, do I really want to be the person who has to break this to him? Thinking over how exhausted Luna looked before she left the scene today, I make my decision.

“She has a stalker.” I spit the words out quick, my body tensing, ready for his reaction. He doesn’t disappoint.

“What the *fuck* are you talking about, Garrison? A fucking stalker? There’s no fucking way. How am I just hearing about this? I’m gonna wring her goddamn neck,” he says, unlocking his phone and typing in her number. His phone is to his ear as he continues to rant. “Who is this fucker? When did this start?”

“Look, man, I don’t have all the details yet. She’s coming in tomorrow to file a formal report, but I was on the scene today. Apparently, it started three months ago-“ and boom goes his temper.

“THREE FUCKING MONTHS AGO?!” he shouts. And now we’re officially drawing attention from other diners. Fuck, I gotta get this under control. It also appears at that moment that Luna picks up. I probably should

have sent her a text, warning her of what she'd be walking into. But really, it's her own fault. First, she keeps the stalker a secret, and then she doesn't tell her brother, knowing full well how he'll react.

"Hey, hey, Zee, calm the fuck down."

"I'll get to you next because you knew this shit and said nothing." His eyes are on me, anger burning, and I roll mine in response. "Luna, what in the fuck is going on?" he shouts through his phone. I raise my hand, encouraging the waitress over.

"Can you get him a shot of anything really fuckin' strong?" I ask her, smiling the smile I perfected in college that always was a winner with women. She blushes and nods before running to get my order.

"And this all started three months ago? And you decided what, to just keep it to yourself? You know Luna, I get you like to do shit yourself but this is just stupid." I hear Luna shouting through the phone, snapping back at being called stupid. With a sigh, I sit back, knowing where this is going. I've known the Davidson kids my whole life and I've seen all three of them brawl in ways that would make both Housewives of New Jersey and WWE stars grimace. Whether it's a war of words or fists, it's best to just let it fizzle or risk getting punched yourself.

That's how I got the scar above my eyebrow, trying to break up a fight between Zander and his younger brother Ace.

"Don't start this shit, Luna. Of fucking course, I would be angry and protective. I'm your older fucking brother. But you know who's going to be the angriest? Dad." He pauses to listen and faintly, I can hear her voice arguing with him. "Oh yeah, I'm calling him next. Good fucking luck with him, because he'll probably lock you in the basement for this shit. Three fucking months. You must be out of your damn mind."

It's a good threat. While their mom is a gypsy through and through, just like Luna, their father, Michael Davidson, is a man's man. His whole life he worked for Tanner Coleman's father as site manager for his construction company before retiring and spends most of his free weekends hunting, fishing, building shit, or working on cars. To add to the cliché, his baby girl is his princess. He loves that girl and coddles her more than any father on the planet. It's sweet and I've always pictured myself similarly when I'm older.

When we were kids, it drove us crazy - Zee would get in trouble for something that Luna did, but she'd go cry to her daddy, and boom, Zander is grounded. As she grew up, it became kind of an adorable quality. But I pity

anyone who ever puts Luna in actual trouble because hell hath no fury like Mike Davidson when someone hurts his little girl.

“No, I’m doing it, Lune. You can’t talk me out of it. Seriously, what the fuck were you thinking. You could have gotten seriously hurt or worse.” There’s a pause on Zander’s end before his face softens and I can see that she’s worked her magic. “Oh, Lulu, don’t cry. I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to flip on you. I’m just worried, okay? I’m out with Tony and he’s over here telling me all of this crazy shit and I lost it. You’re my little sister... Yeah, I love you too. No, I won’t call Dad tonight. Come in tomorrow morning to give your report. You’re at Hannah’s? I’ll pick you up on my way to the station. Yeah, I’ll grab you breakfast. Okay, I’ll talk to you then, honey. Love you, Luna. Tell the girls I said hi.”

And just like that, I give you exactly how Luna Davidson plays her brothers and her father in one fell swoop.

“You good?” I ask, raising an eyebrow and trying to fight the smirk on my lips. He looks up, spotting the shot glass the waitress placed down, and slams it back before answering. Still grimacing from the burn, he answers.

“No. But she’s safe right now and there’s not much I can do right this second.” Ahh, the rational Zander has returned.

“So, do you think she was actually crying, or did she play you?” I ask with a laugh, leaning back and winking at the patient waitress as our burgers are delivered to the table. She’s cute, a blush creeping on her cheeks as she gives me a small smile, but my mind is stuck on the blonde who has always caught my attention.

“Who the fuck knows when it comes to Luna. Can’t stand it either way.” It’s the fundamental weakness of all three Davidson men that both Luna and her mother are well aware of and use to their advantage. It’s kind of endearing. I’ve seen it in action though - her big blue eyes water, her full pink lips start to tremble. It’s not just the Davidson men who are affected. Every guy in a 100-foot radius feels the tug to go over and comfort them.

“Look, I know it’s kind of a mind fuck, but it’s all going to be fine. We’ll find this creep, keep Lune safe. She said she has a bunch of saved information from the times he’s contacted her that she’s bringing tomorrow.”

“Yeah, we will. I just can’t believe she didn’t say anything.” Zee’s head is in his hands, elbows on the high-top table we’re sitting at.

“Man, seeing your reaction to finding out? I do. You gotta chill the fuck out.” I say. “That’s why she keeps shit from your guys.”

“Fuck you, if you were in my shoes you’d do the same.” In all fairness, I had, just in a slightly more professional capacity. Arriving on the scene and seeing the destruction drove a searing blade of worry and anxiety through my gut. That turned to anger when I saw Luna on the ground, clearly in a panic. Finding out that the cause was much more sinister and concerning than kids screwing around was a horrible feeling.

“Okay, whatever. So where’s she staying?”

“Hannah’s. Sadie and Zoe are there too. They’re having a sleepover tonight.” Zoe is Luna’s best friend and the Chief of police’s daughter. She’s been pulled into many of the torturous schemes Luna pulled when she was in high school, trying to catch my eye. Fuck, those days... if she had only known.

“Hunter’s out of town right now. Will be for a week or two, I think.” My stomach knots at the thought of Luna with a bunch of women and no one to protect her.

“Yeah, but it’s the suburbs with houses all around and Hunter has a killer security system installed. I’m comfortable with her there.” He picks up his burger, taking a giant bite out of the sandwich.

“I guess,” I say, thinking I’ll take a drive or two around the neighborhood on the way back, just to be sure. We sit in silence for a bit, eating our burgers and fries, both in our own heads, before I remember what he’d been about to say earlier. “Zee, what did you mean earlier?”

“About what?”

“About being into her?” I ask, gut-clenching a bit.

“Bro, you’ve been into my sister since we were kids.” He pops a fry into his mouth like this conversation is normal. I open my mouth to argue, but he cuts me off. “Seriously, Tony, I kicked your ass multiple times over the years for this shit. I know just because you’re both older that shit hasn’t changed. You’re into my sister.”

“What? No, I-” I’m arguing, but I’m not sure what to say. Do I deny it, say no way, that’s never been the case? Or do I admit that there’s always been... something about Luna that pulled me to her.

When she was younger, I’d spend hours on the couch at the Davidson’s house with her, talking about shows we both watched or arguing about politics. Even when we completely disagreed about what seemed like important issues, I loved listening to her perspective, watching her get riled up and passionate. So many times when we were around Springbrook Hills,

I'd ask Zee if we could bum around his house instead of mine, always with the hope that Luna would be there.

"It's fine, dude. I don't give a shit. I mean, I do, but also she's gonna settle down, eventually. Fuck, you'd be a better choice than most of the assholes she's ever dated. At least I know where you live and all of your weaknesses." I snort but agree. She has dated some assholes in the past. "I'm not saying I want you to go for my sister, just that since she was a teenager, you've always had a thing for her. Always taking her side, asking questions about her." I should have known he would notice.

Most underestimate Zander, assuming he's just the goofy jock type with minimal brain cells. But he's a great cop because he reads into every single motive and detail. He's quiet, but not because he has nothing to say. He just is taking in everything, allowing others to reveal their true motives.

"So, let's say, hypothetically, that I had a thing for Luna." He rolls his eyes at me. "Would you be cool if I... pursued that?" I ask. Jesus, why the fuck am I so nervous? The woman fucking hates me. Ever since that night, she refuses to be in a room with me, avoiding me like the plague. It's not like I'm going to date her.

"I mean, you'd have to get past that wall she built in front of you, but so long as you don't hurt her and it doesn't fuck up our friendship? Zero fucks given, my man. Just know if you ever broke her heart I'd kick your teeth in."

I sit on this thought. I always assumed that if I ever tried something with Luna it would be a huge issue in our friendship. Fuck, I can name at least four times over the last 10 years that Zee's thrown a drunken punch when I let it slip his sister was hot. The mere thought he might be okay with me starting something with his sister is.. confusing. All those years ago, I wanted to take that chance, but now?

"And I would never ever want to hear details," he says, his face going a slight shade of green, making me laugh. But underneath, even as we move on in the conversation and talk about sports and our schedules for the week, my mind is racing, wondering.

It might be time to finally have that talk with Luna about what the fuck has been between us our whole lives.

On my way home, I drive past Hannah and Hunter's place to check in on Luna and make sure nothing looks off. The house is an old brick two-story

that Hunter and his sister Autumn lived in when we were kids. I know the ins and outs of that house from high school parties when their father was out of town. As I drive past slowly, my eyes dart to all the spots in the yard I know would be great for hiding out.

All looks fine, with all the lights on and a raucous of female laughter drifting in through my rolled-down windows from the backyard. With that, I feel comfortable heading home. It helps as I'm driving past, I see the Chief's patrol car circle as well, checking in on his daughter and her friends.

These women might be nearing 30, but the men in their lives still feel the need to protect them. They may hem and haw about it, but it's clear that they all secretly love it.

That need to protect others is why I got into the profession. I knew early on that I wanted to protect others who couldn't protect themselves. From the bullied kid on the blacktop at recess to the woman walking home from the bar at midnight, I've always felt the need to step in and watch over, be the protection that they need. Past girlfriends felt smothered by my need to wrap them in bubble wrap, protect them from the world around them, and ultimately, it's been just another reason we've parted ways.

Maybe that's another reason I've always felt drawn to Luna. Her whole life she's been encased in bubble wrap, three men doing everything in their power to keep the ugliness of the world from her. While she's fought it, she's also accepting and even grateful for it. She's strong and brave and independent but still lets her brothers and father do what they can to protect her because it's important to them.

As my truck pulls into my driveway, the screen door sways in the night breeze, once again refusing to click into the frame. Just another item on my list of never-ending list of house projects that I never seem to shorten.

Last year I bought the two-story, four-bedroom house for a steal as a foreclosure. It had been neglected for years, clear in the overgrown grass and weeds, leaking roof, and attic where a raccoon had taken residence. It's in a great neighborhood that on an officer's salary, I'd never be able to afford to live in if it was in perfect condition. But as soon as it was listed, I knew I had to have it. Something drew me to this train wreck that said, "Buy me! Fix me!"

The problem is, even if it was much more affordable as a foreclosure, it drained my accounts enough that affording someone to do the renovations for me was not going to happen. So instead everything has been done by myself,

friends, and family, excluding the few things I'm not qualified to do, like electrical repairs. On days off and with the help of friends I've bribed into helping with free beer and pizza, we've been able to redo the layout to open it up, creating an open concept, replace all the cracked and damaged drywall, and get started on the first room flooring. We finished the master bedroom right off the bat, giving me a place to sleep at night and unwind.

Still, it's been slow going, especially when I'm taking on overtime to replenish my savings after the purchase and ongoing cost of supplies and renovation. Balancing work, life and this house has been a bit more than expected.

Walking through the front door I'm struck with a thought: what Luna would think of this place?

Once that one breaks through, more flood in. What color would she paint the living room? Would she prefer a butcher block counter or marble? How would she decorate the living room? Shaking my head, I make my way to the room where I hang my holster and lock my service weapon up, a habit I started as soon as I was given one. One day, God willing, I'll have curious kids running around these halls.

As I go through my routine, showering and getting into bed, I can't help but think of Luna, of her situation, and how I'm going to keep her safe, whether she wants my help or not. Thinking of her unprotected on the other side of town makes a shot of fear run down my spine. I can't quite explain it. In any other case, I could rationalize that nothing would happen tonight. All evidence points to an escalating situation, but not where one could assume something would happen immediately after the incident. But with Luna...

Pulling out my phone, my fingers tap out a quick text.

Tony: Just checking in. You safe?

Luna: Who is this.

Tony: Tony.

Luna: Oh. Yeah. I'm at Hannah's.

Tony: Do you always respond to texts when you don't know who they are?

Luna: It's rude not to. What if it's someone important?

Tony: What if it's a fucking stalker?

I sigh, stress leaking me knowing that this woman is bound to drive me out of my fucking mind.

Luna: Do stalkers check in on your safety?

Tony: I wouldn't know. I'm not a stalker.

Luna: could have fooled me. Thanks for ratting me out to Zee.

I laugh, knowing she'd be pissed at that.

Tony: How was I supposed to know you didn't tell him?

Luna: Whatever.

Sitting in bed with my blanket pulled up to my chest, I wonder what she wears to bed. I wonder what side of the bed she sleeps on and if she's peaceful or all over the place. I wonder... *get a grip, Garrison.*

It's like 10 years of ignored yearning and want are all surfacing at once. 10 years ago I was ready to finally, *finally* go for it, but then everything changed. And now, all I can think about is this woman, about the chance I let slip through my fingers.. and how I might be able to fix it. Except she fucking can't stand me, so fixing it is a near impossibility.

Luna: Thanks for calming him down.

Tony: What?

Luna: I know you had something to do with the fact that my dad and Zee didn't break down Hannah's door to drag me out and lock me in a safe dungeon.

Tony: Yeah, well, you owe me.

Luna: we'll see.

I have about a million replies I want to send to her, but I decide to leave it at that. Tomorrow she'll be coming into the station.

Tomorrow we'll start fixing this fucking problem she's gotten herself into recently - and maybe the one she got herself into with me years ago, too.

THREE

-luna-

THE NEXT MORNING, I wake up in the guest room at Hannah's. Sadie is cuddled in behind me, Zoe sprawled on the floor beside us. At some point, Hannah must have made her way to her bed. We could have taken separate guest rooms for each of us. The house is so big, but what's the fun in that when you can just have a girls' sleepover.

Stumbling over Zoe as I trek to the bathroom to pee, I see my phone blinking with a text.

Zander: Coming to Hannah's in 10 to take you to the station.

Well, fuck me.

And the text came five minutes ago.

I love my brothers. I really, truly do. They put me through hell during my teenage years and even more hell when boys entered the picture, but always they were my protectors. But 27 years of knowing my oldest brother means I know from experience that there will be no talking Zee out of taking me into the station today.

Running a brush I found in the guest bathroom through my hair as I use my finger to scrub my teeth clean, I steal a pair of yoga pants and a tee from Hannah's room before running downstairs. She's already sitting pretty at her kitchen island, a life of taking care of others, meaning she's always up bright and early, ready to go.

Next to her is a travel cup of coffee she hands my way without looking up.

“God, you might be my favorite,” I say, grabbing the container and kissing her head. Somehow the girl always knows everything, meaning at some point this morning she got the heads up that Zee would be here to grab me.

“I know.” She looks up and smiles her beautiful, happy smile that no longer has a distant fog of sadness and hurt in it.

“I’ll wash these and bring them back,” I say, pointing to the pants I store as I grab my bag off her brown leather living room couch and head for the door. “Love you!”

“Love you too. Call me when you’re done!” she shouts, already back into reading her book.

Zee’s at the curb in his old red Mustang that he fixed up with Dad when he was in high school. My dad is a man’s man, the guy who drinks beer in the garage while toying with a project, a trait my oldest brother inherited.

Like all of us, he got our mom’s light blonde hair and green eyes, which he keeps buzzed short. Instead of my mom’s willowy body type that Ace and I received, he has the same tall and stocky build as Dad. He’s four years and a half years older than me, making him currently 32 to my 28.

“Get the fuck in,” he says as I lean in his open front window and kiss his cheek, which has the faintest stubble on it.

“Hey big bro, good to see you.” God, I do love to fuck with this guy. I know acting nonchalant is going to drive him insane.

“Seriously Luna, if you don’t get into this car right now so I can take you downtown to give your goddamn statement, I’ll tell Dad about who really crashed his Corvette when you were in high school.” I gasp because this is the one secret we’ve always kept and we *never* use it as leverage.

In high school, Ace and I took a joy ride in Dad’s ‘Vette and it didn’t end well, to say the least. We called Zee in a panic, knowing we were dead meat, and with a few crocodile tears and some pleading, Zee and Ace took the fall, claiming me as an unwilling accomplice rather than the mastermind.

When we were kids, we made a pact that we each got one no-questions-asked ‘cover for your siblings’ card. I used mine on the Corvette. Zee used his when he was 14 and broke mom’s favorite vase. It was the incident that made the damn pact and Mom thinks I did it to this day. She still doesn’t trust me with valuables. Ace hasn’t used his yet but threatens us regularly with it.

“You wouldn’t.”

“Luna, my fucking little sister has a stalker for three months and hasn’t told me, a police officer who could fucking help her. Do not test me.” Okay, so when he says it like that, it sounds bad. Instead of arguing, I round his car and hop in, barely slamming the door shut before he drives off. “I cannot fucking believe this shit.”

“Look, Zee, it’s really-”

“And the fact that I have to find out not from you, but from Tony! Hours later!” He yells the words, not taking his eyes off the road. “Do you know what an idiot I felt like, Luna?”

“I’m sorry, Zee, but-“

“And then I find out that this shit’s been happening for fucking months and you just, what, figured it would go away? That a stalker would take the hint and you could handle it yourself?” *Well, I mean, kind of.*

“Zander-“

“Luna, this is not a game. I know you like to play tough chick who doesn’t need anyone, badass bitch who can take care of herself, but shit like this? You can’t handle it alone. You’re gonna get really fucking hurt one day and then what, huh?” he asks, cutting me off again, forcing me to yell over him before he keeps going.

“Okay, Zander, shut the fuck up!” He opens his mouth to say something. “No! Let me fucking talk you caveman asshole!” His mouth shuts, but the anger brewing in his eyes is still clear. “I know. I fucked up. I should have said something, but I didn’t want to overreact. In my line of work, I see a lot of creepy dudes. It’s just the way it is. I’m a woman, I know how to ignore it.” His mouth opens to argue. “But,” I say, cutting him off. “But that doesn’t mean that as soon as my red flags went up, I shouldn’t have told you. That was stupid and I’m paying for it. I’m going into the station to give my statement and hopefully avoid any other dumb issues. If this ever happens again, which, for the record, I hope to God it never does, I’ll be sure to pull you in ASAP.”

“And yes, after I should have called you, but in all fairness, this is what I wanted to avoid. So instead, I headed to my friend’s house where I would be safe and could unwind, knowing that your *best friend* since *kindergarten* would undoubtedly inform you of the situation.” Done with my speech, I collapse back into the chair and breathe in deeply. Zander stares at the road, then at me, then back at the road silently. My eyes drift closed while waiting

for his reply, exhausted from a stressful day, a night of drinking with my girls, and the impending drama coming my way.

He sighs, breaking the silence. “Fine. But if you ever keep something like that, the sibling pact is null and void.”

And just like that, I’ve crossed my first hurdle of the day.

FOUR

-luna-

TWO HOURS LATER, I'm sitting in a room with my brother, Tony, and Mitch. Cups from Rise and Grind are around the table with breakfast sandwich wrappers from the deli littered throughout.

Perks of being the sister of a police officer, apparently: they feed you before they interrogate you. Cool.

"Okay, Luna. Are you ready to get into it?" Mitch asks, setting up his recording device and taking out a pen and paper. My stomach drops to my feet and the feeling of ice being dumped over me takes over. Now that the dust has settled, thinking about what an idiot I've been is not something I want to be doing.

"I guess," I say, avoiding eye contact and playing with the wrapper from my sandwich.

"Let's start from the beginning. How did the guy contact you?" Tony asks, looking at his paper pad. He hasn't even looked at me since I walked in this morning, much less spoken to me. All-day yesterday hot rage emanated from him, making everyone around us keep their distance. But today he's cold.

"I got a message on Instagram."

"And was it from someone you knew?"

"I don't think so. It was a relatively anonymous profile. He... he deleted it

since then.” I whisper the last part, having left out that detail yesterday.

“Deleted?” Tony asks, his head popping up and blue eyes boring into me.

“Uh, yeah? I checked yesterday to see, and it’s still gone. I thought maybe he could have blocked me, but we tried last night from a dummy account. It’s either deleted or hidden from the public.”

“So this guy starts to creep you out, then his profile magically disappears and you *still* choose not to tell the authorities?” he asks incredulously, putting his pen down. “Do you really think that was a great idea?”

“Tony...” Mitch warns, but I stand my ground.

“Obviously not, Tony, but making me feel even more like shit won’t help me out, will it?” He glares at me a few moments longer before looking back at his pad.

“And then what happened, Luna?” Mitch asks, taking over. His soft, gentle tone is a contrast to his partner’s anger. My brother is still sitting quietly, taking it all in.

“Okay, so for a week or two he was sweet, I guess. Definitely not creepy, Just... nice. We talked about random things, getting to know each other. He never told me his name, and I never pressed too hard.”

“Didn’t you wonder why?” Tony asks, clearly frustrated.

“Of course I did. I’m not stupid.”

“Then why didn’t you block him right then?” he asks the obvious logical question. But the answer is much more complicated.

Because, of *course* I should have dipped out and blocked him. But the hopeless romantic in me kept thinking that maybe, just maybe, there was a reason. Maybe he was embarrassed. Maybe it was someone I knew. Maybe there would be a sweet story at the end of the day that we could tell our kids about and laugh over.

God, I was so stupid.

“I don’t know.” He stares at me, digging into my soul the way only he can, trying to find the true reason that I’m hiding. Whether he finds what he’s looking for, I don’t know. “Then what happened?” he asks, looking down at his pad again.

“And then it moved to phones. Texting. From a real number, too, trust me. I checked it.” And I did. The number wasn’t in my contacts, so I did a quick check and found nothing. Being the sister of a detective means I hold a bit more knowledge than the average citizen, so I know how to cross-check this kind of thing.

“Do you still have that number?”

“Yes, but it’s disconnected.”

“We’ll need that number before you leave. Try to run it and see what we can find,” Mitch tells me. My fingers make lines in the crumbs on the table, distracting me as I get further into my story.

“I asked who he was a few times, and he kept avoiding me again. The last time I finally listened to my gut, blocked the number, and called it that.”

“But...” Zander twirls his hand to urge me to go on.

“It was fine for two weeks, maybe? But then I started getting texts from unknown numbers, blocked numbers. Some were just said hello or something just as harmless. Some were.. angry.”

“And you still didn’t say anything to anyone?” Tony looks exasperated but is still scribbling in his pan, eyes glued to his pan and avoiding looking at me. *What a dick.*

“No, Tony, I didn’t say anything. I regret it, okay? I figured I could handle it.” A sigh breaks from my chest, knowing that the worst is coming. “And then I got a screenshot of my dating profile. He called me cheating whore.” All three men look up at me. My eyes close, my face screwing up to prepare for the backlash.

Something happens when you’re the sister of a badass. His badass friends come to see *you* as their sister, whether or not you want them to. And any crime against your good name becomes a crime against them. All three explode with questions.

“What the fuck?” Zander says.

“But you weren’t dating?” Mitch asks.

“Why the fuck do you have a dating profile?” Tony asks, glaring at me. I decide to answer Mitch first, turning towards him.

“Obviously, we weren’t dating. But the guy doesn’t seem to be the most mentally there guy, you know?” I say, then turn to Tony. “Not that it’s relevant to any of this-“

“I disagree,” Tony says, staring at me, his mouth a tight, straight line of anger.

“Whatever. Not that it matters, but Sadie made it for me against my will. She thinks I need to get la- She thinks I need to go out more. See people. Do... things.” I do *not* want to talk about getting laid around my brother. Tony’s ocean eyes stare at me a moment longer before looking away. *Is that.. relief playing across his face?* No. No way.

“Anyway, she made me the account, but I never used it. It’s been up for a year, at least. He somehow got a picture of it and sent it to me. I told him to leave me alone, and that I was not interested in him. I threatened him with going to the police, which shut him up.”

“Except you didn’t go to the police, and he didn’t shut up.” Tony is angry, rage vibrating through him and permeating the air.

“He was quiet for another two weeks. And then... this happened.” I wave my hand as if *this* is in front of me. “That’s it.”

“And this all came unprompted?” Mitch asks.

“As far as I know. I don’t go out seeking male attention. I don’t even have time for that” *It’s probably why I fell for the message in the first place* I think, but don’t say out loud.

“Do you have any idea who this could be? Anyone who you see regularly, anyone you’ve turned down in the past six months?” Zander asks.

“I mean, I run a bar and I’m not terrible to look at. I don’t think I get hit on nearly every night. The list, in theory, could be endless.” Again, that anger burns its way from Tony to me, singeing my skin with its intensity. When I glance his way, confusion running through me, his eyes are on me, burning into my own. *What on earth is going on?*

“Jesus fucking Christ,” he mumbles under his breath.

“Fuck off, Tony, it’s not like I ask for guys to hit on me at my place of business.” It’s a downside of the job, for sure, but it’s one I accept, knowing that the alternative is working for someone else.

“I’ve seen what you wear to work.” His eyes are still locked on me. I sit a beat, waiting for the *sike!* to come, but it doesn’t.

“Are you fucking kidding me right now?” I say, ready to throw down. Working in a bar, I’ve heard my fair share of conversations with men about what the clothes a woman wears tells a man. I’ve gotten into my fair share of arguments and kicked enough of them out to know how to shut it down quickly.

“Tony,” my brother says, warning in his tone.

“Bro, bad move,” Mitch says, eyes wide. Okay, so maybe the guys have had to come a few times when I was on a rampage to escort a customer out.

“I’m just saying, you’d probably get hit on less if you covered up more.” With that, my blood boils, rage steaming my soul and outrage working its way through my chest.

“Fuck you, Tony. No woman should ever feel like if she wears what

makes her feel good, what she's confident in, she is setting herself up for men to hit on her, or worse. If I'm in my own goddamn bar, working to pay my fucking bills, I shouldn't have to cater to men to do so without unwanted come-on's. You can go fuck yourself with that misogynistic shit because I will not stand by and have you make me feel like I deserve what's happening to me right now because I sure as fuck do not." My chest is rising and falling with my rapid breathing and my heart is hammering in my chest. There are a lot of things I'm passionate about, but a woman's right to dress how she wants and enjoy a night out without feeling she needs to be on high alert is the biggest.

In my first year owning Luna's Full Moon Cafe, a young girl was slipped a date rape drug on my watch. Somehow, she staggered to the bathroom and passed out there before anything could happen, but it opened my eyes to the reality of where I was working. When police confronted the man, he said his date had dressed in a way that said she wanted it. He was just helping things along.

Since then, I've enacted many procedures and standards to help keep women safe. We now have two full-time security guards on duty and all staff have gone through training to spot women - and men - who could be in dangerous situations. In the bathrooms, there is signage for special drink orders. We change out monthly and have a secret meaning. This month, if you order a blue-eyed monster, a security guard will escort you out of the building and into a cab. If you order a fuzzy navel with a twist, we know you're in imminent danger and will call the police.

It's so important to me that everyone who comes to my bar feels safe and comfortable, no matter who they are, who they're with, or what they're wearing. All the men in this station know that, so having Tony say this shit is beyond me.

He stares at me, his unfortunately beautiful face stoic, chiseled jaw firm, like he's thinking over an appropriate response. Then he smirks like he's lost a battle.

"You're right, Lune. That was a dick move. You should be able to wear what you want without being stalked." Something releases in me, a nervous weight lifting. It's like all of my long-held beliefs that Tony is a good guy were once again confirmed. The men in the room let out a quiet sigh of relief, knowing they dodged a bullet.

"Okay, so your next step is to collect any information you have on this

creep. Usernames, profiles, texts, phone numbers, everything you've got, and hand them over to the department so that we can go over them. We need to pinpoint this guy before it escalates," Mitch says, changing the subject.

"Escalates?" I ask in a nervous squeak, scared out of my mind at the prospect.

"I don't think he's just going to stop here until he gets the attention he wants from you, darlin'," Tony says, his voice now soft and comforting and the term of endearment strikes through me, awaking a memory.

I remember the first time he called me that. I was 13; he was 17 and always working to embarrass me. We were learning about cowboys in my history class and I became obsessed with old Western movies for a time. Tony caught me watching them once and started calling me 'Darlin'' like the hero in the film. The attention from my middle school crush made me blush to high heaven, so he kept it up, and at some point, the name just stuck.

I haven't heard it in years.

"Where are you staying tonight?" my brother asks.

"My apartment?" I say, because where else would I stay. I know why he's asking, of course. The location isn't ideal, but I have a good security system and can guarantee I've been added to the patrol route.

"On top of the bar that was just defamed? Hell no," Tony says, looking at my brother.

"Gotta agree, sis, I don't like that idea," Zee says, the traitor.

"I'm staying at my apartment. I'm not letting some scum bag win by intimidating me out of my home."

"Luna, I think it's wise to stay somewhere else for a few nights. At least until it's cleaned up, and the bar opens back up."

"We'll be open tomorrow. Chip is coming to fix my windows, and I already scrubbed the spray paint off. Nothing was stolen, just a bit of mess."

"A bit of mess? Are you kidding me? They broke a window and spray painted your store," Tony says, looking at me like I'm an idiot.

"I will not cower in fear, you guys. I stayed at Hannah's last night to put some space between it, but I won't continue that trend." I'm firm in this, too. I refuse to let some creep keep me from the business I built with my own two hands. All three men look at me, decisions and acceptance warring on their faces. They're trying to decide how far to push me, knowing if they push too hard, it will get the opposite of what they want.

"Okay, look, you can stay above the bar, but if you have one more

incident, you're staying with me," Tony says, shocking the shit out of me. What in the...

"What? No way. Absolutely not." I say, just as Zee speaks.

"That's actually a good idea." Mitch just looks on with a smirk, sitting back and knowing that the next argument has arrived and happy he's not part of it.

"What part of that is a good idea?" I ask my brother, bewildered.

"What part *isn't* a good idea?" my brother says. *Uh, let me count the damn ways.* "Look, you can't stay above that bar. You need to be somewhere safe. I know you won't stay with me because we'd kill each other, and mom and dad don't have the room. You need to go to the next safest place."

"And the safest place for you is with me. Period."

"I have to disagree," I say. Because there is no way that my soul can handle staying with Tony, the man I've been in love with since I was seven. The man who sees me as a sister.

"Then where will you stay. I'm not happy about you staying above the bar, but if something else happens, there's no way I'm going to let you stay there. You have a better solution and I'll consider it."

"Oh, you're going to *let me?* You'll *consider it?*! Who do you think you are? You are not my father, Tony Garrison. Not my boyfriend, or my husband, or even my brother, though you think you are," I say, and see it hit true when a flash of... something goes through his eyes. Shame? Pain? Disappointment?

"Yes, *let you,* Luna. If you won't stay with me, where will you go?"

"I'll stay with Hannah."

"Hannah is currently living in a big house alone for the next two weeks. Hunter is out on a business trip. You guys can't stay together, alone while a stalker is out for you." I hate that he's right.

"Fine, then. I'll stay with Autumn and Steve."

"Autumn and Steve have little kids. Do you want to drag your drama into their lives?"

"It's not *my* drama, Tony. It's drama someone else has thrown me into."

"Same difference. Do you?" He's right, of course. I don't want to bring my scary situation to children.

"Fine, I'll stay with Aunt Maggie." Even Zee snorts at that, since our 70-year-old hippy of an aunt wouldn't hurt a fly, literally.

"Yeah, sure, that's a good idea," Zander laughs, the damn traitor.

“You’ll stay with me, end of the story,” Tony says. I’m screwed since Sadie or Zoe are just as bad of an option as Hannah. Fuck.

“What about Mitch? Can I stay with you? I bet you’ll protect me,” I ask, a little desperate for another option.

“Woah, don’t drag me into this.” Mitch raises his hands in surrender.

“Why are you so adamant about not staying with me? I have a guest room that just sits there doing nothing.” How can he even ask that? Ever since he told me he saw me as a sister and broke my poor, naïve teenage heart, I’ve been an expert at avoiding him at all costs. It’s impossible to think he hasn’t noticed that.

But as he asks, he seems to search my face for an answer I will never say aloud. Backed into a corner, I reluctantly agree. “Fine. But only if something more happens. Until then, I’m staying at my apartment.”

“The bar will be added to the patrol schedule. We’re posting a man nearby 24/7,” he says, confirming my suspicion. While I want to argue and make fun of him, saying he doesn’t have that power, I know he doesn’t need it. The Chief’s daughter is my best friend, my brother is on the force, and I know every single officer in the department. Most would take on extra, unpaid patrol hours to watch over me if it was required. It’s not a flex, just my reality.

“Fine.”

“And when you open someone will be inside, monitoring the place at night.”

“That’s a little overkill, don’t you think?” I ask.

“Not at all,” Mitch says. “We do not know this guy’s plan or if he plans to escalate. We need to be vigilant, Luna.” It makes sense, of course. But using so many resources for my silly situations feels... wrong.

“Fine.” I lean back in the hard plastic chair with my coffee and take a sip. “Anything else you need from me?” My eyes meet the three men, settling on my brother.

“No. I know this is uncomfortable for you and you think you can do everything yourself, Lune, but you need to let us do our job.”

“And we’ll do whatever it takes to keep you safe.” When he says this, Tony looks into my eyes, conveying just how much he means that and how far he’ll go to do just that. And God, if that doesn’t scare me just a bit.

FIVE

-luna-

10 years ago

FLUFFING MY LONG, near-white hair once more in the mirror and slapping another layer of lip gloss on, I take a deep breath before stepping out of my car. Tonight's bonfire is it. My chance to make my move on Tony Garrison.

I know he likes me, too. He comes home almost every weekend, spends time at my house, helping my dad even when Zee isn't there. He doesn't treat me like a dumb little girl. He talks to me. And listens. But he's my big brother's best friend so won't try anything on me. He's loyal, and I love that about him. I get it, but I'm tired of waiting. So instead of waiting and waiting for what never seems to happen, I'm taking matters into my own hands.

Tony and Zee graduated college today and Mom and Dad are throwing them a small party in the woods behind our house.

My feet are strapped into wedged sandals, which makes walking through the decaying leaves still leftover from fall difficult, but they make me look grown-up, like the girls I've seen Tony with. My denim skirt is shorter than my dad would ever let me leave the house in, which is why he's never seen it. While my white tank top is low cut, there's not much to show off, especially compared to those college girls. But tonight that won't hold me back.

The fire is burning bright, new college graduates and friends of Zee's from high school around the pit, drinking from red cups. I've been to parties in the woods before, but they were high school parties with cans of warm beer and bottles of liquor stolen from parents' cabinets. This is a *real* party with a table lined with bottles, cans, cups, and a keg.

Confidence, Lune. Fake it 'til you make it, I whisper to myself, ignoring the slight shaking in my hands. The other girls here are wearing shoes similar to mine, but their ankles don't quake with each step.

Walking to the table, I pour a few different things that I think I recognize into a cup before taking a sip. *Holy shit, too strong!* The liquid burns my throat as it goes down, making me wince with pain and cough.

"Here, let me fix that," a guy says, laughing and reaching his hand out. Passing the cup, my face warm with embarrassment, I watch as he dumps it, then mixes a few things with soda before passing it back. Cautiously, I take a sip and smile, loving the flavor. I chug about half of the cup before I look back at him.

"Thanks. That was awful."

"I saw you mix it, I had a feeling." He seems nice. But he's not who I'm here for. "I haven't seen you here before. I'm Cole. Who do you know here?" he asks, and inside a secret smile explodes. He doesn't know who I am! He didn't immediately call me out for being an intruder!

"I'm... uh... Hannah," I say, giving my friend's name. "I know Zander. He's a, uh.. an old friend." I mean, it's not a lie. Technically, he's my oldest friend.

"Ahh, he's a good kid. Did you go to school with him?"

"Yup!" I say as I finish my glass. Once again, it's not technically a lie. I did go to school with him. Elementary school.

"Want another?" Cole says, a gleam in his eye. When I nod my head and hand him the cup, he mixes me another that is just as tasty. It doesn't take long for the warmth in my belly to seep into my limbs and for my nerves to melt away. Cole and I talk some more, but my eyes are constantly scanning, looking for Tony, ready to do what I came for.

"You're so pretty, Hannah," he says, reaching out and grazing his fingers on my arm. It feels.. wrong. The look in his eye feels off too, like he's waiting for something.

"Uhm, thanks," I say, shifting uncomfortably in my too-tall shoes.

"Do you want another drink?" he asks, eyeing my cup that still has some

of the last concoction he made.

“No, thank you.” Scanning the crowd once more, I look for Tony, hoping to spot him. I see a few people I know from around town. Kids that have graduated, but no one from my grade. Cole’s gotten closer, his arm grazing mine, giving me goosebumps all over. And not the good kind Tony gives me when he calls me darlin’.

“Looking for someone?” Cole asks, looking around as well. I nod, hoping that if he thinks I’m here with someone, he might back off.

“Yeah, uh, I’m just looking for-” A warm arm comes around my waist, pulling me back into a tall frame.

“Looking for me, baby?” A voice asks in my ear, a gruff rumble I feel from his chest, sending shivers down my spine. That voice...

“Oh, uh, hey Garrison, do you know Hannah?” Cole asks. He looks nervous, like he’s been caught cheating on a paper, but I don’t care anymore. All I can think is that I am in Tony Garrison’s arms, his warm body against mine. It’s all I’ve ever wanted.

“She’s my girl, Roberts. Get out of here before I tell your girlfriend,” His girl! The word gives me goosebumps again, but this time it’s the good kind. Cole turns and walks away, looking both angry and annoyed before Tony turns me around. My heel catches, making me stumble, but he catches me.

“Jesus, Luna, what the hell?” he asks before sniffing what’s in my cup. “How many of these have you had?” He looks angry now.

“Two? That boy made them for me.”

“Jesus Christ. Does your brother know you’re here?”

“No, and don’t tell him.”

“Don’t tell him? Why the fuck not? What are you doing here?”

“Because I wasn’t invited. He’ll tell Mom and Dad and I’ll be so grounded. Please, Tony, don’t tell him.” I lift my red cup to my lips, hoping to down the rest for courage. Before I can, Tony grabs the cup, then tosses the cup and its contents onto the ground without a care.

“Fuck, don’t drink that. Who knows if he put something in it. He’s a creep, Luna.”

“Littering is rude,” I mumble, ignoring the part about Cole putting something in my drink. Okay, shit. I didn’t even think of something like that. God, how was I so dumb.

“Least of my worries, darlin’.” A shiver runs down my spine at him calling me that. The name that used to drive me insane, but now it feels like a

sweet secret between us. I just know... My lips tip up in a smile that I feel down to my soul. "Come on, let's get you out of here." He holds onto my waist as he directs me back towards where the cars are parked. It was probably not my best idea to drive my car.

"Where are we going?" I ask. "I can't go home like this, Tony." My plan is quickly going up in flames, but the way he's holding me is giving me all the butterflies, anyway. Making this disastrous night worth the risk.

"We'll go to my place until you sober up. Your brother won't be home for hours, by then I'll have gotten you home."

"Oh." Warmth settles low in my belly, thinking of Tony taking me home, taking care of me. "Okay. But what about the party?" I guess I should feel guilty about taking him from what is his party too, but I just can't seem to feel bad about it.

"Didn't want to be here, anyway. We'll take your car. Were you insane driving it here? What was your plan, Luna? Give me your keys." He walks me to the car that I drove to the grass lot near our house. It's technically my family's property, but I didn't want to walk any distance in these heels. What I don't tell him is that my 'plan' was to finally, *finally*, tell him how I feel. Instead, I remain silent as he helps me into the passenger seat, taking my keys as he shuts the door behind me.

We get to the apartment he shares with my brother soon after, but by then the liquor has fully permeated my system, making my head swim and my steps unsteady. Seeing this, Tony looks me over, then lifts me like a new bride, and walks me up the stairs. I smile the whole way, a giggle escaping from my lips.

"We need to get some food in you," he says, placing me onto the couch gently as he takes his cell and orders us a pizza. He puts on a show for us and I sit on the couch next to him, nervous. *God, why am I so nervous?*

"So, are you excited to be done with school?" I ask, twirling my hair in the way I've seen other girls do. I feel stupid doing it.

"I guess. Got the Academy next, so I'm not done." Tony majored in criminal justice, just like Zander, and they're both going into the Police Academy next month. He's wanted to be a police officer for as long as I've known him.

"Yeah, but that's the fun part, that's the part you'll like."

"It'll be worth it." He's pulling at the label on his beer, booted feet up on the junky coffee table they found on the side of the road. When I asked

earlier if I could have one, he gave me a stern look and didn't even bother to tell me no. The face said it all.

"So what's your plan?" I want to know. I want to know everything I can about Anthony Thomas Garrison.

"Hopefully, get a job here in Springbrook Hills once I'm out. Stay close. Eventually, move out of this hole," he says this with a smile, knowing I'm constantly making fun of the two of them for their gross apartment.

"Soon you'll be rolling in it. I'm sure you'll be able to." Tony laughs, stretching an arm around the back of the couch as he flips through channels.

"Darlin', police officers don't make that much. Wouldn't call it rollin' in it." I smile at him, his laugh making my belly drop and my heart flutter.

"Yeah, I know. But you don't need much to make a good life." Tony comes from a family similar to mine - mom and dad still together, two brothers, close family, but not rich. Sometimes barely scraping by, but filled with love and laughter and happiness.

"That's why I love you, Luna. You get the important things in life. Few girls do." The arm on the couch drops to my shoulders and pulls me close as he plants a kiss on my head, a move he's done a million times. My head is still spinning from the drinks as the butterflies in my belly ratchet up, feeling more like bats than gentle creatures. Here's my chance.

"Tony, I-" The doorbell rings.

"Pizza's here." He stands, grabs his wallet, and heads for the door.

"Thanks for taking care of me, Tony," I say softly once he settles into the couch next to me after tossing the pizza box. Full of pizza, the drinks from earlier are waning. If I want to do this without full-on anxiety, it needs to be soon before the calming effects and false bravado wear off.

"Of course, Lune, You know I'll always protect you." He leans forward and puts a hand behind my head, pulling me in to kiss the top of my hair once more. My pulse beats, nerves making my hands shake, and my stomach churn. Here it is.

Looking up, I lift a hand and place it on his bicep, strong with naturally tan skin from his Italian mother. His eyes meet mine, dancing with a small smile on his lips. It's now or never. Leaning up and in, I gently touch my lips to his. For a moment, nothing happens, but then his hand on my head presses in, bringing me closer, his lips softening.

Ohmigodohmigodohmigod! This is it! He likes it! He wants it, too!

It's beautiful, firm lips pressing to mine, his scent flooding me from all sides, the hand on the back of my head tangling in my hair. This is it. This is the beginning of us.

And then the worst happens. His hand moves to the front of my shoulder and pushes gently, breaking our kiss and my heart all at once.

"Luna, no," he says and my world crashes down around me. "We can't do this, Luna, please. You're Zander's sister. And a kid. You're... you're... you're like a little sister to me." There's hurt and betrayal in his eyes, but it's so much stronger inside me.

SIX

-luna-

“WHERE’D YOU GO, GIRLFRIEND?” my best friend Zoe says, snapping me back into the present.

My head shakes to clear my mind. “Somewhere I should not be.”

“Please tell me you weren’t thinking about that night.”

The problem with having a best friend you’ve known since before you were born is she knows you better than you know yourself. Zoe is like this, able to dig into my brain and figure out what I’m thinking, sometimes before I even get the chance to do it myself.

Rather than answer, I ask a question. “What do you want to order for dinner?” We’re in my apartment above the bar in pajamas and drinking wine. It may only be three in the afternoon, but after the last two days I’ve had, I decided it was excused.

Zoe eyes me skeptically, but instead of saying anything, digs through the drawer with my takeout menus. Considering I have to close the bar for two days and I’m still planning to pay my employees for lost wages, I really should be eating the food I have. But today calls for junk food.

We land on burritos, chips, and guac from Aztec plus Zoe’s homemade margaritas. I run downstairs for the ingredients before she whips up some for us when we sit to eat.

I have a mouth full of rice and beans when Zoe brings the subject back

up.

“You know, you should talk to him about it. About that night.”

“Talk to who?” Playing dumb is a lost cause, but one I’m willing to take up, anyway.

“Don’t play dumb. You know what I’m talking about. How sure are you that he knows you remember what happened?” she asks, grabbing a chip from the pile before dipping it into the best guacamole known to man.

“Does it matter?”

“I think so.” Instead of answering right away, I gulp down half of my margarita.

“I just.. it seems silly. What’s the point, you know? It was embarrassing. It’s clear that he doesn’t think of me the way I think of him.”

“Think or thought?”

“What?”

“The way you *think* of him or the way you *thought* of him?”

“Thought. That’s what I said.”

“No, you said the way you *think* of him. Because honey, even if you deny it, you are still head over heels in love with that man.” I cough, choking on the chip I just swallowed.

“What? No! No way, Zoe. I wasn’t even in love with him then, just infatuated by my older brother’s hot friend. God, I’ve barely spent 10 minutes at a time with him since I was in high school until his morning.”

“By design.” She quirks an eyebrow at me, once again knowing me better than I know myself sometimes.

“No, we both have busy lives. They don’t cross over.” *Lies, lies, lies.*

“Yeah? What about the SHPD holiday party three years ago that you refused to go to, instead choosing to sit at home and eat Chinese?”

“I needed a night off!”

“And the time you needed people to help you move, but as soon as Zee told you Tony would come to help, you decided it wasn’t too much and forced me to help you lug this sofa upstairs?”

“I didn’t want to use the guys! They work too hard as it is.”

“Oh, and how about any time you need backup for a bar issue, you ask dispatch exactly who they’re sending so you know whether you should hide and let Jake handle it?” Well, shit. She’s got me there.

“I just like to know-“

“What about last year when you left Zee’s birthday party 30 minutes after

you got there, conveniently 10 minutes after Tony showed up?”

“He wasn’t supposed to be there! He was on call!” I shout, making her shut up with a smile on her face. “Fine. I’m embarrassed as fuck, and looking at him still makes me tingle. Is that what you want to hear? That I still have a childhood crush on a guy who will never see me as more than a sister? That the reason I can’t commit to fucking anyone is because my 15-year-old self compares them to Anthony fucking Garrison until I’m forced to dump them? What do you want me to say, Zoe?” And for some unknown reason, tears fill my lower lashes. God, this is so embarrassing.

“Oh, honey, I didn’t mean to-“

“I know. I know, trust me. It’s just.. he doesn’t want me like that. Never has, never will. And being with him, reminding myself of that? It just.. it hurts, okay? For 10 years, I built up a fantasy in my head and it was just that. A fantasy. I know it’s stupid and nearly psychotic, but that’s it.”

“It’s not stupid. It makes sense to me.” There’s a light in her eyes that I’ve seen in the past but never ask about. She’ll tell me when the time is right. “But you can’t avoid him forever.”

Sighing, I nod. She’s right, of course. I can’t.

“Yeah, well, I can avoid him for tonight, at least,” I say, lifting my burrito to take a bite. Chewing is a great distraction from answering more questions from my well-meaning best friend.

“Uh, well, I wouldn’t be so sure of that,” she says, looking over my shoulder out the window of my apartment that faces the street. Looking that way in dismay, I glance out and see a cruiser parked at the curb.

“Ahh fuck.”

SEVEN

-tony-

“LOOK, all I’m saying is that if things get too out of hand, she can stay at my place.” Mitch is a good guy, he really is, but if he doesn’t shut his mouth soon, my partner is going to get punched in the face. “Jaime would love to have someone else to fuss over,” he says about his wife who does love to fuss over just about anyone.

“Seriously man, shut the fuck up.”

“I know, I know. You’ve got that weird thing with her. I won’t step in. I’m just laying the offer out on the table.”

“It’s not a weird thing. She’s Zander’s little sister, and she’s scared as fuck by me. She had a crush on me when she was a kid. Either way, I haven’t seen much of her since.”

“Got it.” Mitch shoves his sandwich into his mouth, taking a huge bite and getting crumbs all over the seat. The guy is a fucking pig. My phone buzzes on the console, lighting up the lard cruiser parked outside Luna’s apartment.

There was no way in hell I was letting her stay there tonight without knowing she’s safe. Thankfully, her best friend is the Chief’s daughter, so he agreed to put Mitch and me on patrol here.

Luna: What the fuck are you doing outside?

Tony: Patrolling.

Luna: Go away.

Tony: No,

“Who’s that?” Mitch asks, spewing more crumbs across the dash.

“Jesus, dude, smaller bites. Chew, swallow, speak. In that order.”

“Fuck off, you’re not my mother,” he says, digging into the bag for his chips.

“Yeah, except I’ve talked to your mother *and* your wife about your disgusting habits and they both gave me free rein to bust your ass for it.” And they did. Partners in this line of work are sometimes closer than husbands and wives, which means not only have I met Mitch’s insane family, but I’m often invited over for Sunday dinner.

“Stop telling my mom everything you snitch.” Smiling, I glance at my phone again as it buzzes. “So who is it?”

“Luna. We’ve been spotted.”

Luna: Seriously, I’m fine, go do something actually important, find some criminals. Beat up bad guys,

Tony: This is Springbrook Hills. Not many bad guys to beat up.

The small town we live in is not only idyllic in its small size, perfect location, and close-knit community, but the crime is pretty minimal. Kids screwing around and tagging the underpass of the bridge. Petty theft, domestic calls, drunks at the bar. That kind of stuff. We don’t see any serious crime, so spending the night on call outside of Luna’s isn’t diverting efforts from the rest of the town.

Luna: Then move somewhere more exciting.

I laugh out loud at that, something her brother would say.

Tony: But who would look out for you then?

Luna: Me. I don’t need looking out for.

And then, I don’t know why I do it. Maybe a lapse in judgment, maybe being with her for a full day made that night fresh in my mind. I don’t know. But I do it all the same.

Tony: Sure did when you were 17.

After that, the text is quickly marked as delivered, then read. A bubble with typing dots pops up, then disappears like she changed her mind. They pop up, then they’re gone. Over and over. My gut clenches with nerves, wondering if maybe I went too far. I should have let it go.

Luna: That was a long time ago.

Tony: Yeah, well, that was the last time you really talked to me, so

how would I know if that's changed.

Again, bubbles pop up, bubbles disappear.

Luna: they have. I'm not like that anymore.

It's hard not to wonder what she means by that. Does she mean she doesn't need help? That she's not dumb enough to take a drink from a strange man? God, I hope so. Or does she mean something else? Could she mean she feels nothing for me years later? It would be stupid to hope, but also...

Tony: We'll see about that, darlin.

"Who are you texting?" Mitch asks, knocking me out of my stupor.

"What?" My phone slips back into my pocket and my eyes drift up to the window of Luna's apartment. I don't know what it's like on the inside. When she originally moved in, we all offered to help her bring stuff over, but she said she could do it herself. The next day at the station I overheard the Chief laughing with Zee that Luna and Zoe had lugged her huge couch up those stairs by themselves. "No one."

"Is it Luuuuna?" he says this with a school boy teasing tone. The man is like a brother to me, which means the need to punch him really sets in quick some days.

"Shut up, Mitch." Reaching for my own chips, I distract myself by opening the bag and shoving a few in my mouth.

"You know, I don't get that relationship."

"What's there to get?"

"Why is she so weird around you? Haven't you and Zee been friends since you were kids? Did something happen?" I sigh. Occasionally Mitch will ask about Luna to Zander in the way you ask about any guy does about a hot younger sister, but we've never talked about her ourselves.

"Yeah. I've been friends with Zee since kindergarten. His sister was a baby when we met, so I've known her just about her whole life." Zander and I are four years older than Luna, with their younger brother Ace coming in a year after Luna.

"And?"

"And.. something happened when she was 17. I'm not even sure if she knows, but it got more difficult after that."

"Difficult how?" Mitch is the friend who picks and picks and picks at an issue until he gets to the root, continually asking questions like a trained therapist would.

"Okay, so I'm four years older than her. When she was maybe 10, she

had a crush on me. I was a teenager, and she was a kid and I brushed it off most of the time. Sometimes I fed into it, because I was an asshole teen and she was a cute kid. But of course, nothing would come of it because she was 10 and then 12 and then 14.”

“And?”

“And then she was 16 and 17 and every time Zee and I would come home from school, she was there. Zoe and Luna would make these little schemes, try everything they could to get me to notice Luna. Walkin’ around in heels for literally no reason, tanning in the backyard when Zee and I were out there.” As if Luna could even tan, with her miles of porcelain skin. “I wasn’t an idiot. I knew what they were doing, but it was harmless and kind of cute. Flattering. I’d be lying if even at that age, she wasn’t gorgeous.” Mitch makes a face, half amused, half concerned. “Dude, I know. It’s weird. She was a kid.”

“And you were what, 21?” I nod, confirming. When we were kids, that four and a half year age gap felt like an ocean of time between us, but now it just... doesn’t. “Until...” Mitch says, urging me on to finish my story.

“I was home more my last year of school. I’d packed my schedule my first three years and basically coasted the last year. I’d come home to Springbrook Hills and pick up odd jobs, make some beer money, that kind of thing. I did a lot of little stuff for Zander’s dad, so I was there a lot. They’d have me over for dinner. And... I got to know her.”

“Oh shit, please tell me this doesn’t go somewhere, pedo-y,” he says, cringing.

“Jesus, no. If you want to hear this so bad, just shut up and listen.” Mitch raises his hands, telling me to go on with a zip of his lips. “So Zee wasn’t ahead of his classes, so there were times I’d go home without him, Luna would be there without Zoe, so there’d be no scheme planned. We’d talk. She’s sweet, has an enormous heart. Independent as fuck. I told her how I was nervous about starting the Academy and she’d tell me she was nervous for homecoming. God, saying it like this still sounds weird.” My hands rub over my close cropped hair, my nervous tell. I’m shit at poker. “I don’t know. Something clicked. I would never lead her on, never clue her in but at some point when she was 17, I made the decision to talk to Zee when she turned 18.”

Mitch’s eyes widen. “I know he wouldn’t have been immediately excited for his little sister to start something with me, but I swear, man, there was

something there. I felt it. I know she did, too. I started making excuses to come home on the weekend. Excuses to miss parties and games. Once in a while she'd send me a text of something stupid. A picture of their dog or a good grade on a test."

"So what happened, man? Didn't she turn 18 a few months after you graduated? Did you ever talk to Zander?" I sigh, because this is the part that I regret the most.

"Do you remember that party Zee's parents threw in the woods for graduation?" Mitch was two years above us in school, already out of the academy by then, but in a small town like we live in, everyone goes to a big party like that.

"The bonfire?"

"Yeah, that one. So I pull up that night, not wanting to be there at all. You know I hate shit like that. I see her car in the grass with the others and I go looking for her. Find her talking to fucking Cole Roberts and drunk off her ass."

"Cole? That douche that's on his third wife?" Mitch asks, knowing the gossip as well as any small town cop does.

"That one. He made her some drinks, strong as fuck, and she was hammered. I don't even want to think about what would happen if I hadn't found her."

"Fuck, man. What did Zee say?"

"Nothing. He never found out. She begged my not to, he would have ratted her out. I took her back to our apartment to sober her up before taking her home. We watched a movie, and I stuffed her with pizza to soak up the liquor. We were sitting on the couch and... and, fuck, man, she kissed me."

"No fucking way. I'm part proud and part horrified," Mitch says.

"Yeah. It wasn't ideal. The part that sucks most is she was three months from her 18th birthday."

"So what happened?"

"I pushed her away, of course. I'm not a scumbag. She was drunk and underaged. I pushed her away, told her it was wrong, and that she was like a sister to me, no more no less."

"Oh fuck, man. How'd she take that?"

"About as well as you'd think. She was drunk and embarrassed. I took her home eventually, and it's been weird ever since. I still don't know if she remembers everything, but anytime there's an opportunity to see her, she

does everything in her power to avoid me. I haven't been alone with the woman since that night."

"Fuck. Is that why you're never in a relationship?" I think about that, trying to decide what is the right answer. Because honestly, it's a bit of yes and a bit of no. I want to settle down. I'm tired of relationships with no meat, without connection, but every time I get close to a woman I start unintentionally comparing her to Luna, and that's not fair to anyone. Most of my relationships don't last over three or four months.

"No, of course not. But would I make her mine, given the chance? Absolutely." Mitch stares at me. Air leaves his lungs in a puff as he takes in my fucked up tale. Being the clued in partner he is, he doesn't pick at the conversation any more, knowing I'm done with it.

The rest of the night is quiet, Mitch moving on to more casual conversations like sports and some kind of commentary on Zander's girl of the week. But my mind keeps going over our conversation and replaying the scene that I left out from that night when Luna was 17.

"Thanks for taking care of me, Tony," Luna says in her sweet tinkling voice, her blonde hair drifting around her as I sit next to her on the couch. God, she's gorgeous. Three months ago, I made the decision that when she turns 18, I'm going to Zander to tell him everything. That I want to start something with his sister, that I need his okay. That I think I could fall in love with her. There's three more months to go and they stretch out in front of me like an eternity, testing my resolve and patience each time I see her.

"Of course, Luna, You know I'll always protect you." I can't help but touch her gently, putting my hand into her soft hair and pulling her into my chest. My lips brush the top of her head, taking in her sweet scent. I want to tell her what she means to me, tell her how I feel, what I'm hoping to build with her, but it's just not right. Not yet.

Her small hand touches my arm, her fair skin is nearly luminescent in contrast to my darker complexion. Her hand is soft and warm and when her bright green eyes look at me, I can't look away from the emotion in them. My lips tilt, smiling gently at my girl. My girl. God, that's all I want.

Her eyes flash quickly with hesitation, then determination before she does the unthinkable. She leans in and up, pressing her lips to mine, taking me off guard in a kiss we've both been skirting around. I freeze, unsure of what to do, a mixture of triumphant and horrified. Instinctively, my hand on her head presses her closer to me, threading my fingers through soft strands. I need

her; I want her.

Her lips are soft, her taste unimaginable. I want to stay locked with her like this, to stay in this moment forever.

This moment is everything I thought it would be except..

Shit. This can't happen. Not now. My hand comes up, gently pushing her shoulder back to distance her from me.

"Luna, no," I say, standing up and backing away, afraid that if I'm close to her, I won't be able to control myself. "We can't do this, Luna, please. You're Zander's sister. And a kid. You're... you're... you're like a little sister to me." I'm saying anything I can to get her to understand that this cannot happen right now. Frustration and anger bubble under my skin, furious that I allowed this to happen, that I fucked this up so badly.

"Oh. God, yeah, sorry. I'm not sure what uh.. what just happened. I think I'm still a lot drunker than I thought." She's embarrassed and hurt, a look that cuts through my heart. I hate that I put that look on her face. Hate that she's going to believe what I just said, that she's just a sister to me. Hate that I can't correct that for another three months.

"We've all been there." It's all I can think to say. It's tearing me apart.

"Yeah," she says, soft, pain leaking from that one word.

"You know I love you, right, Lune?" I ask, praying that she can sense the underlying meaning. I love you in a completely non-brotherly way. I love the way you smile at me and I love that you never back down. I love that your heart is so huge and you support my dreams. I love that one day I can say I've known you your whole life. Just give me three months, baby. Three months.

"Yeah." She stands and starts cleaning things up, pizza and old beer cans.

"Darlin', you don't have to do that," I say, trying to grab her wrist and stop her. She moves before I can and I don't push it. "Leave that stuff, come finish the movie."

"Let me just tidy a bit. You guys are disgusting, then I'll watch." She's avoiding looking at me, carrying things to the trash, doing the dishes. After five minutes, I convince her to sit on the couch and finish the movie, but she falls asleep, sitting in a ball uncomfortably, as far from me as she can get.

Deciding to give in just a bit, I pick her up and lay her down on the couch, her head in my lap, her hair spilling across it. My fingers play in the soft strands, my heart constricting, thinking that this could be mine. This will

be mine soon. As soon as she's legal, as soon as I can talk to Zee about it.

"I love you, Luna. Just hold on for three months for me, okay?" I whisper in her ear, pushing locks from her face.

"Okay, Tony," she whispers, half asleep, before nuzzling into my lap. And with that, I'm confident that I can make it through.

EIGHT

-luna-

“I NEED three Coors and a dirty martini, Luna!” my bartender Kate yells to me behind the bar. It’s Saturday and my bar is back up and running, thankfully. Chip replaced the window the next day after it happened, and a bit of elbow grease got the spray paint off.

And it seems like the residents of Springbrook Hills missed their Friday night out because the bar is slammed tonight. It’s busier than I’ve seen it since the last time Hometown Heroes, the now mega-popular band Ace is a part of, came to play, which was 2 years ago. One can only assume it’s because of the vandalism and the need for fresh gossip. Living in a small town means that every nosey neighbor wants to check out the damage, try to get the inside scoop on what happened.

It’s par for the course in a sleepy small town where not much happens.

Some might hate that about a small town - the lack of privacy, the knowing everything about everyone, the in-everyone’s-business citizens can get to you if you let them. But it’s also kind of the reason I didn’t leave this town when I started my bar. I love knowing each of my customers, knowing my regulars, and that they know me.

It also helps that the curiosity has brought in the crowds because after paying all of my employees for the day missed and Chip for the new window, my wallet is aching.

“Got it!” I shout over the music playing, turning to grab the bottles from ice and pop the tops. After measuring out the martini, I turn to one of my regulars, shaking the mixer in hand.

“Need another, Hank?” I ask the older man. Hank is the happiest, goofiest older man you’ll ever meet. He’s here nearly every night, nursing a beer or two and avoiding home. His wife passed away from cancer three years ago, leaving him all alone. I think going home just reminds him of that, so instead, he comes here.

“Not yet, my girl, but I think Sheena does,” he says, tipping his head to the right where a middle-aged woman is sitting. Sheena isn’t my *favorite* customer, seeing as when someone comes in four to five times a week and drinks to the drunk edge of tipsy every time, it’s hard not to be concerned about an issue. But my job is to serve her responsibly, not to patrol how often she drinks. I rarely have to cut her off, though it has happened.

“Hey, babe. Yeah, can I get another?” Her eyes are glassy as she lifts her glass with a silly, crooked smile playing on her lips. Taking her in, I decide one more should be fine, so long as it’s a weak one and then she’s done for the night.

“Sure thing, Sheena.” I pour out the martini into a frosted glass and add garnish before signaling to Kate to grab the drinks. Turning to the other corner of my kick-ass bar, I stop dead. Tony.

Tony is sitting at one of the four corners of my large, center bar, holding a soda and staring right at me. *What the fuck.*

“Hey, Tony, uh, what are you doing here?” I ask, loud enough to be heard over the music, but my nerves make it come out soft and stuttered. God, why is he so fucking gorgeous. His blue eyes look right at me, twinkling like he enjoys my distress. He probably does, the asshole.

“Told you I’d be keeping you safe. Here I am.” He lifts his soda and sips, never breaking eye contact.

“That’s unnecessary, Tony. I’m surrounded by people. Nothing bad can happen tonight.” Not only does everyone here tonight know about my unfortunate... troubles, but my stalker would be an absolute moron if he tried anything with this many witnesses. The bar is wall-to-wall customers, most locals who know me or my family personally.

“That’s not how this works, Luna. You’re in danger, it’s my job to make sure you’re safe.” His eyes tell me there will be no reasoning with this man. Sighing, I nod before walking away. Okay, so it’s more of an angry stomp,

and Tony's amused laugh drifts to my ears, even over the sound of the loud music, a staple here at Luna's Full Moon Cafe.

"Hey! Jim!" I say, seeing another regular. Jim McCloud went to school a year behind my brother and Tony, but never left for college. He went straight to work for the Colemans and never left. He's a sweet guy and comes in a few nights a week, sometimes with his coworkers and sometimes alone. "I haven't seen you in a while!" I lean in to the bar and smile his way.

The bar itself is outstanding. I designed the entire thing myself, making it perfect for flow and customers, and easy for the bartenders to get to as many patrons as possible. It's a giant rectangle, made from reclaimed barn wood, that I forced Zoe and Sadie to help me sand and stain. It came out gorgeous, but every time Sadie sees it she glares at the bar top as if it personally insulted her. But don't worry, when she recreated the style in her coffee shop, I was first to help to pay my debt.

The room itself is cool and dim. I have an amazing sound system that I control from the bar and a small stage in one corner. Occasionally we'll have local bands come in and perform live shows, which is my favorite part of this job. One wall is completely lined with old records that I found in record stores, thrift shops, and Craigslist. It was a little sacrilegious to glue records to a wall, ruining them forever, but the result is amazing. Plus, I tried to find as many damaged ones as I could.

Sprinkled around the room are tables and chairs, some high, some low, none matching. We found all of them on the side of the road, at estate sales, or as Facebook Marketplace finds. My entire bar has the same gypsy, a mix-and-match vibe that I try to bring into my everyday life.

I absolutely love this place.

"Hey Luna, hear you had some... issues recently?" he says, looking me over. That's been the question from everyone all night. Prying, trying to get information. Mitch and Tony made me promise to keep what little information I had under wraps, in case my stalker is as far into the community as I am and gets a heads up. They said nothing, but I'm pretty sure they want to make sure he doesn't bolt or escalate things. A small shiver of discomfort rolls down my spine.

"Yeah, nothing big. What can I get ya?" I say, avoiding the subject. My eyes flit over to Tony, who's watching me with a fixed gaze.

"Nothing big? What's up with Officer Garrison staring you down?" Jim asks. See, this is why I did not *want* him here. It's turning this frustrating

experience into a bigger deal than it needs to be. Having an officer here wouldn't be a big deal, especially since Zander brings his brothers in blue here and Mr. Carlson, Zoe's dad, stops in with Dad sometimes as well. But an officer sitting sober, staring at me all night? Raises some questions.

"Oh, God, you know Zee and Tony. They're overprotective." I smile at him and bend to the cooler under the bar, grabbing his usual Coors. "Here you go. Let me know if you need anything else."

"Thanks, Luna. Let me know if there's anything I can do to help." Walking back over to Tony, I slap on my bitchiest face to get him out of my damn bar.

"Seriously, can you just go? You're drawing attention. I already have the whole town wondering what happened. Having an officer glaring at everyone, sitting at my bar, and nursing a soda on my busiest night is drawing way too much attention."

"Gonna be a no, sorry, darlin'." God, I hate that nickname. I love it, but I friggin' hate it right now. Every time I hear it, it gives me a zing of pleasure, chased by the memory of that night. With a huff, I turn, knowing it's a lost cause, and get on with my night, assisting servers and making drinks.

"Hey, Luna! Can you come over here and show me how to make the special?" Daisy calls from across the bar. With one last glare at Tony, I head over to her, hoping I'll be able to ignore him for the rest of the night.

The night goes on with little to no major issues and no interference from Officer Garrison. Music is blaring, customers are happy, bartenders are tipped well. It's a great night overall, a night I needed after the last few days. My soul feels topped up, back in regulation after the last few days of stress and anxiety. Being back in my place, in my zone, does that. Walking over to my favorite bartender, Kate, I hip check her as she's drying a glass in a rare lull.

"How's it going, babe?" Kate is the employee every owner hopes to find. She works incredibly hard, is always down to pick up extra hours, friendly to the customers, and is kind and helpful to her coworkers. She started working at Full Moon when we opened and I've never had a single issue with her. On top of that, she's a single mom to the sweetest little boy who she always puts first.

"Alright, could be better, could be worse," I say with a wink, picking up a towel and a glass, wiping glasses with her.

"Everything good with the drama? Insurance gonna cover it?" See what I

mean? She's sweet and always has her mind out for others.

"Yup, it's all covered, thankfully. Including loss of income." Thank God I went for the more expensive insurance when I first started. The number of times I've cashed it in hasn't been too many, but each time I'm forced to, I'm grateful. When I opened, my dad advised me it was better to be safe than sorry and, business-wise, at least, I've stuck to that.

"Great to hear. So what's up with him?" Kate gently tips her head to the side where I know Tony sits, staring me down. I don't even bother to look to confirm it.

"Just a precaution."

"Damn, I'd love to have a precaution like that of my own." My eyes widen before I slap her arm.

"Kate!"

"What? He's hot, Lune." Glancing over at Tony, I see his eyes are on me, just like they've been all night. Staring me down, taking me in, watching my every mood. Heat rises to my cheeks as I turn to wipe down the bar.

"Shut up. He's a pain in the ass."

"I'll let him be a pain in *my* ass." God, this girl. She needs to get laid. I can only imagine how she'd be on a girl's night with Sadie. I should set that up.

"Oh, my God, you're insane."

"So you'd be okay if I go over there? Flirt a little?" Her eyebrow is quirks like she's laying out a challenge she doesn't think I'll take.

"Uh, sure? Go for it." My hand waves her off and I look away, but something in my gut is churning, making me feel uneasy. Why? Why don't I want her to go flirt with Tony? She's gorgeous, a showstopper, and the kindest soul I know. And Tony is.. well, he's Tony.

She looks over at me, contemplating her next move, before shrugging a shoulder and walking over to Tony. From the corner of my eye, I watch them, taking in every glance, every gesture. She leans on the bar, and I can imagine her generous cleavage spilling from her light pink top. I tug at my shirt, a crew neck men's tee for the bar that I cut into a crop. It shows pretty much nothing above my belly button and just a sliver of skin before it hits my high-rise shorts. Not that there's much under to show off.

Kate flips her long auburn hair over her shoulder as she laughs at something Tony says, making me unconsciously touch my shoulder-length, white-blond hair. My mind drifts to all the girls he's brought home over the

years, all with long, gorgeous hair. I cut mine off when I turned 18, not long after that night.

God, why am I like this? I don't even care. Hell, if she landed Tony that would be the absolute best thing for her and Callum, her 5-year-old son. He's loyal and honest and trustworthy, a perfect example for him to grow up to. He'd take care of them, treat them well.

So why does the thought of him with her, or *anyone*, feel like a shard of glass in my stomach?

To torture myself, I keep watching as Kate says something to make him laugh, his head thrown back and his full-bodied, unencumbered laugh filling the room even over the music.

Shit, I need to stop this. I need to distract myself. Walking around the perimeter of the bar, I collect empties and take orders, but these are far and few between. The night is coming to a close, people are coupling up, and the crowd is thinning. Last call is upon us and not a minute too soon. I need him out of my bar, out of my space. All I want is to go up to my room, cuddle into my bed, and forget this whole mess.

Ducking under the bar top, I go to the small tables littered throughout the space and do the same, grabbing empties and closing out tabs to make closing easier. As I'm circling back to go behind the bar once more, I pass Tony and he grabs my wrist, pulling me close. Too close. Close enough that my side can feel the heat from his body through the thin cotton of my tee.

"Hey, mind getting me another water?" His hand is hot on my wrist, melting tension in my hands and radiating up my elbow. Glancing over across the bar, I see Kate still standing across from him, a smirk playing on her full lips.

"Why not ask Kate?" I say, tipping my chin to the woman in question.

"I'm asking you."

"I'm busy."

"You can make time for me." The smile still on his lips turns into a full smile that melts something in me, the same way it did when I was a little girl and he was some out-of-reach dream.

"Why wouldn't you ask the woman you've been flirting with all night." The words blurt from my lips and I immediately regret showing my hand, proving that I've been watching them. A snort comes from Kate's direction and my eyes shoot daggers at her. Her hands lift in surrender before she reaches over and grabs the empty bottle I'm holding in my free hand. Tony

tugs my wrist so I'm even closer to him, my hip brushing his knee, my heart beating erratically. After all of this time, why do I still get like this around him?

"You jealous, darlin'?" He whispers it, almost sweetly, and somehow it can still be heard over the sound of the music.

"God, ew, no. I'm just busy, you asshat." Tugging my hand out of his grip, I duck under the bar before snatching his glass, placing it under the tap, and tugging the lever to fill it. It makes a satisfying clank as it hits the wood bar, water sloshing over the side. "Here."

"Thanks, Luna." There's a teasing glint in his eye, like he's got something on his sleeve or that there's a joke I'm not privy to. He used to have that look when he and Zee would try to trick me into doing something or they were pulling a prank on me. I saw it the time they hid a worm in my dollhouse and the time I went through the whole day of school with a post-it on my back that said, "I smell." Rolling my eyes, I walk away and continue to clean up, closing out one of the three registers and telling one of my servers to keep on empty patrol.

An hour later, the key turns in the lock after all of my employees head home, leaving just Tony and me in the bar.

"You can leave now," I say, my back to him as I turn off the front lights and finish my closing tasks. It's late and exhaustion is seeping through my bones, begging me to crawl upstairs and collapse into my bed. I've always been a night owl, which is partly why I bought the bar, but after the last week, I'm done.

"Gonna walk you upstairs." His thumbs are hooked in his belt loops and even though he's as used to night shifts and late nights as I am, the circles under his eyes clue me into just how tired he is as well. I kind of feel guilty, knowing he still has to drive 10 minutes across town to get home, but then I remember no one *made* him stay here all night. I tried to get him to leave. Many times.

"There's no need to do that," I say, looking over the bar once more before ducking below to grab my bag.

"Honestly, Lune, I'm exhausted and don't want to fight you on this, but I will. I'm gonna walk you upstairs, look around your apartment to get the all-clear, then stay to listen to you lock the deadbolt. Arguing is just going to keep both of us from much-needed sleep." Staring at him, I weigh my options, trying to decide if fighting it is worth it.

It's not.

Not to mention, if I did and by some miracle win the argument, Zee would be up my ass first thing in the morning and I really, really need to sleep in.

"Fine." My feet lead me through the door marked 'PRIVATE' that leads to the stairwell, taking me to the second-floor apartment. Each step feels like I'm walking through cement, exhaustion weighing me down. Tony jogs up the stairs behind me, getting ahead of me and waiting at the top door. To get to my apartment, you need to unlock this door, walk a small corridor, then unlock my front door. It was a security precaution Zee insisted on when I first opened that I readily agreed to. While most of my customers are kind, friendly, and happy, we've had a few who aren't the best of humans.

"Key," he says, a hand stretched out my way. Squinting at it, my brain tries to comprehend what he's saying. "Give me the key, Lune. So I can unlock it." Once again, instead of arguing, I dig through my bag, finding my key chain with a million different keys on the ring. This is yet another precaution Zee requested - some are duds and some actually open things, but if someone were to get my keyring, they'd have to work to find the right one. Picking out the right key, I hand them over to Tony.

His firm hands slip the brass key with a red key protector into the lock and turn, pushing the door open. And then he slams it. My brow wrinkles in confusion.

"Tony, what the fu--"

"Get downstairs, Luna."

"What? Tony, what on--"

"Luna, get down the fucking stairs. Get downstairs and stay there. Do not go through to the bar. Get to the bottom of the stairs and call dispatch. Tell them who you are, tell them I'm here and tell them to send a car." My pulse pounding, I nod, knowing better than to argue. Years of being my brother's sister, Zoe's best friend, and a general fixture at the station means that I know the face Tony is wearing. It means business. It means something has happened. It means danger.

Slowly, I back away, the exhaustion escaping my body in the flash of a second. Tony reaches behind him, pulling out his gun from the holster, muscles on his back in stark relief beneath his tight grey tee. If fear and awareness weren't driving my actions, I might admire said back. But I slowly descend the stairs backward, acid burning in my gut, watching Tony re-lock

the door, gun at the ready.

“Luna, darlin’, need you to turn around and get your sweet ass downstairs. Call dispatch. Call Zee. Okay, baby?” His voice is soft and reassuring, like I’m a spooked kitten he’s trying to usher into a cat carrier to get her to safety.

And I do just that, my heart pounding, gut-churning, and my mind wondering what the fuck is going on.

NINE

-luna-

“IT LOOKS like they picked the lock on the first security door, then kicked down your front door.” Tony is kneeling in front of me as I sit on a barstool, trying not to hyperventilate. My breaths are irregular and thin, but his hands are holding mine, grounding me. Destroying my bar is one thing. Breaking my home? Raiding my bedroom? A whole other issue.

“How bad is it?” I ask, shocked at how weak and brittle my voice sounds. Officers are walking around the bar, squeaking at each other through radios, going up and down the stairs to my apartment. *My apartment which was broken into.*

“It’s not great, darlin’, but it’s gonna be okay. Yeah?”

“Can I go up? Go see what it looks like?”

“Absolutely not,” my brother says from behind me. Turning to look at him, I glare. I also really want to hug him, to steal some comfort, but he’s just arrived and already annoying me. “Lune, seriously, it’s not a good idea. Not trying to be a dick, but you’ve had a long night. Fuck, a long week. Get some sleep. We can come and look at it tomorrow when it’s cleared.”

“Sleep where? That’s my apartment, Zee.”

“We talked about this. You’ll sleep at my place.” Tony is looking me in the eye now, his stern, no-nonsense voice in place. *Shit, I did agree to that, didn’t I?*

“Can’t I stay at-“

“No. We had a deal.” Looking back at him, I see in his eyes that there’s no point in arguing. I’ve seen that look from the men in my life for the entirety of it. Being the princess of the family means I’ve learned when to push and when to cave. There is no way I’m coming out on top of this. Turning to look at Zee, he’s glaring at Tony with a strange expression, but he’s not disagreeing with him. And honestly, since it’s nearing 4 am, I have no energy to argue.

“What about my stuff? I need some things for... life.”

“I’ll go get them, give me a list,” Tony says, squeezing the hands in his own before standing.

“Uh, no way.” No way in hell am I letting Tony Garrison dig through my underwear drawer. The thought alone makes me lightheaded, the blood draining from my face. Being the perceptive man he is, Tony, of course, notices this.

“Darlin’, you’re not going up there. End of discussion. Not tonight. Give me a list or I’m gonna wing it and miss 80% of what you need.” Starting at him, I weigh my choices. I could argue, but that could mean he goes up without guidance. I could also wait until I find someone I could trust with going through my things more, like Selena, the female officer who isn’t on duty right now, or Zoe. But I’m bone tired and know there’s no way I’m getting out of here without someone making me a bag.

“Fine.”

-Tony-

The apartment is a mess. I’ve never actually been in Luna’s apartment since she refused to let us help her move in and there’s no other reason for me to be here. Her living area is cozy with mismatched furniture - a light green love chair, a black and grey patterned sofa, a flowery ottoman. You’d think it would look like a thrift store threw up in here, but somehow it works. Luna makes it work.

Right now, the ottoman lies on its side, a picture frame with a shot of her and Zoe on her 21st birthday laying next to it. White curtains have been torn off the rods, the cushions on the sofa thrown around, knocking over a vase. In the kitchen, they tossed what little food she had from the shelves and fridge. Fuck, it looks like the asshole took a bag of ground coffee and dumped it on

every surface he could. So much will be destroyed beyond repair and my gut aches, my mind bringing back the image of fear and sadness in Luna's eyes downstairs.

Making my way towards what looks like her room, I see the intruder knocked the frames lining the small hallway off the wall. There's a single empty frame on the wall, still hanging, but the photo is gone. It's like the intruder took the frame off the wall, gently removed the photo, then hung it back up. Taking a picture of the empty frame to ask Luna, I note the other frames littering the ground, seeing nothing of interest. Entering her room is a whole other disaster.

While the other rooms have been ransacked, this room is absolutely *destroyed*. The mattress is torn and upended, sheets and blankets scattered about. The drawers of the solid wood dresser are out, clothes hanging from them like tentacles, skirts and shirts, and pants all creeping out. Her top drawer, which seems to be an underwear drawer, is the most disturbed, with bits of lace and satin scattered about. The thought of some creep going through Luna's underwear drawer, seeing her personal items makes me want to punch something, fire building in my gut.

Her closet door is crooked, like someone tugged it off the hinges. Boxes of personal things, ticket stubs, and notebooks and tossed around, a tornado of memories.

Forcing myself to focus, I grab a random bag I find on the floor and check the list she made for me, trying to find what she needs among the mess. I grab a handful of lacy underthings, throwing them in the bag on top of the pile of bathroom products I tossed in. I find a pair of leggings, some shorts, and a few shirts that seem both clean and unharmed. Pawing through a nearly untouched drawer that seems to be a pajama drawer, my hand touches something unexpectedly hard with a strange texture.

Reaching in, I grab it, only to realize I'm holding a large pink vibrator. My eyes widen, my cock hardening at the mere suggestion of Luna using this on herself, laying in the bed across from me, sprawled and...

Get it together, Garrison!

Pushing the toy aside, I finish grabbing a pair of pajama pants for her, knowing someone will probably be here tomorrow to pack her up a better bag and she just needs the essentials. As much as I'd love to fuck with her and grab the toy just to see her blush, she's had a hard enough night without shit from

I'm about to head down, sure that I've gotten all I can and also eager as fuck to get home and pass out, but something on the ground stops me. A frame lays face up on the ground, glass shattered, but I still recognize the photo.

It's Zee and I at our high school graduation decked out in black gowns and caps with orange tassels, little Luna on our shoulders. She was 13 at the time, not far from her summer birthday. I recall her middle school graduation was the day before, and we embarrassed the fuck out of her screaming her name while she accepted her certificate.

In the picture Luna's head is snapped back, laughing hysterically, her blonde hair which was long at the time tumbling down and draping over our hands. Zee is looking at the camera, smiling, but I... I'm staring at Luna, smiling, a love-sick look in my eyes. *Jesus.*

Even then. Even then, it was there.

The glass in the photo is absolutely shattered, the only frame in the apartment I've found this way. Others are broken, but mostly from what seems like a hard throw. This one looks like it took a boot right to the glass and not by accident. Putting her overnight bag by the front door, I go back to the frame, gently picking it up and bringing it to one of the few clear spots in the kitchen where I remove the photo, being careful to avoid the glass. Once it's out and clean, I take the photo, slipping it into the large pocket on the inside of my jacket, careful not to bend it. Then I grab the bag and head downstairs to get Luna home.

TEN

-luna-

“I’M NOT SLEEPING in your bed, Tony.”

“Yes, you are.”

“No, I am not.”

“Luna, darlin’, I am exhausted. You are exhausted. I don’t want to do this. You are sleeping in my bed. I am sleeping on my couch. That is that.” The circles under Tony’s eyes are deep, dark violet that shows he slept little last night and has probably been up for at least 24 hours. But still...

“Seriously Tony, I’ll sleep on the couch. It’s not a big deal.”

Turns out that the house Tony bought last year has been under quite a bit of construction. I remember when Zee told me he bought it and I drove past the lot without even realizing it. It was a *heap*. Completely overgrown, shattered windows, what was sure to be a leaky attic. Now the outside looks inviting and almost cute, though it’s clear it still needs work.

On the drive over, he told me he had only finished his room and a bit of the living room, so the sleeping options would be couch or bed. I told him I would sleep on his couch, but *of course* Tony insisted I sleep in his bed. Because as much as I hate to admit it, Tony is a good guy.

“Jesus Christ. For the love of God, go the fuck to bed. Stop arguing, get on your pajamas, get ready, and go to sleep in my bed. If not to end this stupid argument, then because you know my mom will cut my balls off and

feed them to the dog if she knows you slept on the couch and not in a bed.”

He has a point there. Mrs. Garrison has three boys, all of whom she taught to respect a lady to the fullest extent. She absolutely would *murder* him. Or ban him from Sunday dinner for a few months, which would be a crime since that’s when she makes her town-famous meatballs and red sauce, or ‘gravy’ as she calls it.

“She won’t find out...” I say, trying a different angle. Instead of answering, he grabs me by the waist, tossing me on his bed with the overnight bag he packed and closes the door. Running over, I turn the knob only to find he must be holding it shut. “Goddamnit Tony, open this damn door.”

“Are you going to sleep in my fucking bed?”

“Fine! I’ll sleep in your bed your Neanderthal!” I shout back, desperate to get out. He lets me open the door, standing in the doorway and smiling, a single dimple showing up in his left cheek. *Shut up, butterflies, he is not hot, he is not into us. He is a jerk.*

“Good. Now go get changed, brush your teeth, and get to sleep.” Grumbling, I push past him, stomping purposefully on his sock-covered foot as I pass with a smile on my face.

When I’m changed, brushed, and ready for bed, I peek into the unfinished kitchen where Tony is plugging in his phone, checking messages. “You all good for bed?”

“Yeah. I’ll just, uh, go into your bed? I guess?” I say, shuffling a foot. This is so awkward. *Why is this so awkward?* Something in my voice piques his interest because he stops looking at his phone and glances up, pausing on my face. He sets his phone aside and puts his back to the makeshift counter.

“Come here.” The words are both soft and an order as he opens his arms to me. A mess of conflicted emotions hit me. But the overwhelming feelings are exhaustion and fear, so instead of arguing, I walk right into the man’s arms, letting him wrap me up in them and kiss the top of my head. Immediately his embrace makes me feel safe, an emotion that hasn’t been around since I found my bar spray-painted.

Probably way before that, if I’m being honest.

And then it happens.

I cry.

Big, body-wracking sobs. The kind that you know as they happen, your face will be swollen at the end and your body will be drained and empty.

Tears soak his shirt that my hands are gripping like I'm afraid he'll let me go and I'll fall to the ground. But this is Tony, so instead, he bends his knees, lays an arm under my behind, and lifts me before walking with me and sitting on his couch. He tucks me into his broad chest as I cry, one hand holding my head down, making it so all I can hear and feel is his steady heart beating. The other big hand is stroking my back, up and down, the calming rhythm a balm to my fear and anxiety.

"I.. d-d-don't know why I'm c-c-crying. This is s-s-so d-d-dumb," I sob incoherently, muffled by his wet shirt.

"Shhhhh, let it go, darlin'." His fingers tangle in my hair, rubbing my scalp in soothing circles while his other hand keeps rubbing my back. "You've had a long couple of days. Your home and bar have been violated, your privacy completely torn apart. This is a normal response, Luna. I'm shocked you lasted this long. You're so brave, so fuckin' strong," he whispers, hot breath grazing the shell of my ear.

"I was s-s-so s-s-stupid." What kind of moron has a stalker and keeps it a secret, like it's a non-issue or something to be embarrassed about.

"You're fine, Lune, I'm gonna keep you safe. No one will get to you, baby girl." Slowly, my breathing starts to slow, my heart rate easing. Sniffling, I nod and snuggle my head deeper into his chest, ignoring the wet spot I've left, enjoying the warmth of his body seeping into my bones.

Finally, once my body is depleted of emotion and tears, my eyes feel like they have weights attached to them. And try as I may, I can't keep them open, falling into oblivion right in Tony Garrison's lap.

Birds are chirping when my consciousness breaks through. Blankets are pulled up to my nose, the fabric smelling of spicy cologne, man, and clean cotton. My brow furrows, confused. My sheets usually smell of my laundry detergent and lavender. Opening one eye to check my surroundings, I feel grit and swelling, reminding me of my crying jag last night. The previous day comes flooding in. Immediately, shame and embarrassment wash over me. Shame that I completely lost my mind last night, drenching Tony's shirt in tears and snot. Embarrassment because I'm pretty sure I fell asleep in his lap, exhaustion taking hold while he held me on the couch.

Fuck.

Pulling the blankets back, my feet touch the ground, toes squishing into a soft dark grey rug over the dark weathered wood floor. This is the only room in the house with a finished floor, so I find a pair of socks in my bag and slip

them on before shuffling out into the living room. The couch holds a neatly folded blanket topped with a pillow. Looking around for Tony, I don't see him anywhere.

The sound of a shower running hits my ears, telling me he's probably in there. I spot the coffeemaker on the counter shuffle over there. The flooring in the entire entryway is subfloor, waiting for tile and wood. The kitchen has the structure of cabinets, an island, and a countertop, but nothing is actually in place. It's clear this is his next project after finishing his bedroom.

Going to the fridge, I spot milk and grab it, then find the sugar on a random shelf with no cabinet front. Spotting an array of mugs on the open shelves above the coffeemaker, I reach up to get one. Unfortunately, it's just out of reach. My thin cami is riding up in my back, the gap between my rolled down sweats and the shirt widening, letting the still cool late spring morning air graze the bare skin.

"Goddamnit," I whisper under my breath. Trying once again while bracing my hand on the counter, I stretch my arm up, almost there except... a warm body comes up behind me.

That familiar, spicy scent envelops me and it takes just a second to realize that he has no shirt on, his still chest damp from the shower and warming my thin shirt. Holy. Fucking. Shit.

He reaches up, pressing his entire front to my entire back, and grabs a cup off the shelf. Then his arm comes before me, caging me in as he places the ceramic cup on the counter with a thunk. Air will not fill my lungs. The butterflies in my stomach have taken off, hitting the edges and bouncing back. A full rebellion in action. My skin is hypersensitive, every square inch of his on mine aware of it, especially the small strips where his bare skin touches my own.

"Here you go, darlin'." His breath hits my ear, warm and nearly erotic, sending a shiver down my spine and goosebumps across my flesh.

The cup sits in front of me now on the unfinished wood counter and Tony has a hand on either side of me, bracing against the counter, pressed against my body. *What in the actual fuck is going on?*

"Thank you," I say, my voice barely a whisper. I reach over to grab the full coffeepot in front of me, which presses my ass just slightly back and into him. And fuck if I don't really, *really* like the feel of that. The sharp intake of breath he takes tells me he felt it too, it's not just me suffering in this weird limbo.

“No problem,” he whispers back and then he bends forward gently, kissing the top of my head before walking out of the room to go get changed.

When he returns, I’m still in the same spot, but with my back leaning against the raw wood, still in shock and confused at what just happened. He comes over, reaching over me to get a mug, then around me to fill it. It’s a replay of what just happened, but this time we’re front to front.

Each move of his body grazes a part of him on me. I should move, I should go to the other side of the kitchen. Shit, I should get in the damn car and drive home. But something keeps me stuck, glued here like the floor isn’t just unfinished, but coated in quick-dry cement.

He leans on the island facing me, leaving barely a foot between us.

“So what’s on the agenda today?” he asks, sipping his coffee. I stare at him, speechless, unsure of what is happening right now. Who is this man? “Lune?”

“Uhm,” I clear my throat. “I have some errands to run. The bar is closed today, I guess. Gotta go to the bank, Target. I want to go on a run at some point. I’d usually spend a chunk of time cleaning my apartment, but that seems like it won’t be happening. Maybe have lunch with Zoe. Get coffee at Rise and Grind.” I’m rambling.

“I’ll come with,” he says, taking another sip of his drink.

“No, you don’t have to.”

“Don’t have to, but I will.”

“Seriously, Tony, it’s unnecessary.”

“Luna, you have a stalker. A stalker who defaced your bar and broke into your apartment. If you think I’m letting you go anywhere without me, you’re on another planet.” This makes sense. I don’t tell him that, of course.

“This is insane. Don’t you have things to do? Can’t someone on-call check in with me throughout the day or something?” *Or, literally, anything other than you spending the entire day with me?*

“Why do you avoid me?” he asks, and the straightforward question catches me off guard. *Why do you avoid me?* The answer should be simple, but it’s not. I can’t quite tell him I’m embarrassed. I spent my entire childhood in love with him, only for him to not feel the same way. Or to tell him that every time I see him, my heart both grows and breaks a little. Or that I can’t stand seeing the pitying look in his eyes he gave me that night ever again.

“I don’t avoid you.” There. Simple and effective.

“Yes, you do.”

“No, I do not.”

“Luna, when was the last time you spent for than 10 minutes in the same room as me?”

“Last night. This morning.”

“Before that.”

“When I was at the station.”

“Stop playing games, Luna. You’ve been avoiding me for years. You skip parties, you refuse help, avoid Zander if you know I’m with him. We used to spend time together, just us. Talking about books and movies, dumb shit and serious shit. You were my friend, Luna. What happened?”

“Nothing happened, Tony. I grew up. I’m not that little naive girl anymore.” He looks at me confused, like he’s trying to unwrap me, figure out my meaning.

“Never in your life have I known you to be naïve.”

“Well, there you go. I tricked even you, the wise detective. Maybe I should have been an actress. Instead, I’m just your best friend’s little sister, right? I was naïve, had little girl fantasies. I grew up. I’m sorry if your inflated ego tells you it has anything to do with you.”

He’s still staring at me, but a look of... understanding? It overcomes his face, infused with warmth and a sweetness that I can almost taste on my tongue. The look is like pieces are settling into place, but I don’t know what puzzle he’s building. Shit, did I put too much out there? Reveal everything I’ve been hiding for so long? His coffee cup makes a clang as he sets it down next to him.

“Tell me, Luna. What happened? What were your little girl fantasies?” He steps closer to me, the gap between us halved. The word ‘fantasies’ on his lips sends a shiver through me, a shiver that travels, ending right between my legs.

“None of your business.”

“Oh, I think it is my business. I think it’s only my business.” His hand brushes mine, grabbing the mug in my hands and setting it to the counter. He steps closer, so close that his breath is mingling with mine. Those butterflies in my belly that seem to always wake up when he’s near are caffeinated, flying everywhere and making my pulse race. “It’s been my business for a long fuckin’ time, hasn’t it, Luna?”

“It’s not, Tony,” I say. He’s now so close that I can feel the ghost of his

lips on mine.

“I think I’m starting to get it.”

“Get what?” My voice is soft and cracks, a mix of anxiety and intrigue coloring it.

“Get what I need to do to make you see.” With each word, his lips are like a soft caress against my own that I can’t tell if it’s real or not. Each breath is shared, our noses touching. He’s so, so close and I just want to.. what? The angel on my shoulder is telling me to push him away, to protect myself. The devil though... the devil is begging me to lean in juuust a tiny bit and-

Tony’s phone rings, snapping me out of the moment and I step to the side, away from him, where I can breathe and think and get myself together.

What the fuck am I doing?

“Fuck,” Tony says under his breath, reaching over to grab his phone. “Officer Garrison.”

Walking towards my phone, hands shaking, my thumbprint unlocks it before checking my messages. A few from Sadie, one from Hannah, four from Zoe. All are asking me how I am and how last night went.

Tony sighs into his phone. “Fine, yeah, I’ll be there. Give me 10.” He places his phone back on the counter and walks over to me where I’m against the counter once again and pins me there, this time not slowly or gently, with intention burning in his eyes.

“I need to go into the station. Can’t avoid it. We will finish this chat, darlin’. I think we have a lot to go over. A lot that you need to wrap your stubborn ass mind around.” My breathing is ragged, my pulse is going a million miles a minute.

“Tony, I-” And then it happens.

Anthony Thomas Garrison kisses me.

It’s not soft and sweet like it was when I was 17.

No, this is.. rough. Dark and steamy. There’s an undercurrent of promise. Promise of what, I’m not sure, but it’s a promise that my body wants to learn more about. His lips are smooth on mine, his hand tangles in my hair on the back of my head, pulling me in deeper. A gasp escapes me, a gasp that opens my mouth, giving him the perfect opportunity to slip his tongue in. He tastes like dark coffee and spice and a hint of toothpaste. His tongue seeks mine, finding it and dominating, taming me in a single second to where the only choice I have is to wrap my arms around his neck and lean into it.

And damn, do I lean into it. My chest presses to his and my hands around his neck pull me closer to him, begging him to consume me, to overpower me. This kiss is everything I ever dreamed of and so, so much more.

It's over before it even started, or so it seems. He holds me close to him, eyes on mine, and gently rubs his nose along the side of mine. It's sweet, a contrast to the kiss we just shared, but now I'm even more confused than I was before. Tony just kissed me. Kissed *me*, Luna Sage Davidson. And that was not how you kiss a woman you see as a sister.

"Hold that thought, okay darlin'?" he says with a smile in his voice, the physical manifestation of that playing on his lips.

"Huh?" I say because it's all I can say. My mind feels like it's wrapped in fluffy cotton candy, sticky and sweet.

"Gotta go to the station," he says, stepping back. The smile is also on his lips, smug and entertained.

"Wha'?" Okay, so we've graduated to half words. Cool, Luna. Cool.

He winks at me - *winks at me!* - before walking around the house, getting on boots and grabbing his weapon and holster. Tucking his keys and badge into his pocket, he walks back over to me, wrapping a muscled arm around my waist and tugging me to him. His lips press quickly to mine once again before he smiles and backs up.

"Be home when I get back. We've got a lot to go over." And then he leaves.

The shriek that comes through my phone speaker forces me to drop my cell where it falls on my foot. "FUCK!" I hop on one foot, reaching down to grab it. And falling, of course.

"Are you okay?" Zoe asks when I finally get the phone back to my ear.

"No, I just dropped my phone on my foot because you banshee'd my eardrum." Flopping in the comfy as can be loveseat sitting in Tony's unfinished living room, I rub my poor bruised foot.

"I'm sorry, but you just told me Tony Garrison, the man you've been in love with since you were *seven*, pinned you to his kitchen counter and *kissed you*. I think a scream is a completely valid response."

I sigh. "Maybe I should have called Hannah first. She's way more reasonable."

"I would literally kill you, you dumb bitch," Zoe says, deadpan. "So wait,

please run down exactly what happened. I want detail. Graphic fucking detail.” I could argue, tell her there’s not much to tell. It would be the truth, after all. But I know Zoe better than I know myself and I know there is no way in hell she would accept that as an answer. So I do - I tell her about my crazy, confusing morning and the night before. From crying to sleep in his arms to the coffee cup to the kiss to him telling me we have a lot to talk about.

“So what do you think he meant when he said he has things to talk to you about?” Zoe asks. I shrug before I remember I’m on the phone and she can’t see it.

“I have no idea. What could he possibly have to talk to me about? I’ve known him for years, I see him all the time.”

“You mean you avoid him all the time,”

“Not this again, Zo.” I’m already burnt out from the whiplash Tony is giving me. I don’t think I have the mental or emotional capacity for this.

“Maybe... maybe he wants to talk to you about... you two.”

“About us?”

“Yeah, Lune.”

“Babe, there is no us. I’ve known him my whole life, never been an ‘us’.”

“Do you really think that, Luna? All those years, talking about random shit, him teasing you, comforting you?”

“There’s no ‘us’, Zoe.” And I’m pretty sure that’s the truth. Except... the longer I think about it, I have to wonder if maybe, just maybe, there once was an ‘us’. Or at least, the promise of an ‘us’. A promise that is long over, buried in the past.

“I don’t know. Maybe he wants there to be one?” She sounds so hopeful where I can’t even bear to let my mind go there. The ultimate best friend.

“No, I don’t think so. He was clear back then what I meant to him.” The butterflies in my belly settle, a somber flap to their wings like they, too, are disenchanted by that truth.

“Honestly, Lune? It was forever ago. He was young. You were younger. Things change.”

“If things have changed, it’s because he’s decided I’m in danger. You know Tony as well as I do. He wants nothing more than to protect the people in his life. Wrap them in bubble wrap and keep them safe. If there is anything there, it’s because he’s confusing that desire with a completely unrelated one. I can’t let myself get lost in that. The last time I needed his help, the last time

he saved me, I made an ass out of myself. Not making that mistake again.”

It’s an honest answer torn straight from my soul, painful to admit. But one reason I loved Tony as a girl was because he worked so damn hard to protect me. From bullies, from Zee’s mean big brother tricks, from creepy guys at a party I had no business at. It’s an endearing trait, especially when you’ve been force-fed stories of knights in shining armor and being the fragile princess. When you’ve spent your whole life protected by men who love you and who taught you to accept nothing less from a man.

“I don’t know, Lune. I’d just... just be open, okay? Promise me you’ll go into whatever conversation he wants to have with open eyes and an open heart.” And there’s my sweet, optimistic, fairytale-loving bestie. If anyone was fed the “you’re a princess and don’t forget it” line more than I was, it’s Zoe, who was raised in a police station with men telling her that no guy was worthy of her.

“Okay, Zo. I promise,” I say, though only half of that is true. She knows it, of course, but we both pretend otherwise.

“Alright, babe, well, I gotta go. Deadlines are catching up with me,” she says, bidding me farewell before she hangs up to work on her freelance journalism projects. And now I’m bored on my day off, afraid to leave because Tony told me not to. Normally that would be even more reason to do just that, but with the current circumstances, I hang tight.

Looking around Tony’s half-finished family room, my eyes land on a can of paint and rollers. Walking over I see it’s the color he swatched on the living room wall. Impulsively, I make the quick decision to try my hand at some home improvements. I mean, how hard could painting a room be, right?

ELEVEN

-tony-

“OKAY, SO WHAT DO YOU HAVE?” I ask Marcus, the station clerk. Yesterday I asked him to look into the phone numbers Luna gave us as well as any reports from Luna or Full Moon Cafe. The stack of papers in front of him is much thicker than I would have thought, making me hopeful of good news.

“So, the numbers you gave me were from burner phones, only able to be traced to the tech store in Bridgeville. They weren’t able to give me any information about who may have purchased them, so for now, that’s a dead end. But we know he’s a local now.” My stomach churns at the thought of a stalker local to Springbrook Hills, local to Luna. “The social media accounts came back to encrypted IP addresses that even I can’t decode, so again, dead end for now.” Well, that’s not quite what I wanted to hear. Marcus is great at his job and has a knack for hacking.

“Not quite was I was hoping to hear, man. Did you call me in on my day off for this?”

“Just give me a second. Next, we’ve got this stack of reports.” He hands over about 50 pages of double sides printouts with various colored tabs. “These are all the reports that we’ve taken for various issues at Luna’s over the last two years. As you can see, it’s quite a bit, though some are incredibly minor and unrelated.” Jesus, how did I not know there was so much going on

there? I thumb through the papers, noticing some incidents that I was on call for and some I had no idea happened. “I flagged any that might warrant more investigation. Anything with a serious accusation or where someone faced repercussions, job loss, jail time, a fine. That kind of thing.” One of the flagged reports notes that Luna caught the man trying to slip a date rape drug into a woman’s drink. Yeah, that would be good cause to terrorize my girl.

“This is great information, but again, it could have waited until tomorrow.” All I can think about is Luna’s lips in mine, the sound she made in her throat when she realized what was happening. The hazed look in her eyes when I pulled away reluctantly. I need to get back to her before she overthinks again. I *need* to have that talk with her.

I’m understanding that the reason Luna has avoided me for years is she’s... embarrassed. She had a thing for me and I told her she’s just a little sister to me, just my best friend’s sister. It wasn’t true, of course, but that kind of thing probably cuts deep when you’re 17 and putting yourself out there. Seems like she didn’t catch me telling her to wait three months like I thought and instead has spent all this time thinking I wasn’t into her the same way she was.

And fuck am I into her. My cock hardens just thinking about that thin strip of pale skin that showed above her pajama bottoms as she reached up for a coffee cup.

“Yeah, probably, but this last bit of information? You’d want it right away.” He pulls out one last stack, this time smaller and in a manila folder, and hands it to me. “We found a camera.”

“What?” It’s like someone dumped a bucket of ice on my head, my insides freezing, body still as a statue. The blood drains from my face, leaving me light-headed. “A camera where?” But I know the answer.

“In Luna’s apartment. We did a bug check after you two left and found one camera and one microphone hidden behind a frame. The only one he didn’t knock down.” The frame that was missing the photo. “Thankfully, not in her bedroom or her bathroom, but still extremely worrisome. It’s also worrisome because the technology is advanced. You really have to know your tech to know how this works and how to use it to your advantage.”

“Who would have access to this kind of technology? Can we use that to narrow it down?” Our leads on this case seem to be excruciatingly low, so I’ll take any advantage I can get.

“Unfortunately, no. If we boiled suspects down to two or three, maybe,

but no database says who would have access to this kind of technology. Shit, most of the people who know how to use this technology know to keep that under wraps.” Fuck, not what I wanted to hear.

“Is this it? All we’ve got so far?” My fingers graze through the papers, reading statements and names, already noting which cases we should look into, building information on motive. There is a chance that her stalker is less obsessed with her and more looking for revenge. If that’s the case, these cases are where to start.

“Yeah. Maybe you can ask Luna to go through that stack of cases and pick out which one’s feel important. Anything notable, any cases that make her feel a bit more suspicious. Guide her to trust her gut,” Marcus says before slapping the table and standing. “But that’s all we got right now. The guy is good, is covering his tracks. We found some prints in Luna’s apartment, but I doubt they’ll be of any help. Probably Luna’s or her friends’.” This makes sense. No prints would be usable at the bar either, with the number of people in and out.

“Have you told Zee?” I ask, knowing he’s going to lose his damn mind. Marcus shouts a surprised laugh.

“Do I have a death wish? Fuck no. Thought I’d leave that up to you.”

I sigh, understanding his reluctance. I might be protective of Luna, especially after this morning’s kiss, but Zee is unbearably protective of his little sister. The number of times in college that we drove home just to look over whatever guy she was dating in high school can’t be counted on one hand. While it annoyed the fuck out of her in the moment, no one could say she didn’t appreciate her big brother taking care of her.

“Great. Thanks.” I stand, gathering the papers.

“Hey, Tone, one more thing.” My stomach drops. How much more could there be? “Here’s the stuff from her apartment. Zoe packed it once they cleared the scene.” He lifts a large laundry basket overflowing with clothes and little bags.

“Jesus, how much shit does she need for a couple of days?” One of the other officers in the room says, staring at the mountain of things. But seeing it makes my gut warm. She can come with all of her shit, choose the colors of the rooms in the house, and take over my walk-in closet for all I care. I’m done waiting for Luna. She’s mine.

This morning gave me the insight I needed after all these years. Insight into what the fuck happened all those years ago that made her avoid me and

pretending I didn't exist. Turns out, she remembers more about that day than I thought, but not enough.

Grabbing the handles of the bags, I nod before walking out to find Zee.

I find him at his desk. A surprise. If you'd have asked me, I would have thought he'd be at the bar or on patrol, but it seems like he was waiting for me all along.

"How is she?" he asks, not even saying hello.

"She's... okay. Last night was rough," I say, thinking of her warm body in my lap, tears soaking my shirt, and feeling the unbearable weight of knowing that nothing in that moment could change her situation. When her body became lax and loose with sleep, her soft, even breaths on my neck, it became clear I'd do anything to make this woman feel safe again. To make sure she'd never stand crying in my arms again, overwhelmed by the anger and aggression that was found in her apartment.

And that's because from now on, she's mine. Luna Sage Davidson is mine, always was, and I will work until the day I stop breathing to make her feel safe and secure.

"Rough how?" Zee's face is a mask of concern for his sister.

"She's overwhelmed by everything that's happened, and I don't think it hit her until last night. She was exhausted and emotionally drained, spent a good 10 minutes crying before she passed out."

"Is she okay now? Was she fine when you left?" I think about how I left her, kiss-swollen lips, backed against the kitchen counter, dazed and aroused. Yeah, my girl was just fine when I left. Fighting the smirk that hits my lips at the thought, I nod. Now is not the time to bring up my intentions to Zee about his little sister, regardless of if he told me it would be okay.

"Yeah, she was good. I'm sure she'll have a million questions when I get home, but she knows we're on this and we're going to find this psycho." The thought of the person who is terrorizing Luna makes my blood boil once again. Any man who makes it his mission to make a woman feel unsafe should be put down immediately, or at least locked up for life.

"Is there someone watching her now? She's not alone at your place, right?"

"Johnson is parked right outside in a marked cruiser. No one would dare try anything." Saying that outright feels like tempting fate, but I'm pretty sure that she is, in fact, as safe as humanly possible where she is.

"Alright. You're off today, right?" Nodding, I take a deep break, knowing

what I have to do next.

“Look, Zee, this morning, they called me in to tell me something about the case. Need you to prepare, brother, and promise me you’ll keep a clear head.” His eyes flash with concern before he tempers it. Part of our job is being able to put on the face, the shield that separates our emotions and personal feelings from the facts, victims, and accused. Zander’s shield is strong and I’ve seen him keep a cool, composed head in some seriously shifty situations, but knowing his sister is the victim in this makes things a bit more difficult.

“Alright,” he promises.

“They found bugs. In Luna’s home. Not in her bathroom or bedroom. One mic, one camera.” His eyes widen, fury peeking through the shield, sparking concern that it will fail and he’ll lose his fucking mind. But at the last minute, the shield tempers the flames, and his cool-headed professionalism is placed in front.

“Okay, and what are we doing about those?”

“They’re trying to trace them, but they’re coded deep. They were transmitting to something over the public wi-fi of the bar, which could benefit us, but we’ll need warrants to dig any deeper. So far, it seems like this guy is a tech guru, knows his shit and how to hide it.”

“Fuck.”

“Yeah, Marcus is digging, but we have no idea when we’ll get anything back.”

“Goddamnit. I hate the idea that my baby sister is caught up in this shit.”

“Trust me, I know.” His skeptical gaze is on me, knowing that over the years I’ve asked many questions about his sister, more than a normal friend asking questions.

“Yeah, I’m sure.” A corner of his mouth tips up almost imperceptibly and I fight a roll of my eyes. I stand, an effort to change the subject and grab Luna’s stuff. “Alright, I better get back to her before she tears apart my house.”

“Good fucking luck with that shit,” he says with a laugh as I walk off, knowing his sister better than anyone.

Walking up my front path, I wave off Johnson, letting him know that he’s relieved. Lifting a hand in acknowledgment, he drives off. From outside, I hear music, hip hop bass blasting through open windows. Unlocking the front door, it swings open to the most alluring sight I’ve seen in my life.

Luna is standing on a step stool in tiny shorts and a sports bra, her short straight hair sticking straight in a ponytail at the top of her head. She's reaching high, her lean body stretching deliciously as she spreads paint from a roller onto the wall. It's a faint light green color I bought on a stupid, idiotic whim when I saw the name of the paint: Moonlit Sage. It reminded me of Luna, whose middle name is Sage. After I brought the color home and painted a swatch on the living room wall, I was unsure if it fit my vision, feeling stupid for making the strange impulse and putting off doing the entire room this color.

Seeing it on three of the four living room walls, speckled across Luna's fair, pristine skin, and watching her roll it on, I immediately decide I fucking love this color. It's my new favorite.

"Honey, I'm home," I say just loud enough to be heard over her loud music, making her head whip my way, eyes wide, when she loses her balance. She tries to catch herself on the wall, but the paint is wet and her hand slips in the slick green as she continues to fight to catch her balance. Dropping the basket, I race to her, grabbing her at the waist just before she completely falls off the step stool. Lifting her, my hands on her bare skin, I place her on solid ground, giving her a second to steady with a hand on my chest.

Her hand was covered in paint, leaving a perfect imprint on my black t-shirt.

"Oh, fuck, I'm so sorry!" she says, using her other hand to wipe at the smudge, making it worse. "Fuck! Goddamnit."

Laughing, I pull her close, taking in her scent: part gypsy, part Luna. "No worries, darlin', my fault. Didn't mean to scare you. You good?" She extricates herself from my arms using her clean-ish hand and walks over to the small BlueTooth speaker I've kept in here for when I'm doing housework and turns off the music.

"I'm fine. Sorry about your shirt." We both look down at my chest where there's a clear, light green imprint of her tiny hand, and I can't help but think how it improves the shirt.

"No need. So, uh, what are you doing in here?" Looking around, the subfloor and couch are all tarped. The large TV that was leaning against the wall is now sitting in the middle of the room, a plastic sheet protecting it from splatter. Blue tape lines the white ceiling I painted last week and outlet covers to protect from stray paint.

“Oh, well, uh. I got bored? So I looked around and saw your house needs like a lot of work. And I found this paint that you’d swatched and some rollers and whatnot and decided I’d help. As thanks. For, uh, you know. Last night. And letting me sleep in your bed. Although, I’m not sure I should thank you for that since I wanted to sleep on your couch instead and let you-” she’s rambling and experience tells me this will go one of two ways: she won’t stop until someone cuts in or she’ll talk herself into being angry at something. It’s looking like if she’s left to her own devices, she’ll go with option b. I need to cut in.

“Luna. Calm down,” I say, taking the roller that’s still in her hand and placing it in the paint pan. Grabbing her wrist, I tug her closer, looking down at her. “Thanks for painting for me.”

“Uh, well, I was bored. The color is super pretty.” She’s whispering, her breath fanning gently across my face, and fuck, I want to kiss her again. I’m not sure if I should, though. “I uh, I should finish up and take a shower or something. Zee is coming by tonight to take me to dinner.” Fuck. I really wanted to spend what was left of my day off with her, figuring out what was happening and convincing her to give it a chance.

Because knowing Luna, I’m going to need to do a lot of convincing to get her to give it a chance.

Give us a chance.

Fuck. *Us*. I love the fucking sound of that.

“That’s fine darlin’. Want some help? We also have that talk we need to have today.” Her breath hitches, nerves, or maybe something more. It’s hard to tell,

“Talk?” God, she’s back to the adorable one-word sentences, the words a quiet squeak. My lips quirk into a smile, causing a shaky breath to come from hers. This girl.

“Oh, yeah, honey. We have a lot to talk about. I think that at some point we may have gotten our wires crossed, and it’s gonna be my personal mission to uncross them,” I say, brushing a wispy piece of hair that broke free from her Flintstones-style ponytail behind her ear. “So, what do you want to do first? Talk or paint?”

“Uhm. Paint. Definitely paint,” she says, nodding her head and I can’t help but laugh at her, laugh at this situation. Pressing my lips to her forehead in a short, sweet kiss that sends a zap through my lips and makes her still in my arms, I let her go, then go find myself a roller.

“Trust me, these are the colors,” Luna says, handing me a stack of paint chips in various colors. After we finished the living room, we decided that painting the rest of the upstairs rooms made sense. All minus the bathroom are finished, just needing paint and trim before they can be filled with furniture. Looking at the colors she chose, I’m unsure.

“Lune, this one is pink,” I say, lifting one that is called, ‘Perfectly Peach.’

“No, it’s not, it’s like a light orangey-pink.”

“Is that not pink?”

“No, it’s orangey-pink, Tony,” she says with the straightest face, and God, I want to kiss that face off of her, but I can’t scare her off anymore.

“Fine. And this one? The grey?”

“Grey is classic and easy to decorate around. This one is perfect for the base of a really fun office. I’m thinking teal and white accents.” She looks at the grey color, the ideas flying through her mind clear in her eyes and I decide that whatever room I decide to paint this grey will be her office.

“Got it. So all five colors?” I ask, flipping through to see a butter yellow, a light blue, a cream color.

“Yup,” she answers, but she’s already off, walking down another aisle and ooh-ing and ahh-ing over fixtures and finishings that we are so far from needing. “Aren’t these doorknobs perfect?” she says, lifting and brass option. “Oh! And these would be just so, so sweet in a baby girl’s nursery! I need Hannah to go on and have babies already.” She lifts an antique crystal knob, and all I can think about is Luna decorating a baby nursery. Shouldn’t that scare me or something? I lean a shoulder on the shelf, crossing my ankles.

“Yeah, you’re right,” I say, looking at her, but I’m barely glancing at the knobs. My eyes are glued to her. She looks up at me, smiling.

“God, I love this kind of stuff. I decorated my whole apartment, but when I did, I was so totally broke getting the bar off the ground. Everything is thrifted and kind of mismatched, and I’ve been way too busy to change it up. This is so fun!”

“Well, feel free to help with the house. Not a fan of decorating. Fixing? I like the part. But the paint and accessories and decorations are just not for me.”

“No way, really? That’s the best part!” She guides me down another aisle, this one for bathrooms,

As I watch her walk down the aisle and away from me, excitement and intrigue pouring off her in near-visible waves, a plan takes root in my mind, growing and morphing until I can see the future this woman is going to build. And I'll be damned if I'm not a part of it.

TWELVE

-luna-

“SO, how was your first night at Tony’s? He treating you good?” Zander asks me as he sits across from me at the diner, a huge sandwich in front of him. The Springbrook Hills Diner has been around as long as I’ve been alive, and if you’re in search of comfort food to soothe your soul, this is where you come. After the week I’ve had, it’s all I want. The bar is closed again tonight, officially a taped-up crime scene, but Zee has assured me I’ll be able to open Tuesday as usual. I’d rather they take their time since rushing to open last time did me no favors. Thankfully, my insurance got back to me and will pay my employees’ wages as part of the almost unbearably expensive plan I am very thankful I chose.

“Uh, yeah, he was fine,” I say, avoiding eye contact and picking at my fries and chicken tenders. *If by treating me well you mean pinning me to his kitchen counter and kissing the fuck out of me, then yes. He’s treating me great.*

My afternoon was even more confusing. Once he came home and saw me painting his living room, he helped and then we went to the home improvement store, buying more paint and planning the decorations for his house. It felt strangely domestic and I’m even more confused than I was after that kiss.

That kiss.

“Where did you sleep? Last time I was there, his house was still a disaster.”

“In his bed,” I say bluntly, not even thinking as I pick the breading off a chicken tender, lost in my mind. The fork he’s using on his coleslaw clatters as it hits his plate. My head pops up to take in his expression, a mix of confusion, shock, and anger.

“What? In his bed?”

“Yeah. I mean, I wanted to sleep on his couch, but he wouldn’t let me.”

“And.. where was Tony?” Zee asks, folding his fingers and placing his chin on them, no longer distracted by his dinner.

“Oh, God, Zander, get it together. He slept on the couch. I was in his bed, alone.”

“Oh,” he says, taking me in before picking up his fork and going back to eating. “I would have thought...”

“Thought what?”

“Nothing.”

“Well, that sounds way too interesting to just skimp out on. What were you gonna say?”

“It’s just.. not that I’d want anything at all, especially with what’s going on, but when we were younger, he had a thing for you. Like when you were in college, maybe?” My entire world tips just a fraction.

“What?” I feel the blood drain from my face, my stomach dropping in a moment of sheer disbelief. Tony? Into me? When I was in *college*? “No way. I’m basically his little sister,” I say, thinking back to that night when I was 17. Zee scoffs.

“No, you’re my little sister, Luna. All of my friends have always been into you. It’s gross, but I mean, I guess I can see it. We have a good lookin’ family.” He smirks at me and I kick him under the table. “Fuck, Lune, that hurt.” He lifts his leg, rubbing his shin. “Okay, remember the Christmas party, maybe five years back? The year it snowed the next day, and we were stuck at Mom and Dad’s until New Year’s?” I nod, remembering the year. I had just graduated college and was securing the loan for Full Moon, so I was staying with my parents. “Remember Tony’s black eye?”

I did, of course. It was brutal. He came over that night for my parents’ annual Christmas party and his entire eye was swollen, black and blue. It was fresh, and it looked like it hurt. As always, I avoided him like the plague, but the few times I caught sight of him, it made *my* eye hurt just looking at it.

“Yeah?”

“I gave him that black eye. It wasn’t a suspect like we said.” My eyes widen in shock, remembering that they told everyone Tony had been his by a suspect they were pursuing. I looked through the newspaper for a week trying to find information on it but saw nothing.

“Didn’t.. didn’t you have a split lip?” I ask, trying to remember all the details.

“Yup. Thanks to Tony.”

“What the fuck happened?” It’s coming back to me now. Mom was so fucking mad because every year at that party, she insists we take a family photo. Somewhere hidden in a family album is a shot of the five of us, Zander sporting a fat lip and a swollen cheek. She didn’t talk to him the entire night.

“I don’t remember all the details. We were drinking at my place and he said something about you. We’d seen you out that night. Said something about you being all grown up, that he might want to try something. I kicked his ass.” My foundation is cracking, crumbling around me, and the world, as I thought I knew it, is changing. Why would Tony say that? Why would he say something that he knew would piss off Zee, something not even true? After all, he told me all those years ago the exact opposite.

“That’s.. that nuts. He’s not into me. Never has been.”

“What are you on, Lu?” He’s laughing like I told a hilarious joke. A joke that I must have missed because none of this is funny to me. When he sees I’m not laughing, he goes on. “Luna, Tony’s been into you since we were kids. I fought him so many times from the time you went from cute little girl to woman. As soon as you started prancing around with Zoe all the time, I don’t know. Maybe you were 16? I always figured as soon as you were old enough he’d try something with you, but then you stopped hanging out with us.”

My mind is reeling, shock and confusion flooding my system. “Zee, you’re insane. There’s no way.” He looks at me like he’s trying to make a decision.

“Look, I’m probably breaking some kind of guy code right now, even talking about his, but I’m serious. He was into you. Honestly, Lulu, he still is. That’s why I tried to convince you to stay at my place, even though you would drive me insane. I’m not sure how I feel about the two of you staying in that wreck together.” The entirety is my understanding of my relationship

with Tony and his relationship with my brother is being turned upside-down.

What he's telling me can't be true. It just can't. He said, straight to my face, he saw me as a sister.

"When you were younger, jailbait, he was careful. Respectful, ya know. Not creepy. He never talked about you in a weird way, but he always wanted to spend time at our house instead of his. And you two would sit on the couch talking about random TV shows or arguing about politics and global warming or whatever the fuck. I'd walk off, bored to be with you, but he'd stay, talking to you. I knew it then, Lune. He was into you. And not just because you're a hot piece." His face goes a bit green at that and I can't help but laugh. "Because he likes something about you." His eyes soften, even though this conversation is making him uncomfortable. "You're a catch, and he sees that. Be an idiot not to."

"But..." I pause, trying to decide how much I want to tell him. "Years ago. I... told him I was into him. I had a crush on him for years..."

"No shit," Zee says, rolling his eyes. It's kind of embarrassing that apparently everyone knew how into Tony I was. All those times Zoe and I were so sure we were being sneaky, everyone knew and humored us. God, we were so young and dumb.

"Anyway," I say, glaring at him, "I told him and he turned me down. Said he only saw me as a little sister and that was it." My fingers play with the paper napkin that came wrapped around my silverware, tearing the delicate paper to shreds absentmindedly.

"Look, Luna, I'm not sure why he'd say that. And trust me, I am one thousand percent not trying to encourage anything between you two because, gross. But Tony has always been into you and I know that hasn't changed." My mind drifts, trying to take this information in and process it before I lose my mind.

Because if that's true, if all this time, Tony has been into me and turned me down for some, I'm sure, gallant reason, then... why have I been avoiding him for 10 years?

THIRTEEN

-luna-

“WAKE UP, DARLIN’.” The words are a whisper in my ear, like a sweet dream I’ve had so many times before. Warm, mint-scented breath grazes my face, and a rough finger brushing hair off my cheek. God, this dream is the cruelest yet. It feels so damn real. Like he’s standing right next to me, like he’s...

Holy shit, I’m in Tony’s bed.

And this is not a dream.

My eyes snap open as panic suffuses me, my body stiffening as my head turns from where I’m curled into a bundle of his pillows and blankets to look behind me. I’ve always slept like a maniac, needing to feel like I’m cuddling something, even when it’s just me.

“Tony! What the fuck are you doing?” I say, my voice still groggy from sleep. Rolling to my back and bending at my hips, I sit up, scooting to the head of the bed and holding the blanket up to my body. I’ve never been much for sexy pajamas, but the thin cotton of the giant tee illustrates that my ‘dream’ affected my body and there’s nothing but a scant pair of panties beneath the hem.

He smiles, tucking a hair behind my ear before kissing the side of my head like he’s been doing for days now. What the fuck *is* that. “Gotta get up, darlin’. Makin’ breakfast, then we gotta get to the station.” And then he..

walks away. Just like that. The man wakes me up, confuses the fuck out of me, then he walks his fine ass away, into what sounds like the kitchen. I scramble out of the bed, finding a clean pair of jeans in one of the random piles of clothes I have strewn about his room. Guilt washes over me, but it turns out having nearly all of your clothes and nowhere to put them makes a mess. And there is no way I'm *moving in*, moving in. This is temporary. Quickly, I tug on the jeans before making my way to the unfinished kitchen, where Tony is dishing out eggs and toast onto two plates.

My arms cross on my chest to hide my still tight nipples from his eyes. "Tony!" His eyes stray right to where my arms are covering my chest, his gaze seeming to burn straight through flesh and bone to see what's beneath. Then he *smiles*. Smiles at me! "Tony! What is going on?" I ask, frustrated and embarrassed and... other inappropriate feelings from having his gaze burning my skin.

"I gotta get to the station at 8. You're comin' with me," he says this, and he walks the plates to the island bar stools, gesturing to one for me to sit in. "Better sit and eat before it gets cold. Then go hop in the shower while I clean up if you want or just get dressed. Let you sleep in, but we gotta get a move on." He sits on a stool and starts shoveling food into his mouth. Turning back to look at me, he pats the seat, showing where I should sit.

For some dumb reason, I oblige. "Why do I have to go with you? I already gave my statement." As I'm arguing, I pick up the heavy silver fork and stab a piece of scrambled eggs, realizing just how hungry I am. The eggs are perfectly cooked, creamy, and fluffy, with little specks of black pepper and melty cheese. I nearly moan when they touch my tongue.

"Not leavin' you here alone all day. Bar is closed, your brother is on duty, I'm on duty, you're coming in."

"But-" I start, ready to argue, but he cuts me off.

"Please, Luna. Don't fight me on this. I don't want to argue about it. It would make me feel better knowing you're there. Zoe's coming in to take you to lunch and it's not like half of the men aren't your buddies, anyway." This is true. I stop in regularly to see my brother, and most of the officers come into the bar either for drinks or to break up fights. "Also, need you to sift through the calls that have been made from the bar over the last year. Pick out any that stand out to you, see if we can't get some leads on this guy from those."

"Okay," I say, taking a bite of the perfectly toasted toast smeared with

melted butter. Jesus, why is he also a good cook? It's just toast and eggs, but it's easy to fuck up. I stare, annoyed, at the mug of coffee he fixed for me, already sensing it's going to be perfect.

"Okay?" Tony sounds surprised. His face reads 'shocked'.

"Yeah, okay. That makes sense to me."

"You're giving in. Just like that?" He still looks confused. It's a cute look on him.

"I'm not that stubborn, Tony. If it makes sense, I go with it."

"Luna, I've seen you argue with Zander about French fries for an hour straight."

"That's because steak fries are *not* French fries. They're steak fries. Totally different. One is potato wedges that have been fried. One is delicious, crispy, fluffy potato sticks. If I order French fries, I expect *French fries*." He stares at me, that stupid sexy dimple winking at me as he quirks a side of his mouth up before shaking his head and taking a bite of his breakfast.

"God, you're fuckin' cute." Unsure of how to respond to that, with my cheeks blazing, I shovel my breakfast in and get ready to go.

"Okay, so, these are the calls that we've made to Full Moon in the past 12 months." Mitch slaps an enormous stack of manila folders in front of me. "And these are the ones where you or someone else filed charges." He slaps a slightly smaller stack next to it.

"Jesus, this is from one year?" I ask. While I do occasionally have to call into the SHPD when someone gets too rowdy or misbehaves, I didn't think it was *that* often. It's a small town with few out-of-towners coming in and causing trouble.

"To be fair about half of this stack," he slaps his hand on the bigger of the two, "is Hank, so we just show up and drive him home," Mitch says about my regular who is a bit of a lush but the sweetest old guy you'll ever meet. That puts things in more perspective and makes a *bit* more sense. "So we need you to go through these and make a list of any that stand out to you. Maybe they said something to you specifically, or you had to go to court or they just felt off to you. Anything." He hands me a pen and a yellow legal pad.

My mind is racing, wondering how I got myself into this position.

"Aye aye, captain," I say, grabbing the pad and winking at him. He

shakes his head with a smile before heading out. Before he leaves me in the small meeting room, he turns back to look at me, leaning in the doorway. His eyes are familiar, brotherly, and kind with a hint of hesitation in their brown depths.

“He’s worried about you.” My brows furrow, confused why he’s stating the obvious.

“My brother?”

“No.. well, yeah, I’m sure. But Tony. I meant Tony.”

“He’s doing his job, same as you, Mitch,” I say, keeping my tone light and looking back at the papers. I try my best to ignore the slight flicker in my stomach, the uptick of my heart rate. My eyes go back to his when he speaks again.

“That’s not true, Lune, and you know it.” He stares at me a moment longer as I sit there, unsure of what to say. A few moments of silence pass before he straightens, knocks twice on the door frame in place of goodbye, and walks away. I watch him disappear into the mess of cubicles and ringing phones, confused as can be before I dig into my pile of mayhem.

FOURTEEN

-luna-

THE DRIVE back to Tony's is quiet and uncomfortable. For me, it's my conversation with Mitch running through my mind and overthinking about what he meant. Tony worries about me - that much is clear. But the way Mitch said it, he meant more than an officer cares for a civilian or even a man cares for his best friend's sister.

But I just can't figure out what it meant exactly.

I have no clue what Tony is mulling over. I barely saw the man for the rest of the afternoon. Zoe stopped by, bringing sandwiches, chips, and sodas, and we munched on them together while I went over the files. Once I handed them back to Mitch, noting which could be an issue, we sat around, gossiping. Occasionally, one of the men would pop in for a few and shoot the shit. My brother came in to hang out with us, but never Tony.

Instead, It seemed he intentionally avoided that room, that part of the station. He came in only once, 20 minutes before he was off shift, to tell me we'd be leaving in 20 minutes.

Exactly 20 minutes later, we were in his truck, headed back to his place.

Which brings us to here.

As I sit in the car, my eyelids feeling heavy and my head braced against the window, I can't help but wonder when this will all be over, when I can go back to my normal life.

“How long do you think this will go on?”

“What?” That’s all he says. ‘What,’ gruff and standoffish like I’m asking him about a timeline for a new house build or something. But I don’t even have the energy to be snarky right now.

“This. Me at your place, limited hours at the bar, that kind of thing.”

“As long as it takes,” he says, eyes on the road as he pulls onto his street.

“Got it, but how long do you think that will be?”

Tony puts the truck in park, then turns to me. “Luna, if I knew, I’d tell you. I want this over just as much as you do.” My gut drops, realizing what a burden I’ve been on him. Seriously, the man hasn’t even been sleeping in his damn bed. He must see my panic and immediately works to dispel it. “God, no, Lu, not that. I just mean if I could sleep knowing that this fucker isn’t a threat, I’d be a happy man. It would also be great knowing I won’t be couch-bound for long.” He takes the key from the ignition and goes to step out of his truck, but I grab onto his arm, holding him in place.

“Tony, you don’t have to do that.”

“Do what?”

“Sleep on the couch. I can sleep there. You shouldn’t be out of your bed just because I’ve gotten myself into trouble.”

“Luna, I’m not having this talk again.” He turns out of the truck and slams the door, leaving me sitting there as he walks to the front door. Before I’m even out of my seat, the door is unlocked, and he’s walking in.
Goddamnit

“Tony!” I say, walking into his house and tossing my bag on the small strip of newly finished hardwood floors he must have started when I was at dinner with Zander last night.

“What do you want for dinner?” His back is to me, his hands each on a cabinet knob, holding them open to see what’s inside.

“Tony, I’m serious. I don’t want you sleeping on the couch anymore.” I can feel myself going into Luna-mode, as my brother calls it. My hands are on my hips and my attitude is snapping into place. Tony turns his head to look over his shoulder, a smile breaking out on his face.

“Fine, then I’ll sleep in my bed,” he says, a smirk playing on his lips. The ease of that makes me skeptical, a slow churn starting in my belly.

“Oh. Good, Great. I’ll grab my stuff out of there before we-“

“Oh, no darlin’. You’ll be in there too. Can’t let a lady who’s facing what you are sleep on the couch.”

“Tony, no! I’m not sleeping with you!” His eyebrow raises. “Or doing.. that!”

“Luna, this was your idea, remember? You said I can’t sleep on the couch. Ma will whip my ass if she finds out I’m letting a lady sleep on the couch. Plus, kind of like knowing you’re nearby in case something crazy happens.”

“Nothing crazy is going to happen.” Tony stares at me, clearly amused. “Okay, nothing crazy is going to happen *again*.”

“No, it’s decided. I’m sleeping in my bed tonight. And you will be too.”

“Tony, this is ridiculous, I’m not doing it.” He takes items out of the cabinet and fresh produce from the fridge.

“Think what you want, Luna. Tacos good for dinner?” At a loss for words and not eager to argue with this annoying as can be man, I huff but concede. I can move my things to the couch later. It’s not like he’s going to *force* me to sleep in his bed with him.

“I’ll make a salad,” I say, low and frustrated. The chuckle that escapes from his lips as I slice a tomato does not help.

It’s nine at night and shockingly enough, I’m absolutely exhausted. Typically, my tired-o-meter doesn’t kick in until I lay in bed, at which point I promptly pass out. It’s a great trait to have when you run a bar, seeing as those hours are anything but humane. But tonight it seems all the excitement and chaos is catching up to me, leaving me bone tired.

“When do you think you’ll be heading to bed?” I ask Tony through a yawn as he sits on the couch. I’m cuddled up on the loveseat and it wouldn’t take much for me to pass out right here.

“You getting tired? I was thinking about heading to bed soon, anyway.”

“Yeah, surprisingly. I’ll go get myself ready, then I’ll get things situated out here,” I say, standing and stretching.

“Don’t bother.”

“What?” I stop in my tracks on my way to the downstairs bathroom to brush my teeth and get my nighttime routine going.

“I said don’t bother. Moving your things. You do, I’ll just bring them back into the bedroom.” He’s stretched out on the couch, eyes still locked to the movie he turned on while I read on my Kindle.

“Tony, I’m sleeping on the couch tonight. It’s only fair. I’m not taking

your bed from you again tonight,”

“I know.”

“So, my things will be out here. For me to sleep with,” I say, like I’m talking to a five-year-old.

“Nope. Told you before, you’re sleepin’ in my room. With me.”

“And *I* told *you* before. That’s not happening.” Finally, his eyes leave the television and meet mine.

“Fine, Luna, get ready for bed, okay darlin’?” His words are sweet and soft, and I’m so thankful he’s agreeing to this. It’s crazy that it was even a question. Before I brush, I decide to change into pajamas, sweats, and an old band t-shirt and collect my pillows and blanket. Padding into the living room, I toss my things on the couch across from Tony. He eyes them skeptically.

“Gonna go brush and get ready and then I’ll probably pass right out,” I say to him in answer. He nods before hitting the power button on the remote, making the room dim a bit as the TV goes blank.

After I brush my teeth and do my nighttime skincare, I walk back out to the nearly black living room. My eyes take a moment to adjust, but then I see it.

Nothing.

None of my bed things are on the couch. I stare, I feel around. I even turn the lights back on, blinding myself in the process, trying to see if maybe they’re somewhere else. No. Not there. Walking to Tony’s room, I see that while I was searching, he must have gotten *himself* ready for bed. The lights are off except for a small light on the left bedside table.

Tony is in the bed.

He’s in the bed, *shirtless*, the thick grey comforter pulled up to his waist, sitting up and reading a book.

He’s sitting there, reading a fucking book as if this is what he does every damn night. And next to him are my pillows and the blanket turned down.

Then he does it. He looks up from his book, *smiles at me*, then he *pats the damn bed* where I guess I’m so just, what slide in willingly?!

This man expects me to sleep in here!

“Tony!”

“Hey, Luna. Is this light too bright for you? I’m gonna read a bit before heading off to bed.”

“Tony!”

“I can turn it away if it’s bothering you.”

“Tony!!” I’m shrieking now.

“Yes, Luna?”

“Why are my pillows here?”

“Because this is a bed, Luna.” He says it like I’m a friggin’ adorable, small child.

“Yes, Tony, but we agreed I would sleep on the couch so you can sleep in your own bed!” Forget being tired. This has pumped me full of anger-fueled adrenaline, making my skin feel hot and my chest tight.

“No, *you* decided that. I said that you’d be sleeping here, next to me.”

“Tony, I can’t sleep here.”

“Why not?” he says, putting his book face down to hold his page while he turns his full attention to me.

“Why not? Why not!? Because it’s weird! You’re.. you! And I’m... me! We’re not.. you know!”

“No, I don’t know. Why don’t you explain it to me,” he says, a small smile on his face that he’s fighting to hold back.

“Tony, I’m not sleeping in this bed with you.”

“You are Luna, just accept it. If you take your shit into the other room, I will carry it and you back in here. I thought about it and I was joking before, but I do want you close. I’ll stay on my side of the bed, scout’s honor.”

“You weren’t a fucking Boy Scout Anthony Garrison!”

“Ahh, yeah, I guess that’s the downside of you knowing me my whole life,” he says, like he’s contemplating the pros and cons of Luna Sage Davidson.

“Tony, seriously, I’m getting my stuff and sleeping on the couch.” I reach for my pillow, but he slaps a solid arm across it, his thick muscles and tan skin capturing my attention without my permission.

“Luna, for fuck’s sake, get in the damn bed. I’m exhausted. Please, this once, don’t make me fight you on this. I want to sleep in my own fuckin’ bed. My back is killin’ me from being on that couch, as comfortable as it is to sit on and watch a game. If you sleep on that couch, I’ll spend the whole night thinkin’ about you on that couch and how Ma is gonna kill me when she finds out. And you fuckin; know she will, Luna. She’s a fuckin’ super spy. All night I’ll be thinking about how if, God forbid, someone broke in, you’d be first in line for that fucker. Please. I’m tired. You’re tired. Get in the goddamn bed.”

His eyes are on me and I stare at him, seeing the exhaustion in his eyes,

the deep bags detailing his stress. I see the pleading in his eyes - not humor or coercion. I stare for what feels like minutes before gritting my teeth and sighing.

“Fine.” I wiggle my way under the covers and roll away from him, laying as far as possible. Like I have every night I’ve slept in this bed, I surreptitiously sniff the bedding, letting the smell of Tony fill my nose and calm to my soul. His soft chuckle hits the room and I blanch, thinking he knows what I did.

“What?” I say, trying to remain calm and aloof, still keeping my back to him.

“Just thinking about how I spent years wondering about this, never thought it would be a psycho who made it happen.” My mind is jumbled and confused, cloaked in the exhaustion that’s returning already.

“What?” I say again and even I can hear the grogginess in my voice.

“Go to bed darlin’,” Tony says, then turns out his sidelight.

“Okay,” I say, and immediately drift off at the command.

At 3 a.m. I’ll wake for a moment to realize I had rolled in my sleep and pressed myself to Tony’s side, my head on his chest and his arm wrapped around my back.

“Tony?” I say, quiet and dreamy, not sure if this is reality.

“Sleep, darlin’,” he mumbles, voice the same quality as mine as he pulls me into him tighter and plants a soft kiss in my hair.

“Okay, Tony,” I say and drift off until morning.

FIFTEEN

-luna-

FOR THE NEXT WEEK, we work like a well-oiled machine. The ease of it doesn't feel contrived or strange but instead a comfort, like it's always been this way.

Tony wakes up before me each day, his alarm blaring before he quietly sneaks out of the bed we still share. After he goes for a run, he comes back and tells me the time and leaves to take a shower. Before he's done showering, I just barely roll out of bed, shuffling into the kitchen to grab the coffee he's already fixed for me.

Some mornings he heads off to work, letting me know who's on shift to watch the house and reminding me to let him know if I go anywhere.

Some days, he's working the night shift and we run errands together before he drops me off at the bar. Either way, before he heads off, he always pulls me in by the neck and kisses me lightly on the forehead, confusing me to no end.

I still have no idea what that's about.

If he's not working nights, he comes to the bar, sitting there through the night and sipping on one beer before switching to soda. He jokes with me and my regulars, making me laugh or picking on me. Some nights Zee joins, or Hunter or Tanner. Some nights it's just Tony. Nights that he's working a night shift, he stops in once or twice before he picks me up after closing to

take me home.

Home. It sounds weird, but that's what Tony's house feels like. My new home. And the thought of it scares me thoroughly. This is a temporary solution to a problem that will hopefully be solved soon. But it's comfortable. It feels like something I could get used to, a life that I once would have given anything to live.

But I can't let myself get caught up in that. In the ease between us that's returned after 10 years of avoiding the man. The forehead kisses, the running errand together, making dinner tougher. We sit on the couch and watch movies and argue and debate like those 10 years didn't happen. And he keeps giving me signs, signs that he wants... something. Something more than being friends, more than my being his best friend's little sister. Signs that equally scare me and excite me to my core.

The problem is, years ago, my heart was crushed. Crushed in a way only a naïve 17-year-old girl can have her heart crushed. Yes, I'd attached myself to an unreasonable hope and dream, deluded myself into thinking that he could like me, this little girl, a child. But it still took me years to get over. Hell, I'm not sure I ever really got over it, if I'm being honest with myself.

Now, spending so much time with him, learning more about who he is, having him as a fixture in my day and my life, becoming comfortable with him in this way? It would crush me forever if I opened up and things fell apart.

Like I told Zoe, Tony needs to feel needed, like he's able to protect the damsel. The only reason he's with me night and day right now is he feels the need to protect me. As soon as this threat is gone, what will there be? Just a lonely bartender, the little sister to his best friend. Once the shine of being the knight in shining armor to my damsel in distress is gone, so will Tony.

And, of course, he'll be nice about it. Be the good guy, break it to me softly. I won't even be able to hold it against him, because it's not his fault. But I'll still be crushed and I'm not sure who could put me back together.

These are the thoughts running through my head this morning as I stir the coffee he made for me, setting it on the counter near the island bar stool I always occupy. One of the morning errands we've been doing together is working on the floor and the kitchen. I think of it as my rent. Now the island and kitchen counters are finished, with cabinets almost done.

The water in the shower stops, signaling Tony will come out soon in shorts and no shirt, short hair damp and with more energy than anyone should

have after a full night of work. Minutes later this happens, and when his eyes meet mine they warm, a soft smile hitting his lips. He walks over to me, grabs the back of my neck before planting a soft kiss on my forehead like he's done every morning for a week.

It's then I finally crack.

"Tony, what the fuck is going on?" I ask and he pulls back, looking confused. Honestly, the words just tumbled out, no thought attached to them. Half of me wishes I could rewind, take the words back while the other half is nodding, eager to hear his response. I'm exhausted from the emotional turmoil of the last week.

"What do you mean? I'm about to make some breakfast?" He points to the stove which now has a marble countertop around it we installed together a few days ago.

"You know what I mean."

"I really don't."

"Me and you. Us. What is this? Why are you... like this?"

"Like what?" With that, my temper, the lone trait that I seem to have inherited from my father, boils over and I erupt.

"Jesus, Tony, like.. this!!" I wave my hands back and forth in the space between us. "All sweet and taking care of me. Making me coffee in the morning, visiting me at work. Letting me help with your house. The... forehead thing." My words fade out alongside my temper and I start to feel like an idiot as he looks at me with a knowing smile.

"The forehead thing?" Oh God, he wants me to tell him. Oh *God*, this was a terrible idea.

"Yeah, when you, you know. You grab me and you kiss my head? Like... all the time."

"I'm saying hello, darlin'. Or goodbye. sometimes I just want to do it." That smile, sexy and stubborn and teasing, widens and the look floods my system with warmth. And anger.

"Why? You've never done that before. It's... confusing." God, I can't believe I'm doing this now, before I've even had a single sip of coffee. Why couldn't I just let it play out, wait until my situation is cleared up, then go back to ignoring him?

Because I could never go back to ignoring him after this.

"What's confusing, Luna?" he says softly, taking a step closer to me. He's barely a foot from me, his eyes warm, face cast in a look of amusement,

like he finds this highly entertaining. *Figures.*

“Why are you doing this?” I ask him straight out, over the game and the overthinking.

“Because I like you, Luna. I probably more than like you, but we can get to that another time when you’re not panicking in my kitchen.” His hand reaches out, gently grasping the hand that’s not holding my coffee. That same warmth from before tingling up my arm at the soft touch.

“You can’t like me.” He laughs, breath hitting my lips as he grabs my coffee, setting it aside and using the very tips of his fingers to force my face to face him. The gap between us is shrinking, barely there, and it feels like the air between us is vibrating, pulsating with the knowledge of what’s coming.

“I can’t? Why not?”

“Because you... you don’t see me like that. You told me yourself. I’m a sister to you. I know you don’t have any sisters, but let me tell you now, this is not how you hold a sister.” His arm has moved to wrap around my waist, bringing my chest to his naked one, the heat from his body seeping in through the thin, old t-shirt I wore to bed. My hand is stuck between us, touching the light dusting of hair there, the skin still damp from his shower. The feel of the rippling of muscles and the pounding of his heart travels through my palm and reverberates through my bones. Why is his heart pounding? Or is that my imagination?

“Okay, I think it’s time we talked about this, Luna.” My brows come together, confusion drowning out the warm fuzzies valiantly fighting their way in. “Yes, I said you were like a sister to me and that I didn’t see you as anything else. But do you remember the circumstances of that conversation?” I shake my head, unable to think, much less talk with him this close to me.

“I had just graduated from school. I was about to leave for the academy for God knows how long. You were entering the summer of your senior year when you should have fun and not worry about your older boyfriend in the police academy. You had just been in a seriously sketchy position with some guy who was probably trying to take advantage of you and you were still drunk. And, baby, you were 17. I was 22. There is so much wrong with that, and even if you couldn’t see it then, now being an adult, I know you can look back and see that was jacked.” With each word, my stomach both melts and goes to stone, every moment in the last eight years making sense, the looks, the words, the memories blasting me.

“I couldn’t touch you, Luna. I wanted to so fucking bad, to be your man, to touch your body and kiss you and fuck you, but you weren’t old enough. It wasn’t fuckin’ right.” My breath catches, seeing the rationale. Seeing the look in his eyes, the truth, the plea for me to catch on, to understand where he’s coming from.

“Why didn’t you say that?” It comes out as a raspy whisper, words dragged from somewhere deep in me. A hopeful place I buried years and years ago, a place that over the past few weeks he’s slowly picked at, shifting the rubble until its beauty shown through.

All this time, he’s been working on me. Talking to me, Goofing with me. The forehead kisses. Watching movies and arguing over dinner and choosing paint colors. Sharing his bed, protecting me. He was building it back, that blissful friendship we always had, the friendship that naturally bloomed into something... more. Pinpricks of tears burn the back of my eyes as it hits me, a montage of images and clips from our time together making it all clear.

“Luna, darlin’, you and Zoe were always working so damn hard to catch my eye. Prancing around in bikinis, flirting, shaking your ass anytime I was around. You’re telling me that if you’d known for sure I was into you and waiting for you to be legal that you two wouldn’t have kicked that up a notch, teasing me until I broke? I couldn’t handle that kind of temptation. That kiss? The one in my apartment? Took fucking *everything* in me to end and not just pin you down there, take it to a place we couldn’t come back from.” Those words send a delicious shiver down my spine.

“But I needed to play it smart. You aren’t just some girl to me, you never were. If I fucked it up, if we didn’t start it off right, it could have ruined everything, my relationship with you, my friendship with Zee, the trust of your family. All of it.” My breaths are coming erratically now, knowing he’s telling the truth.

“Why didn’t you tell me when I was 18?”

“Jesus fuck, Lune, if I could have, I would have. But after that day, you did everything in your power to ignore me. We were never in a room together without three or four other people. You seemed like you wanted nothing to do with me. Honestly, I figured you were disgusted by what happened, that an older guy had tried something with you when you were vulnerable.”

“Well, to be fair, I’m pretty sure I kissed you,” I say, a small nervous smile coming to my lips. His are so close, so close I could just...

“Yeah, that’s true. But, that night, you were laying in my lap. I told you

to wait for me. Your birthday was in three months and then I was going to talk to Zee. I was going to tell him everything, probably get punched in the face for it, but tell him and then talk to your dad. Then I was going to come for you, Luna. You said okay. The sweetest okay I've ever heard." His hand is cupping my cheek now, holding me in place, an anchor to keep my light heart from floating away.

"I... I was sure.." My eyes well, the image in front of me blurring. "I thought that..."

"What baby?" Tony asks, a thumb tucking a strand of hair behind my ear.

"I remember that. I thought it was a dream," I whisper, embarrassed. This whole time. All these years that I've avoided Tony.

"Not a dream at all, Luna."

"Oh," I say, the word just a breath of air on my lips.

"I'm gonna kiss you now, okay darlin'?" he asks, and something about that breaks the remnants of the barrier I've had built for years, holding back how I feel and the hurt and embarrassment, letting it wash away. It crumbles and I'm standing in front of him, open and free.

So instead of waiting for him to lean into me, I press my lips to his, gently at first, just a brush of skin on delicate skin. It's so light, so tentative. I'm full of nerves and anxiety at the revelations of this morning, but there is one thing I am absolutely sure of: I want Anthony Garrison to kiss me and I want to see what happens next.

As soon as our lips brush, the arm around my waist tightens, gluing my front to him while his hand on my cheek tips my jaw up, a finger running down my neck.

And then the dam breaks.

Years and years of pent-up lust and attraction burst forth, and neither of us can hold it back a moment longer.

His lips press to mine, taking over, bruising in their intensity. My hands run up his bare back, feeling the taut muscles and ridges, the erratic beat of his heart that matches mine. The hand on my jaw goes into my hair, tugging with a quick sharpness that has me gasping and liquid pooling in my core almost immediately. As I gasp, my lips part, and his tongue sneaks in, grazing mine, forcing a moan from my throat.

The taste of his lips - the taste of this man I've loved since I was a girl, who I thought was out of my reach for years is so much *more* than I expected. It's the same as all those years ago, but better. More. Aged with experience

and wisdom.

The sound only seems to spur him on, drawing a groan from his own throat as he steps into me further, forcing my hips into the counter and his hard cock into my belly. I can feel everything through his loose shorts, making the awareness of my arousal even more primal.

We're a mess of tongues, heavy breathing, a clashing of teeth, of unsated attraction. He pulls my lip into his mouth, tugging with his teeth before he kisses down my throat, sucking in some spots, licking in others. My scalps tingles as his hand tugs my hair, pulling my head back, giving him more access. Air can't get into my lungs fast enough, breasts rising against his chest and my hard nipples grazing my rough shirt. Each breath is an erotic tease, feeding the deep need in my core.

The arm at my waist trails my ass, squeezing hard. "God this fuckin' ass," he growls against my neck, trailing back until he hits my lips again. There's salt on his lips and something about knowing that the salt from my skin is on his lips pulls a moan from deep in me, desire overtaking me. Any remaining shred of modesty or propriety disintegrates as I lift a leg trying to wrap it around his hips, but he does one better. Strong hands grab my hips, lifting me onto the new marble countertop. Using his hands still on my hips, he pulls me to him, pressing himself against me, grinding his hardness to my soft, my thin shorts, letting me feel every inch of him.

"Oh, fuck, Tony."

"Say it again," he growls in my mouth.

"Huh?" My mind is dazed and foggy, unable to comprehend anything but the feel of his cock grinding against me, each rock of his hips grazing my clit, building, building...

"My name, darlin'. Say it."

"Tony," I moan softly. Briefly, I think maybe I should be embarrassed, squirming on his counter, basically begging for him, moaning his name on command, but I'm just... not. This is Tony, we're talking about, after all.

"Jesus, fuck, waited so fucking long to hear that from you. Sounds just as beautiful as I thought it would." His words make me clench, sending another rush of liquid to my pussy. One hand on my ass drifts down the outside of my thigh, then his thumb trails up the inside, edging its way inside my shorts, grazing bare skin underneath.

"Fuuuuuccck. No panties, Luna? How long have you been walking around with no panties in my house?"

“I can’t sleep in them,” I breathe, telling him details of my life that have zero purpose right now. His thumb is *so fucking close* to where I need him. “Tony-” I start, about to beg, but then it happens. His thumb moves, grazing my soaking slit and skimming my swollen clit at the top and a loud, guttural moan falls from my lips. It’s so unlike me, so foreign I almost look around to find the source.

“So fucking wet, baby. This all for me?” His thumb enters me, finding my hole and just barely dipping the tip in before coming back out to circle my clit. The moan that escapes is low and throaty, my nails on his back digging in and probably leaving a mark, but I can’t find it in my to care. Not when his hand is under my shorts, when he’s breathing in my ear. Not when he’s rocking his harness against my inner thigh. Never in my life have I been this turned on, this out of control. I nod my head at his question, rocking my hips, trying to get more from him.

“Answer me,” he says, adding two more fingers under my shorts, teasing me, sitting right outside my entrance.

“Yes, Tony. It’s for you.”

“Fuck yeah it is.” With that, he slams his fingers in me, making my back arch and my mouth drop open. He steps back a half step and I open my eyes that I hadn’t realized had slipped closed to see him staring between us as he pumps his fingers into me, a wet spot at the crotch of my grey shorts.

“Oh god,” I say, another rush of ecstasy running through me as his fingers curl, hitting my g-spot and making me tremble.

“So fucking beautiful.” My eyes drift closed again, loving the feel of his thick fingers in me, of his body in front of me. Of his lips trailing down my throat. “Here’s what’s gonna happen,” he says and although he sounds casual, I can hear the strain in his voice as I continue to rock my hips in time with his movement. “Gonna make you come all over my fingers. Gonna watch that shit because I’ve been jackin’ myself thinkin’ about it for fuckin’ years. Then I’m gonna take you into our room, strip your beautiful body and fuck you until we both can’t move.” I’m not too far gone to miss him say ‘our’ and a shiver runs down my spine.

“Okay, Tony.” His eyes blaze at my agreement, then he starts savagely pumping his fingers inside me, all control lost, curling them and grazing my sweet spot with each thrust. My hips grind until I’m riding his fingers shamelessly, needing it all so close. His thumb joins the party, grazing my clit once, twice, and then... I’m gone. I’m screaming his name, coming on his

fingers as stars burn behind my eyelids, my head back and Tony growling into my ear, prolonging my orgasm. My body jolts with aftershocks as he pulls his fingers out and then once again when he puts those fingers in his mouth, sucking them clean in a way that is so unbearably hot, I'm ready to go again, my last orgasm just taking the edge off.

"So sweet baby. Gonna eat that clean, but not right now. Right now I'm gonna fuck you until we both pass the fuck out." A whimper escapes my lips, and he lifts me by my waist, my legs instinctually wrapping around his waist as he starts toward the master bedroom. His arms move to my ass as I shift to take off my t-shirt, leaving me to press my bare skin to his.

"Fuck, no bra either baby?" he says, a hand leaving my ass to cup my breast then pinch my nipple. My back arches against him as I lick up his neck, taking in the salt of his skin and nibbling on his earlobe. Before I know it, he's tossing me on the bed and pulling down the soaked shorts before shucking his own, kicking them into a corner. Watching him, I'm awed by what's sitting in front of me. Abs that I've been drooling over all week, arms that can carry me into a room with just one hooked under my ass, a fucking beautifully dark happy trail leading to... holy fuck.

Okay, I'm not one to call a dick pretty, but if there ever was a pretty dick, Tony Garrison would be the owner. It's long and thick, a slight curve upwards, and he's stroking it, eyes locked on me and sending hot waves through my body. *Holy fuck, holy fuck, holy fuck, this is really going to happen.*

And it's going to be fucking good.

He leans over to this side table, grabbing a condom and tossing it on the bed next to me. Following the condom, he kneels on the bed where I lay on my back, feet to the mattress, spread and open for him. His thumbs come to me, pulling my lips apart and staring at my wet pussy. "So fucking pretty." And then, God bless the man, he bends forward until he's nose to clit with me and flattens his tongue against me, licking from bottom to top.

"Ahhh!" I shout, convulsing at just that one lick and the feel of him on me.

"Couldn't resist." He smiles at me as he kneels in front of my spread legs, somehow already having torn open the condom and rolling it on. "Lift your ass for my baby," he demands. I do as he asks and his hands go to my hips, fingers under my ass. "Gonna fuck you hard, okay darlin'?" he says, eyes locked on mine. I nod, wanting him, wanting everything he can give me.

With my consent secured, he slams into me, eyes staying locked on me, hips in the air angling him to slide in perfectly as he's on his knees, hovering above me. My back arches and a silent scream comes from my open mouth. I'm so full, the fit so damn perfect, each inch grazing every secret sweet spot inside of me. I hear him groan in agreement before pulling back and slamming back in, over and over.

"So fucking perfect, Luna. Knew you would be. Made for me." He tells me as he thrusts in, each thrust feeling deepening, imprinting him on my soul in a way that I know no other man will ever be enough for me after tonight. This... this feels so unbearably right, the most perfect joining of two humans who were somehow *always* meant to share this moment, meant to be together.

His eyes are still locked on mine as he continues to pummel into me, holding my gaze, and in them, I can see the same emotions and thoughts running through his mind. He feels it too. *He knows it too.* Even though the sex is explosive, hard and fast, it changes somehow, becoming edged in softness and a cotton candy sweetness that feels so damn perfect.

"I'm close, honey." I manage to whisper under my breath, unable to say much more between moans and gasps.

"Do it, do it for me, Luna. Come on my cock, do it now." With his permission, I shatter, a million pieces of my soul scattering across the room, embedding themselves in his room, in his body, in this bed we're sharing, leaving remnants of me there forever. Never again will I be whole again unless I'm connected to him.

He follows close behind, thrusting deep one last time and grunting as he comes. I can feel him in me, twitching the last of his release before he collapses on top of me, out of breath.

I know at that moment I will never be the same. I will forever be his.

SIXTEEN

-luna-

WHAT FEELS LIKE HOURS LATER, we're still in bed, naked, with the grey sheets pulled up to our waists facing each other. He's twirling a lock of my white-blonde hair between his fingers.

"Always loved your hair," he says, studying it.

"It's weird. Too light," I say, walking my fingers up the valley in the center of his chest. It only took one time for the kids in school to tell me it looked like I had old lady hair and it's been a source of self-consciousness since.

"No, it's gorgeous. And now I know it's also so fucking soft." I hum, not agreeing or disagreeing, just loving the feel of having my hair played with.

"Why'd you cut it?"

"What?" I still, but I know what he said.

"You were a senior. You always had long hair. Then you cut it short. Never grew it out again. You're beautiful, darlin'. Always were. Always will be. But your hair was gorgeous." His eyes watch his fingers sift through the silvery strands, the light-catching in spots to bring out the white, the blonde, the faint glow of purple.

I sigh. "I grew it out when I was in middle school. Girls you dated had long hair. I thought..." I don't finish my sentence, but the way his hand pauses says he knows what I'm saying.

“You cut it after...”

“Yeah.” I agree, avoiding his eyes and pressing my lips to his chest. I try not to dwell on how dumb I’ve been. How this could have been us for years. We sit in silence, bodies sated and my mind comforted and safe in the knowledge that this is the man I’ve known my whole life. A good man, a trustworthy man. “So, what just happened Tony?” I ask, still avoiding his eye.

“Do I really need to explain it?” he says, tugging on the strand in his fingers.

“Not that part, dummy. The... other part.” I watch my fingers as they continue to walk paths on him, his tan complexion a gorgeous contrast to my fair skin. *Made for me.*

“You’re mine, Luna. Have been for a while, but I’m putting my official claim on you.” He swipes the loose hair behind my ear and over my shoulder. Rubbing his hand up my arm, sending a trail of goosebumps.

“So... what does that mean? Are we just like... you know? Or...?” Oh my God, why is this so awkward? Why can’t I just be a normal person? Or at the very least finish a friggin’ sentence.

“You’re my woman, Luna.”

“Oh.”

“Is that... is that okay with you?” he asks, a moment of anxiety in his voice which is so endearing, the smile that creeps onto my lips is impossible to avoid. Meeting his eyes, I see the truth in him. He... wants me. After all these years, all this time avoiding him, he wants me. Luna.

“I’ve wanted to be yours since I was seven, Tony.” His eyes warm, a sweet, boyish smile cracking his face. It’s a face I’m realizing now I’ve only seen him give to me.

“That’s good, darlin’.” Comfortable silence blankets us again, my mind racing about how much has changed in just one morning.

“Are you... are you sure this isn’t... I mean. I’m living with you right now. We spend a lot of time together, by necessity. And you’re like, protecting me...”

“What do you mean?” He doesn’t sound mad per se, but he doesn’t sound happy that I’m questioning his motive.

“I know you like to be the protector, Tony. Before I let myself get too... deep in... this, I just want to make sure... This isn’t some kind of... damsel in distress, taking care of the little lady type thing.” He looks at me for a long

second before the unexpected happens. His head shoots back, a huge belly laugh erupting from his full lips. My face flames and I attempt to bury it in the pillow we're sharing.

"Lune, look at me," he says, a smile in his voice once the laughter dies down.

"No." My voice is muffled by the pillow, but he can hear me. He gently pulls my head from the pillow I'm trying to disappear into.

"Darlin', where did you get that from?" he asks, voice soft and caring as I continue to avoid his eye.

"I don't know. I just... this is all happening quickly. We're stuck together with a ton of drama and I remember Zee once telling me it can be... enticing. To have to protect someone. That it can mess with your head." I don't tell him that this conversation happened yesterday... Now that I'm thinking about it. I can't help but wonder if Zander knew all along this might happen, that he was trying to get in front of it.

"Lune, look at me." I contemplate ignoring him but glimpse at him from the corner of my eye, ready to bury myself as needed. "Luna, seriously, look at me." His voice is serious now, so I do, turning my body back so we're facing each other as his arm snakes around my center, pulling me close. His lips graze my own as he talks. "If that was true, any woman I've ever helped in a tough situation would end up in this same position." My gut drops. "And before you even go there, no, this has *never* happened to me. I keep work and personal life as separate as I can in this small town. I don't even *date* anyone in town because of that." Thinking back, he's right. He's brought women over the years to family events, even into the bar, which cut deep, but never anyone I knew, never anyone from Springbrook Hills.

"Oh," I whisper, my breath catching as his hand dips under his tee I'm wearing, making circles on my back.

"Yeah, oh," he says, the smile playing on his lips revealing his dimple. "So you got me? You're mine, in a way that I would want you to be mine even if you weren't swimming in a sea of chaos. Chaos, I should note, that could have been avoided if you weren't so damn stubborn." Fingers pinch my side playfully.

"Yeah, but if it had, would we be here?" I say, smiling at him as I hook a leg over his hip, bringing my core right against the spot where he's getting hard. Again.

"Mmm, and I really, really like where we are right now, Luna," he

whispers, his hand squeezing on my ass and lips coming down on mine.
We don't get out of bed again until dinner time.

Later that evening we're both sitting outside, a fire in the pit in his backyard. The bar is operating on limited hours, as per Tony and Zee's request, which means tonight, a Wednesday, we're closed. Tony is off too, a rare overlap in our schedules, so we built a fire and ordered in Chinese.

I'm sitting in one of his comfy Adirondack chairs in his tee that almost comes to my knees and a pair of panties, curled up on the chair with a container of lo mein and a pair of chopsticks. Tony sits next to me in sweats and a t-shirt, having dragged the heavy chair over to eat next to me. Unlike me, he is long done with his dinner, now just sitting and staring into the fire.

"It's weird, isn't it?" I say, placing my chopsticks into the container and looking over at him.

"Hmm?" he asks, his hand playing with my hair, the feeling running through my spine with a delicious shiver.

"That this feels so.. normal." My smile at him is shy, like I'm the 17-year-old again, nervous that he'll laugh at me. "All these years I've wanted this. This exactly. Sitting with you, doing nothing. I think I always thought it would feel... different. But it just feels normal. Right." I look away, watching the flames lick up the log in the pit, the dance mesmerizing. "When I think back, it's like all the times that we weren't doing this feel unnatural, like this was how it was supposed to be all this time."

He's staring at me, gaze burning into me the same way the flames are burning up the wood, but I refuse to make eye contact, nervous for what I'll see there. When I don't look at him, he gives up, reaching over and grabbing me, an arm under my knees until I'm settled in his lap, my food forgotten on the arm of my chair. His hand comes up, brushing my shoulder-length hair behind my ear, watching his hands sift through the strands. "Because this is how it was always supposed to be, Luna. Me and you, always. We were both just too dumb and stubborn to make it happen."

For a split second, I think about arguing with him, telling him I'm not dumb, that he's not dumb, but the look on his face registers, and all arguments dry up. The look isn't hot and burning, like the looks he's been giving me all day. Instead, it's warm and comfortable, full of knowledge. It's a look I've never seen from another man, a look that says he's known me all

my life, seen me at my best and my worst. He's seen me in my ugly duckling stage and watched me struggle through my teen years. Watched me build a business and fight for my independence.

And I've seen him - I've seen him go from a goofy teen, always getting into trouble and pushing the envelope and grow into this man, this protector. It's been a beautiful transformation, and knowing he's seen the same in me over the years is overwhelming.

"What, darlin'? What's wrong?" he asks softly, his voice full of concern as my eyes fill with the beauty, knowing who we are to each other, where we are.

"I'm just... happy. It feels nice. This feels right. All of this craziness that's going on, all of this scary stuff, and you're anchoring me and giving me... everything." He stays silent, my words sinking in and I worry I said too much, that this is all too much, too quick. "Oh, God, that was too much. I swear, I'm not crazy. It just feels nice, that's it, nothing weird-" I'm rambling, on the verge of saying too much, too fast, too soon-

"No, Luna. Stop that, whatever is going through your mind. I love that you're here, that you're safe and happy. I love that I finally broke through, that we finally cleared shit up after all this fucking wasted time. I love how open and sweet you are, love that you're sitting here in my lap, in my tee and panties and nothing else." I'm melting in his arms, my hand going up his neck and squeezing as his hand travels up the back of my shirt, drawing nonsense pictures with his callused fingers on my back.

"We wasted a lot of time, didn't we?" I say, smiling at him.

"Way too fucking much time." The words are growled as he feels the loss of that time the same way I do.

"So... what happens next?" I ask when we've both been silent for a bit.

"What do you mean?"

"Like... with us. What happens next? What are we? What is... this?" A blush burns across my cheeks, but I've never been one to beat around the bush. Tony smiles at me, his white teeth gleaming in the firelight, his dimple poking out. God, that dimple. I just want to lick it. He rearranges me so I'm straddling him on the chair, a knee in the space on either side of his hips, my chest against his. I'm thankful that his property is bordered on all sides by trees, so no nosy neighbors can see the bottom of my ass I feel the fresh air grazing.

"What do you want this to be, Luna?" Okay, so maybe I lied. Maybe I do

beat around the bush because I want nothing less than to answer this question before he tells me what he wants.

“I, uh, well... I asked first.” Tony throws his head back laughing, the deep, warm sound reverberating through his chest and into mine, pooling right in my center because holy shit, this man is sexy as fuck.

“Okay, Luna, here’s the deal. I want you. You want me. I want you in a way that I want everyone to know you’re off fucking limits. I want to take you home to ma and pop and tell them you’re my girl. I want to let your brother get in one good right hook, then threaten to kill me if I hurt you. I want to have a seat at your bar where I can watch your sexy ass work all night when I’m off, a seat that is mine only. I want you to wear my tee to bed every night and every night I want to be the one keeping you contained when you sleep like a crazy person.” Each thing on his list fills my soul just a bit more as he clarifies what he wants us to be and it’s clear it’s not just my body. But still...

“So... you don’t just want me for sex?”

“Oh, I definitely want you for sex, just not only that.” As if to prove his point, he takes my hips, moving them forward until my center presses against his hard cock. I’m mildly shocked, considering all we’ve done today is have sex and occasionally eat to maintain energy levels, but it’s like our bodies are making up for lost time, eager to fill the void.

“Hmm, yes, that is nice. But...” I start but stop when I feel his roughened hands slip under the waistband on the ass of my panties.

“Luna, you’re my woman now, got it? That’s all you have to know. You’re the only one for me and I damn well better be the only man you’re with,” he says, then uses his new leverage point to pull my ass forward, rubbing my center along his length, two layers of fabric between us but it doesn’t matter. I feel every single centimeter as it rubs me, God, how am I so ready for him again?

“Oh,” I breathe, any semblance of conversation quickly fleeing my mind.

“Yeah, oh.” His voice is gruff and quiet, moving my hips slightly faster against him, back and forth, rubbing my clit against him on every forward stroke.

“Tony,” I whisper into his mouth, our lips brushing against each other. He leans up a fraction of an inch, pressing his firmly to mine, invading my mouth with his tongue and I moan loudly around it, both at the taste of him and the feel of what’s happening between my legs.

“Gonna fuck you outside, okay darlin’?” he asks, his hands still moving me, his lips dragging down my neck. We talked before our second round and I told him I have an IUD and I’m clean. When he told me he was tested recently and came back clear, we decided to forgo condoms.

Licking my lips, my head nods woozily, but my mind is already in another galaxy, needing him inside me. He reaches down while lifting me with a powerful arm around my waist and pushes his sweat down just enough so his cock springs free, a soft groan escaping his lips as he does. I go back to grinding on him, loving having one less layer between us.

Fed up with the grinding, he uses a thumb to pull my panties aside, circling my clit a few times, making me mewl. It’s not a patient sound at all, but one full of need and desire. “Tony, need you,” I say, my hips seeking him, seeking more.

“I got you, baby,” he says, soft and hard at the same time. And I realize then he always has, he’s always had me. Now he also has my body. He lifts my hips, lines himself up, and slams me down on him, causing my body to immediately quake with the exquisite fullness. After a day of fucking non-stop, I’m deliciously sore, which adds to the pleasure overtaking my body. “It’s all yours baby, ride my cock.” His words shudder through me, causing me to clench around him and a rush of liquid to run from my pussy. The feeling makes us both groan and I lift onto my knees, slamming down again, loving the feel of him gliding in and out.

His thumb is still holding my panties aside, making this all feel just a bit naughty, illicit, and unbelievably hot. The thumb trails over our connection, feeling him disappear in me and I ride him before it drifts up to circle my clit.

“Gotta make this quick, darlin’. Feelin’ you, your wet cunt on my cock, the little moans you’re making, not gonna last. Need you to come on me.” He growls the demand rough but quiet in my ear, words for me alone, and I nod, already lost in the feel of him. I start riding in earnest, needing to get there, needing to make him come in me, fill me, to make him moan aloud with his release.

His thumb keeps rubbing me, perfect pressure and speed, and soon my thrusts get sloppy, my control falling apart, my concentration shattering as I come on him, my back arching and head falling back, only his firm arm around my middle keeping me from falling off. When I drift down from my high, he thrusts up into me, holding my hips in place and growling before slamming me down onto him and holding me there, grinding my hips to milk

him dry. I'm a boneless mess on his chest, panting as he comes down, drifting his hand up and down my back under my shirt.

"Jesus, do you think I'll ever get enough of that?" he asks.

"I really, really hope not," I say back, and fuck, do I mean it. `

SEVENTEEN

-luna-

“SO, YOU’RE TOGETHER, HUH?” Zander says, looking into his beer as I stop by to give Tanner a fresh one. He nods at me, a small smile playing on his lips like he knows that the conversation I’m about to have with my brother in my bar on a busy Saturday night is the last thing I want to be doing.

“Huh?” I say, playing dumb because what else are little sisters supposed to do besides avoid talks like this.

Tony just left the bar after stopping in while on patrol with Mitch. On his way out, he left me with a quick but hot kiss on the lips, leaving not a dash of doubt in the minds of our little town whose woman I am. Just like he told me he wanted. All night Zee’s been sitting at the bar with Tanner, part of the rotation that they’ve forced me to agree to keep my business open while they catch this creep.

“Don’t play dumb, Luna. You and Tony. You’re together.”

“Uhh...”

“Lune, just saw the man kiss you like he was leaving for war. You sure as fuck had better be together.”

“Uhh, well... kind of. Yes. Yes, we’re together.” My gut clenches, saying it both in excitement and nerves. Because we *are* together. While I don’t know if I would call Tony my boyfriend - the name sounds so trite and silly,

especially for someone like him - he's made it clear that I'm 'his woman'. Normally someone calling me something like that would make my inner independent woman shudder and run for the hills, but those words coming off Tony's lips? A shiver rolls down my spine just thinking of it. The *good* kind of shiver.

"Knew it was coming. I'll fucking kill him if something happens. Already told him. Telling you," my brother says, lifting his beer and looking me dead in the eye as he takes a long sip. Tanner lets out a loud guffaw, drawing the attention of nearby customers to them.

"Uhh..."

"And I don't want to see it. At all. Never. No PDA in front of me, got it?"

"Okaaay..." I start, mildly confused and shocked that this is going down so.. easy. I truly thought there would be at least *one* punch thrown. "Okay, why are you being so cool about this?" I can't help but ask whether it's wise or not.

"Can't stop the inevitable, Lune." The words make sense, but the smile that creeps on his face tells me there's more to his devious plan. "And you get to tell Dad." My heart stops, my stomach dropping to my feet.

"What?"

"Dad. You get to tell him. I'm not doing it. And you better tell him soon, since you know nothing stays silent in this town for long." He's absolutely *grinning* now, the asshole. My brother knows my dad has not liked a single boy or man I've dated in my life. Each one he tries to scare away from the get-go. For years, I'd have a boy come over for dinner and within a week, I'm single. Over time, Zander has taken to warming Dad up to them before I even bring them around. Then I carefully craft a family dinner with my mom that won't end in disaster or a break-up.

Being the princess of the family has its perks, but damn, it has its disadvantages.

"Zander!" I say, high pitched and panicked, the same way I have for years. "Don't be a dick!"

"You're dating my best friend, Luna. I'm entitled to make your life just a little bit of a living hell." He's looking me in the eye, a huge smile painted across his face. He's enjoying this, enjoying my pain and suffering. And if he started dating one of my friends, I'd probably be enjoying making him squirm just as much. Okay, probably more because he's a player and none of my friends deserve that.

“But Zander! He’s going to freak.”

“Yup sure is.”

“Zander!”

“Look. I’m not gonna tell him. And if you don’t, someone will tell him or tell Mom and then you’ll get it even worse, not being the one to clue him in. He’s gonna give you shit, but he’s also not stupid. Everyone knows you’ve been into him since you were a kid.” Goddamnit, was I that obvious all these years? “But he is definitely going to threaten to cut off his balls and feed them to him if Tony hurts you. So.” With that, Tanner once again throws his head back laughing as I walk away grumbling, knowing I need to call my dad. And soon.

The next morning, I’m awake at an inhumane hour, Tony having woken me after his run. It’s become our routine - he wakes up at an ungodly hour, then goes for a run. After his run, he climbs back into the bed sweat-covered and endorphin-fueled and wakes me in deliciously wicked ways. Sometimes the shower comes after, and some mornings he carries my naked body into the shower and has his way with me under the steamy water.

Either way, it’s quite the way to wake up.

I still can’t get enough of this man. It’s like years and years and years of wanting him, yearning after him has created a bottomless pit of need, and each time we’re together it just takes the very edge off the desire, never fully sating it. Each night before bed we discover each other’s bodies, learning sounds and places that make the other shiver, then in the morning, we commit those details to memory.

Now, I’m curled up on the couch while Tony makes us breakfast in the kitchen, happily sated and enjoying the cup of coffee he brought over to me as I scroll through my phone.

“What’s your plan for today, darlin’,” he says over his shoulder, flipping bacon.

“Opening at 2,” I say, yawning through the words. As much as I enjoy spending time with him before he heads off and the ways he wakes me, waking with the sun will probably never be something I do easily. The bar has been open this weekend, meaning my nights have been late. Friday, Tony came and sat at the bar from the moment I opened until he drove me home, and last night featured Zee and Tanner with Tony popping in a few times

while on shift. While I've pretended to be annoyed that they're overreacting, the truth is it's a comfort to know they're watching over me and I truly believe it's also helped the staff feel more comfortable coming back to work.

"I'll be off at 9, stop in then," he says, and I secretly smile into my coffee cup. He looks over his shoulder at me and winks. *God, I love this.* The cute banter and the warm looks. I love the routines we're forming and the easiness of it all. But even more, I love that since I've known Tony my whole life, there's none of that awkward getting to you know part of a new relationship. It's just... us. The way it was always supposed to be.

He turns back to the stove, placing bacon on paper towels and blotting off the grease before turning to the toaster and grabbing the freshly browned slices. I stand, wandering over to where he is before he brings our plated breakfast to the island. Making us breakfast is a task I've officially given up on trying to take over. A few times I've argued that I feel like a lazy bum, living in his house and having him cook for me while I sit half-asleep on his couch but he's insisted that if I even try to take over, he'll lose his mind. Since mornings are not my forte, I didn't fight him too hard on that one.

Slipping my phone in my pocket, I press my front to his back, wrapping my arms around his tight abs and kissing the back of the white tee he's wearing. Tony puts down the butter knife and turns, bending down to press his lips sweetly to mine in a way that makes those butterflies take flight. I almost love these kisses more than the hot, intense ones that lead to more. These tell me he's happy with me, happy to just be.

He pulls back, then runs his hands through my hair, pushing it out of my face and running a thumb over my jawline. "So damn pretty," he whispers before bending down again for another sweet kiss. I sigh into it, trying not to melt into a puddle at his feet, when my cell rings.

"Who is calling this early?" I murmur, pulling my phone from my pocket and leaning back from him to look. The blood drains from my face and the butterflies in my belly turn to stones, anxiety ratcheting through me as I look from my phone up to Tony. His face is washed with concern, anxious about who might call me.

"Lune, who is it?" he says, looking down at my phone, but I've already pressed it to my chest in panic.

"Oh shit, oh shit, oh shit," I whisper, trying to think of what to do.

"Luna, darlin', who is it?" I walk over to the couch and plop, rubbing my temples as my phone continues to ring. I know I need to answer. "Luna,

should I call someone at the department to track your phone? Is it him?" He's kneeling in front of me, reaching for my phone with his own in his hand. That snaps me out of it.

"No, this is worse." Confusion overtakes his fear. "It's my dad!" I say, breaths shortening in my panic. Relief crosses Tony's face. The phone stops ringing, my voicemail picking up. For a moment I sigh at a bullet dodged, but it immediately starts back up.

"Luna, you need to answer your father," he says, a small smile playing on his lips because *he knows*. He knows what's coming. Of course he does. He's been around my whole life. Hell, he's been in on the tormenting with my brothers and my dad a few times. Something I totally need to ask him about another time.

"Or we could just run away? Like, to Mexico or something. Somewhere warm, where they can't find us. My dad hates being too hot."

"Luna, answer your phone," he says, now laughing at me. Laughing at me!! This is not a funny situation.

"I don't want to. He's going to scare you off," I say, because I'm an idiot and I just woke up and I'm panicking.

"Nothing could scare me off from you." He leans in, and then the traitor swipes to answer my cell, putting the phone to my ear.

"Uh, hi, Daddy!" I say, trying to sound as chipper as possible. "Happy Sunday!"

"Ya know, it was going to be a happy Sunday. Your mother just went downtown to get some donuts. Was gonna eat one on the back deck, watch a game, get some work done around the house. You know who she talked to while she was there?" My stomach sinks, knowing who my mother talked to. Judy runs the bakery downtown, where on Sunday mornings you can get killer donuts. But Judy is a freaking gossip. If you have a secret and tell her, you can rest assured the entirety of our small town will know by day's end.

Usually, this is fine. I live a low-key life and I own a bar, which means I witness many of her gossip topics first hand but I'm never *one* of the topics. Until...

"It was Judy. She talked to Judy. When she came home, do you have any clue what she told me?"

"Uh... I, uh..."

"You're seein' the Garrison boy." My eyes roll so far into my head, bringing my head back with them as it hits the back of the couch, because

this is how he describes every single man I've brought home.

"Dad, his name is Tony. You know his name is Tony. You've known him his whole life." Tony snorts out a quiet laugh and I shoot him a glare that should have him scared, but he just smiles at me. Men.

"Yeah, well, now he's apparently the boy that's datin' my damn little girl. The little girl, mind you, who didn't tell me she was datin' him." In his voice are the signs that he's close to losing it and going on a rampage.

"Daddy..." I start.

"Don't you 'Daddy' me Luna Sage. I told your mother. I told her damn well years ago that boy had an eye for you, and I told her again when your brother told me you were staying there while this whole situation played out. Told her we could make room for you, know you don't want to stay with your slob of a brother, get that. But we're your parents. And now you're in his house, falling for his shit, goin' all gooey-eyed and kissin' him in your bar. Roberta Johnson was out with her book club last night, gettin' a drink, and told Judy this morning." God, this freakin' small town.

"So then I call your brother, because no way in hell would *my* little girl start datin' her big brother's best friend and not call her old man, and he tells me he's not getting in the middle, but that he told you last night you needed to tell me. Like it's some big secret. Are you ashamed, Luna? Is the why you wouldn't tell me?" He's rambling now, and it's taking everything in me not to hang up and go beat my brother's ass.

"Daddy, let me -"

"And then your *mother* tells me it's not a big deal and I'm overreactin'." God, I love my mom. "And says this is why you wouldn't tell me. Told me you and that boy were written in the stars from the start. Now she's upstairs making fuckin' star charts for your babies or God knows what." And she probably was. My mom and her sister Maggie are hippies through and through. They named me Luna Sage, after all.

"Daddy, it's not-" I start, trying to calm him down, but then my phone is out of my hand. I stare at my hand in shock, because... it was right there. But then I look to my left and see Tony, glittery case to his ear.

"Mr. Davidson? Yeah, it's Tony Garrison. Good morning, sir." My dad's voice is a low murmur through the phone, too low to know what he's saying. Nerves are eating at my insides, anxiety swelling, knowing how my dad has been with every other man in my life.

"Of course. I'm sure you understand how crazy things have been. We

were just talkin' this morning about taking a trip over to see you and Mrs. Davidson on our day off tomorrow. Talk to you in person. Man to man." Oh, he is such a liar. He's also good at this. My dad will love that man-to-man shit. "Yes, sir. I'm sure it's no surprise that I've always thought your daughter was beautiful inside and out."

That makes me melt into a gooey Luna puddle on the couch, smiling at him before I straighten when Tony bursts out laughing, nodding. Why is he laughing? My dad doesn't joke with my boyfriends. Never. "Yeah, she's a bit of a pain, but I'll keep her in line." Oh my God, he's going to kill Jim. While Zee, Ace, and my dad might bitch about what a pain I am, anytime *anyone* other than those three talks poorly about me, it's game over. I once watched my dad nearly punch his own brother because he said I was being a brat. And I totally *was*, in all fairness.

Instead, he laughs again, deep and rough. Are they... "You've got that right, driving me insane already." Oh my God, they are! They're commiserating about me! "No worries, Mr. Davidson, I've got it covered... Alright, Mike, it is then." Shut the fuck up. Did he tell him to call him by his *first name*? What kind of voodoo is he using right now? "We'd love to. Five? What can we bring?... Oh, no, don't worry, I won't let Lune cook anything." *Are you fucking kidding me!?* "Okay, Mike, talk to you then." Tony takes my phone from his ear, swiping to end the call and tossing it on the couch before scooping me up and situating me on his lap. I try to wiggle free, but he holds on tight.

"Dinner at your parents tomorrow at five." I stare at him as he plays with my fingers, twining them with his over and over like that phone call didn't just happen.

"What the fuck was that?" I say, trying to pull back. Tony refuses, pulling me closer and nuzzling his face into my neck.

"What was what?" His mouth is against my skin, words vibrating through my bones and forcing me to fend off a shiver that wants to race down my spine. When his tongue peeks out, tasting my skin, I lose the battle.

"That. With my dad."

"Making plans, darlin'. Told you, dinner at five." His mouth latches to my neck, sucking at the spot that immediately makes me want to ignore this conversation and instead have a completely different kind of conversation. One that includes minimal words.

My hands push on his chest to gain my mental footing, removing myself

from his hold and standing in front of him. Once I'm free, they go to my hips, taking on my bitchy-bossy-stance I use on rowdy customers. "Tony, you know what I mean. My dad was ready to rip me a new one. You get on and.. what? Charm him into having a good ol' boys talk?"

"Are you mad at me?" he says, a smile playing on his lips and that stupid, stupid dimple popping out. It takes everything in me not to smile and climb back into his lap because that smile directed at me after years and years of watching him give it to everyone *but* me...

"Yes, I'm mad at you. You just told my dad I'm a pain in your ass and then you two laughed about it, commiserating about what a pain I am. My dad's supposed to hate you. He hates every guy I date. And you're.. you. He should hate you more. He knows all the bullshit you've pulled, and you're Zee's best friend!"

His hand shoots out, wrapping long, thick fingers around my wrist and tugging. The force knocks me off my feet, landing me right in to his lap where I straddle him, one hand on the couch on either side of his head. "Darlin', are you really mad about that?" I stay silent because, to be honest, when I dig into my emotions can't find anger. Maybe.. frustration? And confusion? But not anger. Maybe even a dash of relief, which is annoying. "Luna, it's because he knows me, knows who I am and what I stand for that he's not losing his mind. I've seen the men you've brought home over the years, heard the stories from Zee. They were losers. No good for you. Not a man who would do anything to keep you safe, who knows how to keep you happy, and has the patience to put up with your shit." I open my mouth, ready to argue.

"And you've got a lot of shit, Lune, but fuck if I don't love it. Turns me on, dealin' with your sass and your attitude, the push and pull we've got goin' on." His voice has gone low and gravel-y now, making me forget I might have been annoyed. "But regardless, I'm not other guys. Your dad knows that, so he's not gonna be treating' me like those other fuckwads you brought home."

"Oh," I say, because really, what else can I say? He's right, in so many ways, even though I will go down with the ship declaring that he's wrong. The other guys I've dated have been losers, all meticulously chosen to be the exact opposite of the man whose lap I'm in.

"Yeah, oh." He pulls my face down, touching his lips to mine with his hand cupping the back of my neck and kisses me, making me forget

everything. The talk with my dad, the past men in my life, the fact that Tony likes that I'm kind of a pain in the ass. His lips are firm and it doesn't take long for him to take control, slipping his tongue into my mouth to touch mine, drawing a soft moan from me.

Before I can get too into the kiss, he pulls away, touching his forehead to mine with a soft smile on his face. "Darlin' you don't get off my lap and sit at the island to eat breakfast, I'm gonna be late for work because I'll be fuckin' you to remind you why I'm so good for you." His voice is soft and teasing, but he's serious. I can tell just *how* serious when his hips lift underneath mine and his hardness grazes me. The action plants a seed for trying to figure out how to convince him to be late for work. He must see the mischief in my eyes, because he laughs, lifting me from my hips and placing me gently on the ground before he stands in front of me. His arm wraps around my waist, kissing the top of my head before guiding me to where the finished plates of food sit.

"As much as I'd love to be late because I'm fuckin' you on my couch, I really don't want to explain that to my Captain."

"I could call Zoe, tell her to sweet-talk her dad," I say, mostly joking but also...

"Let's save that for a day when we can play hooky and I can enjoy you all day," he says, and goddamnit if I don't love the way his mind works.

EIGHTEEN

-luna-

THE TEXT COMES when I'm closing.

My phone vibrates on the polished wood of the freshly wiped-down bar while Tony sits, chatting with my bartender, Amy. She's pretty - tiny and curvy, a contrast to my willowy figure. Her long dark hair hits the top of her ass, curling slightly in a way that I know my male customers find attractive. Her makeup is always perfect, her smile always shining, her attitude always sunshine-y, basically a wet dream in a bartender's uniform.

Any other time in my past I'd be nervous, my man chatting with an absolutely gorgeous woman right in front of me. But Tony's eyes track my every move while I'm working, even when he's talking to others. Even when this life-sized Bratz doll is right in front of him. Smiling at him, I lift my phone, wondering who is texting me at two in the morning.

Unknown.

My hands shake. My phone drops to the counter, making a clatter, my gaze darting right to Tony, who already looking at me with concern etched on his face.

"Luna?" He stands from his seat on his barstool, moving my way. My eyes move back to my phone, the message still unopened, unread.

1 attachment the screen reads.

An image.

He sent me an image.

He has *never* sent me an image.

“Luna, baby, what is it?” Tony says, ducking under the bar to come to me, step in front of me. Later I’ll remember that he came to me first, ignored my phone, which held the problem, instead concerned about me, cupping my face in his warm hands.

“Unknown number. A text. A picture, I think,” I say, unable to even put together full sentences, coherent thoughts. Tony looks down, seeing the display that still shows *1 new message from: Unknown*, the bright white of the display nearly blinding. He pulls me into him, my face in his chest, one arm around my back to hold me tight and the other reaching for my phone. The stares of my employees burn into my back, a mix of concern, confusion, and intrigue mixing in a suffocating cocktail.

“Jesus, fuck,” Tony mutters, presumably at my phone. He’s looking at what was sent, has opened the message. Still staring at it, his hand slides up to between my shoulder blades, pinning me in place so I can’t move, can’t turn to look at the phone he’s holding behind my back. I hear the phone fall, hitting the bar before Tony reaches in his pocket to grab his cell, pulling it out and pressing the screen before it hits his ear.

“Zee, it’s me. Need you to come to Luna’s, now... Yeah, I know you’re on duty. Need you on duty for this.” My gut drops, dreading how this mess keeps getting worse, how I just keep getting hit by more and more. What did I do to deserve this? Why is this happening to me?

“Tony...” I start, my head on his chest, hair pinned between his shirt and my face slipping into my mouth, but I don’t care. My body is shaking now, full-body quakes of fear and trauma.

“Shhh, darlin’, please, calm down,” he says, soft and low, an immediate balm to my soul, He’s hung up his phone, placing it on top of mine on the bar like it’s a weight holding down the evil threatening to escape. He bends slightly, an arm going under my knees to lift me until he’s cradling me like I’m a small, frightened child. There’s a hand in my hair, scratching my scalp as he rocks me, shushing me as the tears start. In hindsight, I’ll find it interesting how much quicker I broke this time, not waiting until we were alone like my bravado is falling apart as the situation escalates. For now, I just wrap an arm around his neck and sob.

“Why is this happening?” I say through hiccups.

“I don’t know, but you’re safe with me. I’ll keep you safe, Luna.” Those

words alone bring my sobs to quiet sniffs, tears slowing, my heartbeat calming. I know that there's nothing this man won't do to protect me, to keep me safe.

What feels like hours later, minutes dragging through my anxiety, blue and red lights flash through my front window, bouncing off the pale faces of my confused and concerned employees who whisper to each other. I attempted to tell them to go, but Tony insisted they should stay until Zander comes and gets a quick statement. They didn't seem eager to leave, regardless, revealing the mettle and loyalty of my employees.

Moments later, a door slams and Zee is jogging in, his uniform on, face dripping with concern and fear. His eyes zero in on where Tony is still holding me, rocking me and rubbing my back, and he mutters a curse under his breath. I'm quickly passed off to my brother who holds me just the same, and a fresh wave of comfort flowing through me. A different comfort, the comfort that only my big brother who has looked out for me since I was born can give me.

"What happened?" he says, not to me but directing the words over my head to Tony. My head stays planted on Zee's chest, tears still leaking, exhaustion flooding now that the first round of emotions is draining. I'm so *tired*. Not just from a long night but the deeper exhaustion of living weeks of non-stop stress and chaos, weeks of enormous changes in my life, even if some are the good kind. I feel like I could sleep for a month.

"Got a message from him. It's a photo," Tony says, reminding me of what I still haven't seen yet. I'm not sure I ever want to see it.

"What is it?"

"It's her. In my backyard. With me." My stomach falls through my body to the ground, and when I peek at the floor over Zee's arms, I'm shocked that I don't see the bloody splatter on the ground, no longer even in my body. *Oh, my God. In his yard... "It's... personal."*

Oh, my fucking God. No. No, no, no.

Zee's body stiffens like he's been turned to stone by the words. "Personal.. how?" Tony doesn't respond, but it's clear he has transmitted a message through his eyes and body language. "Jesus fuck. Your backyard? It's fully lined with trees." But I know it's even more alarming. The privacy of the woods on all three sides would be one thing, but he also lined the patio we were sitting in that night with a mixture of shrubbery, trees, and fencing to create an extremely private space. There's no feasible way to... "When

was it taken?” he asks.

“Wednesday,” I say, my voice crackly and soft like I haven’t spoken in years, the word sounding foreign to my ears. I know what the photo shows, just from Tony’s response and the few descriptors. Wednesday was the day we became ‘us’ in all ways and Wednesday night we were outside, eating around the fire pit in the backyard, when I climbed into his lap and rode his cock. And this fucking creep was *watching us*.

“There’s text, too,” Zander says, sounding angry, his voice rumbling against my ear that’s pressed to his chest. I should be angry. But I’m so drained, all I have left in me is embarrassment and shame.

“I saw,” Tony says, sounding like his teeth are grinding as the words escape.

“I gotta call in backup, take some statement. Take her.” I’m passed back to Tony, where once again I cuddle next to him, trying to leech some of the warmth from his body into my own, which feels like ice.

The rest of the night moves in a blur and I experience it a blur, some kind of transitive state my body created to protect itself. I’m passed around from Tony to Zee, to Zee’s partner Brody and back again. It’s like I’m a fragile child, unable to be set down, or else they might lose me completely. Any other day, I’d argue it, but right now... I just don’t have it in me. Not when I feel the most fear and violation I have during this entire nightmare.

What feels like hours later, I’m strapped into Tony’s truck and driven to his house. I drift off in the car, too tired to do much more than lean my head against the glass and stare out the window. When we get there, he unbuckles me from the seat, lifting me and carrying me into his room before placing me on his bed. It’s not until he takes my clothes off that I speak for the first time. “I’ve got it,” I say, crossing my arms over my waist to lift my shirt before unbuttoning my jeans and wiggling them down.

A shirtless Tony is squatting on the floor in front of me at the edge of the bed, holding my hands and looking into my eyes as I sit in my bra and undies, not even taking in that fact. Focused completely on me. “Everything is going to be okay, Luna.”

“I know.” The words come out impulsively, like instinct is telling me these are the words I’m supposed to say.

“No, don’t. Don’t say that. I know you don’t know, and that’s okay. But I do. I can trust it for both of us. I’m gonna find this asshole and we’re going to throw the book at him. He cannot hurt you, Luna.”

With that, I'm pulled from my trance and into reality, back into my true self, who doesn't let anyone make me feel scared in my own life. In my business or home. And sure as fuck not when I'm wrapped in Tony's word and reassurance. I will not let this psycho have this part of me.

"I know, Tony. I know you'll keep me safe. Know that you'll never let anything happen to me." The words come from deep in my soul, the part deep in me that has always known that one thing as pure fact. They come out strong and loud, a contrast to how I've sounded since I got that text.

His eyes lock on mine, taking me in, looking at me in the way he always can before he nods, standing and kissing me on top of my head.

"Get ready for bed, darlin'," he says, before walking to his closet to do the same.

It's then I know everything is going to be okay, one way or another.

NINETEEN

-luna-

I'M RETHINKING that as we pull up to my parents' small yellow home with the old, wooden door, the nerves that I've been battling all morning and afternoon kick into high gear.

We're here.

I want to say that I'm not ready, not yet. But truth be told, I'm not sure I'll *ever* be ready. Maybe ripping the bandaid off really is the way to go. Either way, my true anxiety comes in the form of not knowing what Tony will do. It's been one thing after another since we started. The stalker drama, my seemingly constant hysterics, the fact I'm living in his home for the foreseeable future... I can't help but wonder if one more thing won't tip the scale to 'this chick is way too much work' territory. Sure, most of it is completely out of my control, but everyone has their threshold for what they can handle.

"Please don't hold anything that happens tonight against me," I say, staring at the front door like a clown serial killer might pop its head out and wave at me.

He turns the key in the ignition, muting the low rumble of his truck so we're sitting in silence. "What?"

"Tonight. Don't hold it against me. I know I've got a lot going on with the stalker shit and you know, basically freeloading at your house, but that's

all temporary. My family is... well. My family.”

“You’re not freeloading.”

“Yes, I am. You won’t let me pay you anything. I’ve taken over your house.” It’s true. I spent the better part of the morning cleaning house, collecting the stuff that I’ve scattered around his home, and attempting to make a small, neat corner.

I failed.

In the end, he forced me to move my clothes into his huge walk-in closet, making me a side and creating a much less temporary feeling stay. I’d be lying if I said I don’t I love the look of my things lined up next to his throughout his home. His home that with my help, is slowly but surely coming together.

Over the past two weeks, we’ve finished a bit more. The first floor floors are finished, thanks to my investing in the coolest tool that you slam a hammer on to and it staples the wood plank down. After I saw Tony doing it by hand, I Googled and ordered the tool as a ‘thank you for letting me stay at your house’ gift. We’ve also done a good portion of the kitchen, with the cabinets being installed today. The still-to-be-done list is a mile long, but it’s finally looking like a true home, rather than a work in progress.

“You pay me in sex. And free labor,” he says, looking over to me with a cocky smile, dimple out for all to see.

“Ew, Tony. Don’t be a perve. You know what I mean. I’m just saying... I know I have a lot working against me right now. I don’t want any of it to scare you off. Okay?” He stares at me, smile softening and eyes warming.

“Darlin’, do you think a little chaos is going to scare me off?”

“And my family. Meeting you as my... whatever,” I say awkwardly, and his soft smile morphs into a grin.

“Luna, everything that’s happened to you has been the best thing to happen to us.” My head jumps back a notch in surprise.

“I’m sorry, what?” He looks at me smiling before unbuckling my seat and pulling me over the center console until I’m sitting straddling his lap, back to the steering wheel. His hand goes up to my hair, tucking a loose strand behind my ear.

“Do you think we’d be here, you and me, if this all hadn’t happened? Hadn’t pushed us together, forced you to stop ignoring me, forced me to open my fuckin’ eyes and see *why* you’ve been ignoring me all these years?” I think on that and shake my head, my eyes locked on his. Because he’s right -

it wouldn't have happened, probably ever. I would have kept ignoring him, keeping my head in the sand.

Tony would have eventually found some sweet, normal girl without major issues and a crazy family. A girl he could build a family with and protect until they were old and grey. And I'd... what? Have the bar? The thought churns sour in my gut. "That's why. That's why I'm fine and, fuck, even in a twisted way, kind of glad you have a creepy-ass stalker that forced you to move in with me. I get to wake up every morning to your sweet body tucked into mine, go to bed every night after fuckin' you, listening to you moan my name." He stops, looking in my eye and making sure I get his point. "Never apologize for what brought us together, darlin', got it?"

"Okay, Tony," I say, and the words come out soft and so unlike me. "But just... you know. Don't hold them against me."

"I love your family, Luna." His fingers twirl the strand that fell loose again. "Always have. They're crazy, but they're genuine and kind." I sigh, because what am I supposed to say to that. My eyes drift to the front door that's now open, my brother standing in the entryway, a gleeful smile on his face. He knows the hell I'm in for. "Come on, darlin'. Let's go get this over with." His lips touch my forehead, soft and sweet, before he opens his door, lifting me off his lap and placing me on the ground, not letting go until my feet are stable. Then he jumps out, grabs my hand, and guides me inside.

When we walk into the house, I half expect to see my dad polishing a rifle that, up until now, he has never owned. Or maybe sitting in a backward chair facing the front door slapping a baseball bat in his palm. It wouldn't be too off-brand for him, and since my whole family knows that I've been head over heels for Tony since I was a little girl, he's probably going to pull out all the stops.

What unravels is not what I expected, by a long shot.

"Tony, son, good to see you," my dad says, sticking out a meaty hand and pulling him in for one of those man hug-back slap things guys do. Michael Davidson is not a small man by any stretch of the imagination. He's tall and stocky, played quarterback for the Springbrook Hills football team in '78, and still talks about his glory days. My brothers inherited this feature and I never in my life felt scared of anything while living under his roof. That's my dad for you.

He still has a thick head of dark hair that's greying at the temples, creases in his face not from stress, but laughter and working long hours in the sun his

whole life. Working in construction since he was 18, I know that the hand Tony feels in his is worn and callused, the same hands that would catch in my hair when I was a little girl, afraid of the dark and crying for my daddy.

But right now, I'm not his little girl. I'm a woman sitting in the doorway, frozen stiff because my dad is *patting my boyfriend on the back* with a huge freaking smile on his face.

Once, when I was in college, I brought a boyfriend home.

I wasn't in love or even anything close, but I knew my dad would insist on meeting him. My dad subjected him to a two-hour third degree and subtly and not-so-subtly threatened to cause him bodily harm more times than I could count.

He broke up with me a week later.

"Luna, darling girl, get out of the doorway," my mom says, wiping her hands on her pink frilly apron. Her white-blond hair that mirrors mine with a bit of grey to it is pulled into a high ponytail that cheerleaders a third her age would envy, a white dash of flour across her cheekbone.

Still, I stand there, door wide open, wondering what alternate universe I entered.

"God, Mike, you're scaring poor Moonbeam," my Aunt Maggie says, coming over to me and pulling me into a hug while kicking the door shut. Aunt Maggie is my mom's older sister and even more of a hippy than Mom, smelling of incense and patchouli and jingling with the sound of literally hundreds of bracelets on her arms.

"Luna, you okay?" my dad says, glaring my way where I am, you guessed it, still standing frozen.

"What on earth is happening?" I say, and even I can hear the slightly shrill nature of my shriek. Looking around, I see Zee on the couch, a beer in hand, chip halfway to his mouth, smiling and trying his hardest not to burst out laughing.

"Luna, my goodness, what is going on with you?" my mom says, her hand on her hips, a mix of motherly outrage and concern crossing her face.

"Dad, did you just *hug* Tony?"

"Men don't hug, Lulu, I've told you that a million times."

"Oh, Goddess, Mike, get over it, men hug. Hugging another man doesn't make you less of one," Aunt Maggie pipes in, grabbing my bag to set aside as if she is the hostess and not my mom.

"These are for you, Mrs. Davidson," Tony says, stepping further into the

house, navigating the cramped living room to hand my mom the bouquet of peonies he picked up for her.

“Oh my, Anthony Garrison, you are just too sweet!” Pink rushes to her cheeks, small hands pressing to them in acknowledgment as she turns to find a vase. Tony fist bumps my brother in greeting before settling next to him.

I am still standing just inside the house.

What just happened?

“Dad, you know Tony and I are, uh, well, you know,” I start, making sure I didn’t imagine telling my father that we’re together. That happened, right? He called me and yelled at me and we talked about how we’re... together now. Right?

“Yeah, honey, I remember. We talked about it yesterday. I’m old, but I’m not senile.” I blink at him. I look at Tony, who is smiling. I blink at him. I look at Zee, who is now experiencing full-body shakes to hide laughter. I blink.

“What fucking Twilight Zone did I just step into?” I ask, finally breaking out of my trance and leaning into my beloved aunt for a hug.

“Luna Sage!” My mother gasps from the kitchen as if I’m not a grown woman. Zee loses it, officially breaking into a huge body-wracking laugh while Tony chuckles.

“Go get your man a beer, Lune,” my dad says, turning back to the TV where the game is on, bringing his beer to his lips. I look at Tony, who is blinding me with the biggest, toothiest grin, clearly finding my utter confusion hilarious. This puts me back in my trance. This trance is less about being utterly confused and more about loving seeing Tony smiling at me like I’m adorable.

“Beer, babe,” he says softly, his smile still in place.

“Okay, Tony,” I say, my voice a near whisper.

“Me too, sis,” Zander says, lifting his nearly empty bottle but eyes still to the game.

“What do you think I am, a bartender?”

“Uh, yeah, Lulu, that’s *exactly* what you are.” This is an ongoing joke in our family since I refuse to serve anyone outside of my bar.

“Then come to Full Moon and pay me. Otherwise, get yourself a beer,” I say, walking away to get my man a beer.

Dinner finished and the men back in their spots on the sofa, I'm standing next to Mom while she washes dishes with a dishrag in my hand to dry. Aunt Maggie stands next to me, ready to put the dishes away.

This is how it goes every Monday. My one consisted day off. Mom makes dinner, we all eat, then Mom and I clean up. It might seem dated and misogynistic, but the truth is if Mad even attempts to help my mom clean up, she freaks out and chases him out of her kitchen, slapping him with a dishtowel.

"So? Tony?" my mom says, just quiet enough to not be heard from the other room before she bumps her hip into mine.

"What about him?" I say, attempting to change the subject. But this is my mom, so I know there's no chance in hell I'll get away with it.

"What about him?" she says, turning to me with an eyebrow raised. I smile a knowing smile but keep quiet. "Luna Sage, you've been in love with that boy since you were seven and he told your brother to leave you and your Barbies alone." My entire body stills, that memory crystal clear in my mind, but a memory I've kept quiet since it happened.

"What?"

"Oh, Luna, darling girl," she says in that exasperated voice a mom has. "A mother knows, Luna. And one day you'll know and you'll count down the days until your little girl gets what she dreams of. You'll cringe when she settles for less and pray that she realizes it. And when she gets it, your heart will feel so full, Luna girl, that it'll be like it's happening to you." The breath in my lungs has seized, my mom's words flowing through me like warm honey, soothing and sweetening every part of my body.

"Mom, I-"

"You and Tony Garrison were written in the stars, Luna. Maggie and I talked about it years ago, watched you two dance around each other and try to avoid fate. But those Fates, they don't let their plan get off track, do they, Mags?"

"No, they sure do not, June."

"Even Ace read it more than a few times when we were doing charts." Of course, she was reading star charts with my little brother. Star charts about my love life and my future. Lovely. "He's coming home next month, you know. He's going to be thrilled! Mags, maybe we should set up a time during the full moon and the three of us can try to read Tony and Luna's charts together. See when I'm getting me some grandbabies!"

“Jesus Christ, Mom!” I say in a quiet shout, trying to keep my voice down so we don’t attract the attention of the men in the next room. My face is on fire at this point.

“Oh, hush Luna. Nothing extreme, I just want to know! Before this talk is over though, I want you to know that I see that look in your eyes, the one that you get when you’re battling somethin’ on the inside. Know that I know what you’re battling and you need to knock that out of your mind, move on and enjoy the beauty that this bit of ugly brought into your life.” My eyes are on her soft ones, the color of grass in summer, my hand holding the rag to a dish in the air, still shocked. “You don’t have to say anything. We’ll just leave it at that.”

“To hell with that! I wanna know what he’s like between the sheets!” Aunt Maggie says. Unfortunately, unlike Mom, she has no concept of keeping her voice down so it can be heard throughout the entire house. Glancing over, I see three male heads swerved in our direction. Two are displaying utter disgust and one holds humor and shining eyes.

“Goodness, Mags! Some couth!” my mother chides at her older sister.

“Pish posh, we’re all family here and I wanna know if my Moonbeam is getting it good or not!” she shouts back and I can feel the burn on my face, so hot it’s near painful.

“Aunt Maggie! Hush!” But when I look back at Tony, his eyes are on me, a giant, gleaming smile on his beautiful face. He’s softly shaking his head in the way men do when they think their woman is crazy, but they like it anyway.

And I think that may, just maybe, I’ve finally got what I dreamed of as a little girl, just like my mom said.

TWENTY

-luna-

THE FRONT DOOR opens on Wednesday, another day the bar is closed on the ‘required’ limited open hours, and comforting sounds drift to my ears. The sound of boots walking the dark wood floor followed by the jingle of Tony undoing his gun belt and securing his weapon, something he does before he even says hi to me each and every time he comes home, has become a lullaby. A sound that tells me he’s home, a comfort that I didn’t know I needed in my day.

“Hey babe,” I say, shouting from the kitchen where I’m stirring a big pot of red sauce. Today has been a day of tasks meant to pay back just a little of what Tony has given me. Part of that included heading over to his childhood home, where I had coffee with his mom and got her super-secret recipe for red sauce and meatballs. I’ve spent an ungodly amount of time making dinner, but from the way it smells, I know it will be worth it.

But the bigger surprise was that Jeanette *gave me the recipe*. That woman guards her secret recipes with her life. My mother, who has known Jeanette Garrison when she was Jeanette Carluccio and they were in high school together, hasn’t been able to wrestle the recipe from her.

When I don’t hear him walk right into the kitchen, as usual, I wander out to the living room, wondering if he saw my other handiwork from today. This morning after Tony left I wandered around his house, finding a big box in

one of the spare rooms marked “Living Room.” Inside was a stack of empty frames and a few bits and bobs of memorabilia and art. Since we finished painting the living room and got in the new baseboards last weekend, I figured it was time to decorate.

Noting the empty frame sizes in my phone and eyeballing the layout to see if he needed any other sizes to fill out the wall, I ran around town to get what I needed. First, I stopped at Jeanette and Frank’s to get some photos from their house. Mrs. Garrison inevitably invited me to stay for coffee and we gabbed about her life, my life, the station, and, of course, her son before she insisted on giving me her sauce recipe.

Next, I hit the drugstore where I could get two-hour photo prints done before going to the grocery store and buying everything I needed for dinner. Circling back to pick up the photos and finally back to the house, I got dinner started before getting to work.

Now the walls of Tony’s living room are covered in photos, art that means something to him, and other bits of his past, like his old football jersey his mom had framed years ago. In a huge, antique wood frame is a shot of him as the best man in Mitch’s wedding alongside Zee, all three holding beers and heads back, laughing. Another matching frame displays Tony, his parents, and his brother at his parents’ anniversary party two years ago. A smaller white frame has a photo of his graduating class at the academy while another shows Zee and Tony as kids, maybe 12 or 13, with a little me and Ace, 7 or 8 all in bathing suits and eating popsicles at my parents’ house.

One last frame is a photo I had saved on my phone that Hannah sent me recently. It’s at Full Moon, a side view of me leaning on my elbows over the bar, smiling at Tony, who is sitting on his barstool, also leaning in with a smile and talking to me. Neither of us is looking at the camera, both locked on each other and probably joking about something silly. I honestly can’t tell you what we were talking about, but God, we look happy and real and... perfect. We look like two people in love.

I stared at the one on and off for near on an hour before I hung it, unsure if it was uncool or crossing some boundary I should stay behind. After all, I’m staying in his home as a guest because I’m in danger. Even though I know it’s more than that, the insecure part of me can’t quite get over that. But I eventually said screw it and hung it up.

Now that the room is finished, all the furniture back in its place, the walls painted and floors finished, photos showing a real person lives here, it’s my

favorite room in the house.

When I round the corner to the living room, though, I don't see him looking at the frames like I thought he'd be. In fact, I don't see him at all.

"Tony?" I call, confusion and a dash of unnecessary fear in my voice. The fear melts quickly when I see a tan hand pop up from behind the back of the couch and then I can spot the heels of his boots hanging off one arm. "Babe, you okay?" I ask, walking closer and seeing him laying across the sofa on his back, a forearm covering his eyes. He grunts.

"Babe, seriously, are you okay?" Worry coats my words now. My superman never acts like this. Maybe he's sick? Again, he grunts. Walking over to where his head lays, I kneel next to him, gently moving his arm to his chest. His eyes hit me and I'm struck by how tired he looks. Absolutely exhausted, overworked, and drained. Guilt sinks my stomach. "Tony, honey, what's going on?"

A heavy sigh comes from deep in his chest, the warm air hitting me. "Nothin', darlin'. Just beat. This week's kicking my ass and this fuckwad is still in the air," he says, cluing me in. And it makes sense - for the past week, we've both been running on empty. Between the stress of my stalker, starting a new-ish relationship, and sacrificing sleep to spend time together, sleep has been on the back burner. He wakes up early as fuck and I try to get up to spend time with him and on nights the bar is open, he comes after his shift, sitting at my bar and chatting with me until close. Then we go home, fuck, and do it all over again.

"God, honey, I'm so sorry. This is all my fault. All this extra shit I'm piling on you - you don't need it. You're exhausted, completely run dry." My hand brushes his forehead, running over his short hair. "And it's all my fault. Seriously, tomorrow you need to stay home. I can call Zee and he'll hang at the bar, you don't have to be there every freaking night, I'll be fine I-" My tirade is cut off by Tony crunching forward and wrapping an arm around my neck, pulling me down onto him and his lips. The kiss is hard and quick, but not without feeling and warmth.

"Luna, baby, hush," he says, quiet but firm, his lips still on mine and brushing with each word. "None of this is on you."

"But it is. If I had just told someone, this could have been solved a long while ago and you wouldn't be so exhausted you collapse as soon as you walk in the door."

"Not gonna argue that you should have told someone months ago when

this first started. But I won't for a single fuckin' second regret all the chaos that brought you to me finally, meaning I come home and my house smells like sauce and you're here to greet me at the door."

"Oh," I say. "Well, that makes sense. But this is all taking its toll on you, honey."

"Yeah, the fact that my woman has a stalker that I cannot find is taking its toll on me. But also, this happens. Some weeks I do more overtime, have a tough case, see some shit that I wish I could forget. That's just part of it, and you'll need to learn to roll with that, this stays good." My belly flutters, warmth suffusing my system at the thought of *this staying good* with Tony freaking Garrison. "And another thing, don't want you even thinking about telling me not to come sit with you while you work, babe. Not now, not for a long time. We missed out on way too much fucking time and until that loss feels sated, I'm gonna spend what time I can with you. You make that sacrifice of waking up early to eat breakfast and shower with me, I come and sit with you, watch you charm drunks out of money, and feel comforted knowing I'm there if something happens. You hear me?" He says this and his tired eyes are severe, serious. No room for me to argue.

"Yes, Tony." I clear my throat. "So are things, uh, you know. Staying good with us? So far I mean?" I ask, nervous and feeling like I've been catapulted back to high school. Tony smiles his shining smile, the one he seems to only pull out for me.

"Did I just walk into our house smelling dinner and seeing you in tiny pink shorts?" I look down at my legs seeing I chose pink shorts this morning, late spring finally warming our tiny town.

"Uh, yes."

"Well, then we'll stay good. Though gotta tell you, babe, you're a great cook, but no one can beat my mom's sauce. You've had it, so you know I don't mean anything by it," he says, a smile lingering on his lips.

"It's your mom's recipe," I say, standing and reaching a hand to him for him to take to help him up. His brows raise in surprise.

"Ma gave you her recipe? For sauce?"

"And meatballs," I say, equally shocked and proud.

"How d'you manage that?"

"Secret of the trade," I say, giving him a wink as he stands. The truth is, she basically threw the old family recipe at me when I stopped there to ask her for some photos. Mrs. Garrison did always love me, what can I say.

Wrapping a hand around my wrist, he pulls me into him, then wraps his other arm around my waist tight.

Home.

It feels like home.

His hand trails up my neck to tuck a piece of loose hair back before he puts his nose against my own. “You’re made of magic, you know that Luna?” His warm breath brushes my lips before he presses his to them gently, a simple hello.

Not much later, our plates empty and stained with red, I put my fork down and look at him as he wipes a piece of fresh bread I grabbed at the store across his plate. “Hey, babe?”

His head pops up, eyes meeting my own as he pops the saucy bread into his mouth. “Yeah?” My eyes roll at his lovely manners, but a part of me loves this. I love knowing we’ve known each other for so long, the history making us comfortable to be ourselves. No pretense, no need to impress.

“I want you to stay home tomorrow night. While I’m at the bar.” The words fly out, something I’ve been sitting on since he came home and collapsed.

“Absolutely not.”

“Tony, I-“

“Luna, I’m not fuckin’ around. Until this shit is over, you’re not at the bar without me if I’m off duty.”

“You’re exhausted, Tony. You’re so stressed and overworked, and that’s my fault. That’s on me. If all of this shit wasn’t happening...” My voice fades, leaving the rest.

“I love your concern, and we already had the conversation about all this chaos bringing us to a good place. A great fuckin’ place. But babe, tellin’ you now, you want to stay in this place where we are, where it’s good and feels great, you gotta accept this. It’s my job, this is part of the life. There will be days and weeks where I am bone fuckin’ tired. Where I am stressed to no end. There will be times I’m overprotective because I saw or heard something that makes me want to keep you a little safer. If you want this, you want us, you gotta accept that.” That made sense, of course. I can handle that. Expected as much, even. “Your case has gone stale. No leads, nothin’ but dead ends. Knowing this guy is out for my girl, that’s gonna eat at me more

than usual.”

“It’s me you’re talking to, not some badge bunny. I’ve seen it with Zee, and I grew up with Zoe and her dad. I’m not dumb. I know what I’m getting into with you. But you gotta know what you’re getting into with me.”

His eyes soften around the edges. “What am I getting into with you, darlin’?” His words send a shiver down my spine.

“I am who I am. I am my mother’s daughter. I take care of the people in my life, the people I lo- I care for.” I pause, panicking over my near slip but carry on. This is important. He needs to know this. “Not the same way as you do, but in my own way. And, babe, that means that if I see you struggling, I’m gonna do what I can to make it better, make it easier on you. Whether you like it or not.”

“Babe-” I cut him off before he can say more.

“And you know what? You need someone like that. Someone who is gonna put you first and worry about you. You’ve spent forever taking care of yourself, not because you didn’t have people chomping at the bit to do it for you, but because you gotta go play macho protector man and do it yourself. Well, if *this is gonna stay good*,” I say this in a low man’s voice, mocking him. “Then you have to let me do that. Let me help you. You can’t do it all yourself. I’ll call up Zee, tell him he’s on babysitting duty. Or I’ll call in Mitch or any of the other men at the station.” By now I’m getting angry, my chest rising and falling heavily with the effort of getting my point through his thick, thick skull.

“But what *isn’t* going to happen, Anthony Thomas, is you running yourself ragged because you have some twisted protector complex that makes you feel you need to do all the things. If this is gonna work,” my hand lifts, and I point in his direction, jabbing my finger to the beat of my next words. “Then you have to let me help.”

He stares at me for moments, moments that drag on while I wonder if I went too far. And then his head tips back, a full, deep laugh exploding from his chest. “Tony! This is serious!” I say, my face going warm with a mix of embarrassment and frustration. He stands, pushing his chair back with a screech, and kicks my chair out the same way. Then his arm is around my waist, lifting me into his arms, pressing me against his chest, still moving with his laughter.

“Okay, darlin’.”

“What?”

“Said okay. I’ll stay home tomorrow night. Go to bed early. But you gotta promise me that if anything happens, you call me. My phone will be on loud. I want regular texts with updates or I’m gonna be pissed, Lune. And when you get home, I want you to crawl into our bed naked and wake me up.” My belly contracts at the thought.

“Wake you up how?” I say, my voice a whisper.

“Don’t know, baby. But I bet you can be creative.”

TWENTY-ONE

-luna-

THE NEXT NIGHT, the bar is busy. Busier than it's been in the past few weeks since this chaos has started, which is saying *a lot*. The whole town knowing about my stalker and the vandalism of my bar has brought nearly everyone over the age of 21 through my door to show their support. It's for things like this, it's hard not to adore a small town like Springbrook Hills.

Zander is sitting at the bar with Mitch on one side and my regular, Jim, on the other. All three are shooting the shit while my brother and Mitch occasionally glance up to track my location. At this point, it's become a welcome feeling, having someone's eyes on me. Not in a creepy way, but a watchful, safe way.

Every hour on the hour I'm sending a text to Tony. After delivering my recent order to a couple on the other side of the bar from my bodyguards, I pull my phone out of my apron when I feel it vibrate.

Tony: Heading to bed. Night darlin. Keep texting me so I know you're all good and call if you need me. Looking forward to you getting creative tonight.

A blush creeps over my face and I try to hide a smile, but I know I'm unsuccessful when I look around and see Mitch laughing at me, his phone up and snapping a shot. I flip him off. He takes another photo before typing away.

Tony: It's not nice to flip off my partner, Luna.

I glare at Mitch, rolling my eyes.

Luna: It's not nice to take pictures of people without their permission.

Tony: Yeah, well, you look fucking cute, so let me have this. Since you won't let me be there.

Luna: You're tired. Go to bed, Tony. Thanks for keeping me safe.

I edit that message multiple times while I'm typing it, each time starting to tell him something I haven't yet confessed about my feelings for him. The message feels like it's... empty.

Tony: Got it, babe. Stay alert, then come home to me.

That sends a million butterflies fluttering in my belly, a swarm of them attacking my insides. *Come home to me.* Like it's our home, and this is what we do every day. God, I want that. I want this to be the norm, minus the creepy stalker. I'll even take the bodyguards if I have to.

"Luna, the Coors is almost empty, gonna need someone to switch the keg," Kate shouts from a few feet over. Kate is my most trusted employee, always on top of everything and more aware than even myself. Right before all of this chaos hit, I was contemplating giving her more responsibilities and possibly letting her close occasionally.

Maybe once things cool down that plan should go into hyper-drive, I can't help but wonder, thinking about spending nights off with Tony, cuddled up in his bed or watching TV or working the house together... Shaking my head to get my mind back on track, I nod.

"On it, you got the bar for a minute?" I ask.

"Yup, you won't be long," she says. Stuffing my phone back in my apron, I look around to make sure there's no one waiting for a drink or a bill, then look to Mitch and Zander, who are in a heated conversation, laughing with Tanner who must have shown up recently. Not wanting to bug them and knowing I'm safe in my bubble, I duck under the bar to head to the back stock room.

Before I make it to the door, I'm slammed in my side, making me stumble into a nearby wall. "What the--"

"There you are, you bitch," a man's voice says, deep and angry. His hand goes tight around my wrist, bruisingly tight, and it's then I realize I should have flagged down my brother and Mitch.

TWENTY-TWO

-luna-

“SIR, you need to let go of me. Now,” I say, firm and loud enough to hopefully be heard over the loud music. The man is a bit taller than me, but not as tall as Tony or my brother. He’s large in an intimidating way, even more intimidating, with his hand shackled around my wrist so tight that it’s now throbbing.

His dark hair is thinning, situated into a hairstyle that he’s using to hide that, but it’s not working. Not one bit. His face shows lines of stress and signs that he probably smokes and drinks just a little too much. Owning a bar, that’s a simple thing to spot.

I also recognize him nearly immediately.

He looks older, a bit more worn down than his mugshot, but it’s undeniable that he’s the man from one of the many suspect pages in the folders Mitch handed me.

Six months ago, he came into the bar. I remember his personality was both too friendly and like a total asshole. I kept my eye on him because the way he was leering at every woman who passed by made my creep alarm go off. It was right too - not an hour later when I served him and some girl he’s conned into having a drink with him, he not-so-surreptitiously tried to slip something in her glass.

I called the station and Tony and Mitch came out, cuffing the man before

he even realized I caught him. I had to testify against him soon after and I'm pretty sure he got off with not much more than a fine and community service.

And now here he was, pinning me to a wall in my bar.

"You fucking bitch, ruined my fucking life!" he shouts, his face close to mine and spit flying into my mouth. He smells like stale cigarettes and fast food, the smell suffocating and fear-inducing. I force back a gag back, still too stunned to speak. "Because of you, my wife left me. Got fired once your shit hit the papers, can't see my kids, and now when you search me it looks like I'm some kind of fucking predator!" *Uh, because you are, you creep*, I think, but thankfully my self-preservation knows better than to utter aloud.

"Sir, I'm sure that--"

"Fucking acting like I couldn't get pussy without help. I can, okay? Can get any fucking woman I want. I just didn't feel like dealing with the bullshit. Wanted to get off, but *no*, you had to have a big fucking mouth. Can't get any from anyone now, now they look at me like I'm some kind of sick fuck." His hand goes up to touch my hair in a way that sends sick chills down my spine and makes me gag, this one I'm not able to hold back.

"But you'll do. You'll fucking do." His voice is low but the words and his intentions can be heard loud and clear over the loud music.

"ZANDER! MITCH!" I scream, finally waking up to the reality of what's happening. But the music is too loud and no one even turns at the noise coming from the dark corner near the backdoor.

"No way, bitch, you're coming with me. We're gettin' in my car and I'm taking you somewhere real special, gonna take my time with you," he says, voice excited and terrifying.

"Oh my God, no, please, look I'm sure we can--" He's tugging my hand now, his iron grip crushing me and I'm forced to fall or follow. He's headed towards the back door that leads to an empty lot behind the bar. Thoughts are running through my mind. Thoughts of how to escape this, how to save myself. What might happen. But most of all, how Tony will hate me forever for forcing him to stay home.

But just before the man hits the door, he falls to the ground, releasing my arm. I jerk back, running further to the crowd when I see the man collapsed on the ground, holding his knee in pain, shrieking in horror. It's then I see Jim is standing beside him, hands fisted and back heaving. And then he kicks the man with an unexpected force.

"ZANDER! MITCH! HELP!" I yell at the top of my lungs, waving my

arms, the wrist he was holding throbbing and aching, each movement a jarring shot of pain. “SOMEONE GET THEM! I NEED HELP!” I’m shouting as loud as I can, at last grabbing the attention of customers nearby who glance at me and then back at the men behind me before voices buzz. Finally, *finally*, I see my brother charging through the crowd, followed closely by Mitch, and warm relief slides through me, slow and sweet and trapping all of my terror and fear.

“Luna! What the-” my brother says when he reaches me, looking me up and down and eyes going to stone as it clicks.

“You need to stop him! He saved me!” I say, pointing to where Jim is still going at the man who seems to be unconscious now. “Stop him before he kills that man!” The music has been turned off now, the ruckus having met the DJ and lights are being flipped. Hopefully, that means Kate or one of the other bartenders has clued in as well. I can only pray that they also called 911. Although Zander and Mitch are pulling Jim from my attacker, I’m pretty sure that Zee is doing it so he can take Jim’s place. And if that happens, they’ll need more than just Mitch to pull him off.

“Zander!” I scream at him as he finally gets Jim off the man and tosses him at Mitch, who restrains him. I watch him take a step towards the man, intent clear in his eyes. “Zander, no! Zander!” He grabs the man by his collar, the man’s face bruised and bloodied, the sight sure to give me nightmares for a while. “Zander, please, no! I need you. I need my brother!” I shout, tears now welling, unable to hold in this fear and chaos any longer.

That seems to break through. He looks at me, anger mixed with sadness and regret in his eyes, and throws the man to his stomach where he cuffs him, leaving him where he lays softly moaning before coming to me.

“Baby sister,” he says, pulling me close, into his chest, where I break down in my big brother’s chest.

Later, most of the customers have left except for the few who could provide eyewitness statements about what happened tonight. I’m sitting in my big swirling desk chair in my office, wrapped in a blanket Kate brought down from upstairs. Occasionally, a tremor runs through me, but it could also be because of the ice in a towel that Mitch has forced on my wrist. Kate and Jim are sitting in the office with me, keeping a wary eye on me, probably anticipating my next mental breakdown.

We have no true evidence yet - the man was unconscious by the time EMTs took him, handcuffed to the hospital to be treated before being booked. But we're all pretty confident that he, who they reminded me is named Kevin, is my stalker. That he's the man who vandalized my building and sent me threats.

This is all over.

That's all that's running through my mind right now.

Moments later I hear a scuffle out of sight and then a shouted, "Where is she!?"

Tony is here.

"Tony, man, you gotta calm down. She's shaken-"

"Fuck off, Mitch, where is my fuckin' woman?" His voice is full of emotion, and I stand, mindlessly seeking him, needing to get to him, needing *him*. Any facade of having gotten it together melts off, the rawness of what happened back. I know there's only one person who can soothe it.

"Calm the fuck down man, my sister-"

"I don't want to fuckin' talk to you right now. You had one fucking job tonight, and this is what happened. Where. The. Fuck. Is. She?" His voice is steel and fire and now that he's in my line of sight, I see his body is towering over my brother's. His frame is rigid, ready to hurt someone at any second. Everyone in their perimeter is backing off, waiting for the explosion.

But I'm not scared of him.

"Tony?" I say, my voice soft and broken, so soft I'm not sure if he will hear me. But instantly his body turns to me, eyes assessing me still wrapped in that blanket. Two long strides bring him right in front of me before I reach my arms up and out, needing to hold him, to be held by him.

Instead of hugging me and pulling me close, he dips his arms going around my back and under my knees, lifting me to cradle me tight against his chest. My head goes into his neck and his into mine and we stay like that. Breathing deep, his scent fills my soul and finally, finally, the tremors stop.

I'm safe.

Tony is here.

I thought I'd cry, let it all out again like I did to Zander, but I feel protected and comforted both physically and mentally, like Tony is here to hold me up and because of that, I don't need to fall apart.

Eventually, my mind returns so I can hear people walking around us, talking, radios beeping, and transmitting information back and forth. But we

stand there amidst the chaos, together and safe.

Until someone behind me clears their throat.

“Uh, Luna?” My head reluctantly moves from where I’m safe and warm to look behind me where I see Jim standing, holding my phone out. He looks angry still, charged up on adrenaline.

“Who the fuck are you?” Tony asks, anger flaring in his voice still, ready to start a wildfire. His anger and fear for me have turned every word, every action into a primal thing, running off straight emotion and the pure need to protect.

“Tony, that’s Jim,” I say, soft and sweet, putting my hand to his chest to calm him. His eyes meet mine. “He, well, he saved me.” Tony looks at me for a moment, then back at Jim. I expect him to thank the man. Or... something.

“What do you want?” Or not.

“Here’s your phone, Luna,” he says, handing me my cell in the sparkly black case. “I added my number too. Hope you don’t mind. Just in case you want to talk about... what happened.” His eyes flicker from me to Tony before he goes back to mine. “I’m gonna head out. They have my statement and my number if they need me. I’ll see you tomorrow?”

Before I can answer, Tony does. “Tomorrow the bar will be closed.” His voice is angry and determined, leaving no room for arguing. Not that I would right now. I was already planning to close tomorrow, possibly through the weekend.

Without answering, Jim nods in my direction before saying “Goodbye,” and walking away.

“Don’t like that guy,” Tony says under his breath.

“Tony, he saved me. If you asked me this morning, I’d tell you he wouldn’t hurt a fly. He’s an IT nerd, I went to high school with him. Totally harmless.”

“Don’t care. Don’t like any man with that kind of interest in my woman.”

“He doesn’t-“

“Luna, not in the mood to argue with you tonight, but let me just say when a man like me says a man is into my fuckin’ woman, just trust me, got it?” Despite everything that’s happened, I giggle.

Never would I have thought that after something so traumatizing, I’d be *giggling*. But here we are. I smile at him, then run my hand down his face.

“Okay, Tony.”

TWENTY-THREE

-luna-

WE HEAD HOME AS SOON as we get the all-clear from the officers on duty and the EMT's wrap up my wrist, telling me it just looks like bruising or a sprain at worse and to take some ibuprofen. I smell an argument coming tomorrow when he insists I go to a doctor, but that's can be dealt with that then. Tony tucks me gently in his truck, assuring me that someone will get my car back to his place before morning.

The only perk about this total fiasco is that because we closed down after the Kevin incident, we're through the door not long after midnight, when I had originally planned to roll in past two like normal.

Another perk, now that the fear has abated and my wrist is no longer throbbing, thanks to a high dose of Tylenol I was given, I'm feeling good, riding a high of leftover adrenaline and my man being a hot guy macho man. *Awesome.*

He carries me from his truck into his house like I'm a small child, depositing me softly on his bed. The room is a disaster, sheets and blankets ripped back from the bed, pajamas tossed around in utter chaos. The top of his dresser is a mess, cologne bottle and frame knocked over, things scattered, like he ran his arm over it looking for something as he was running out the door.

My heart sinks, knowing the fear and anxiety that was running through

him when he got that call. I'm not sure who it was that called him. Maybe one of my bartenders, maybe Mitch, maybe it was dispatch when they received the 911 call I learned Kate made. I'm pretty sure it wasn't Zander, since he was never out of my sight and I didn't see him grabbing his phone to call anyone.

It's clear that when that call came, Tony was frantic and terrified.

For me.

God, this shit is so fucked up.

He steps back, looking me over, eyes pausing on my wrist that's bandaged in a tan, stretchy bandage. Tony, I—"

"Stop right there, Luna. I see the look in your eyes and I don't want to hear it."

"Tony—"

"Serious as fuck right now, don't want to go into this. Had a long fuckin' night, you had an even longer one. Let's go to bed." His back turns to me, heading into the ensuite bathroom before my mouth opens.

"Are you... are you mad at me?" I ask, in my gut knowing the answer. He stops in his tracks, back stiff and showing the struggle in his body.

"Luna, I am fuckin' furious right now," he says, still not turning to me. I knew it. He's burning up with it, heating the room with his fury.

"At me?"

He turns to me, frustration and exhaustion painted across his face. "Fuck, Luna, with this whole fucking situation. At that asshole who thought you were supposed to pay for fucked up shit he did. At your brother and Mitch for not keeping their fucking eyes on you at all fucking times. And yeah, Luna, I'm mad at you. What were you thinking? Walking away and not fucking *telling* anyone?!"

"I didn't—" I start, wanting to explain, though I know deep down I don't have a reason or an explanation. Kate knew, of course. But I was stupid not interrupting Zee and Mitch, not letting them know. So fucking stupid.

"But most of all, I'm so fucking pissed at myself for letting you convince me to stay home. My gut told me it was wrong, that I needed to be by your side any fuckin' chance I could, much less on a busy night that I have off."

"This isn't your fault. You need to take care of yourself as well, you were so exhausted."

"What if something happened to you? What if that fuckwad hadn't been watching you, hadn't seen that asshole corner you, huh? What if he'd gotten

you out that door, into that truck he had waiting In the field behind the bar?" I didn't know that part. "Do you think I would have *ever* fucking slept easy again? Knowing that happened, knowing I could have stopped it if I had just stayed up, gone to the bar? How would I have ever looked at your beautiful face, knowing that you held some fucking demons deep in that gorgeous soul of yours, demons that I should have fought? Or worse, how would I have looked your mom, your dad, your brothers in the fucking eye if things went even worse if you'd lived through that fucked up shit and then he ended it? How, Luna?" His eyes are full of emotion, some I know, some that I can't quite decode. He's still vibrating with fury, with anger, but now I see the guilt clear as day. The fear. My feet walk me closer to him without my knowledge. As soon as I'm close enough, he wraps an arm around me, pulling me in, his face going into my neck.

"Should have been there, darlin'."

"Honey, it's not your fault. And I'm fine. I'm better than fine, knowing this shit is all behind me, we can move forward."

"Yeah," he says, but something in his voice is skeptical. I pull back to look at him.

"You don't think so?" I ask, confused.

"I don't know what to think. The man isn't even conscious. Hopefully tomorrow we'll get some answers, but in my line of work you learn not to go off of what you see right in front of you until you have concrete evidence." That makes sense.

"Tony, I don't want you to hold this on your shoulders. It would kill me knowing that. It happened, but I'm okay. I'm fine, I'm safe, I'm here with you, in your gorgeous house. I can probably even go home soon."

"Absolutely not."

"I'm sorry?"

"You are not going back to that fuckin' apartment any time soon."

"Tony--"

"Serious as fuck, we are not having this conversation. You are staying here. And I'll even lay this out for you - you're not going back to livin' in that fuckin' apartment *ever* if I have anything to say about it."

"I can't--"

"Saw the pictures, Luna." I stop, words freezing in my throat. The pictures. I totally forgot about the stuff I hung in his living room.

"You're making this house a home for me. Went to Ma, got those photos,

hung things that mean a fuckuva lot to me. Saw that picture of us. Saw it and felt it in my gut, baby. Saw it and knew that's it, that's what we have. If I have to cuff you to my fuckin' bed so you stay here. I'll do it." My belly is warm and gooey, but being me, I can't resist starting trouble.

"Tony, you don't even have a headboard to cuff me to."

"Got a frame, darlin'. If that doesn't work, I can get creative." That word reminds me I was planning to get creative tonight before everything went awry. A shiver runs down my spine and Tony's lips quirk up, acknowledging his word use.

"Honey, I can't move in here. That's crazy. I know you feel some kind of guilt that you don't need to fee--"

"Luna, you're movin' in, end of story. I don't want you here because of some guilt I feel. I want you here because you're mine and I want what's mine to be close. I want *you* close. I want to wake up and see you sprawled and snoring in my bed when I leave and I want to come in from my run and see you in my tee sippin' your coffee. I want your shit in my house, even if it's all hippy shit and annoys the fuck out of me. I want you cacklin' in the kitchen with your girls, making drinks, and watching stupid movies. I want you here, Luna. I don't want you halfway across town, worrying about if you're okay and sleeping in a cold bed. Got it?" My belly is liquid, warmth flowing through my veins hearing this, hearing that he loves these things.

"Yes, but, honey--"

"And I'm gonna tell you something else, Luna. I want more than that. I know you're fuckin' Luna, so it's gonna take time for you to see it, gonna take time for you to trust it and if I push it your dad won't be nearly as nice about us as he was last weekend. But you and me? This is it, Lune. Me and you. No more fuckin' around."

I think I know what he's saying, the idea both scaring me and exciting me. And he's right. A dark, angry place deep inside of me doesn't want to believe it, doesn't want to believe that this is real, that it's not just his protective instinct coming out. But God, God, *God*, do I want this. Do I want him, do I want *us*.

"Tony, are you--"

"You know exactly what I'm saying, Luna, don't act like you don't." He's right - I do. I totally know.

"Can you stop cutting me off?" I say, and if I wasn't still wrapped up in his arms, I know I would have my hands on my hips. But I am, so instead, I

just move my head back, trying to see him more clearly.

“I only cut you off when you’re about to say somethin’ stupid.”

“God, you’re such an ass,” I say, but a smile is also playing on my lips because this is it. This is us. The bickering and the banter and the warmth.

“Yeah, well, you’ve been into me forever, so what does that say about you?” His lips are softly brushing on mine as he talks, not quite kissing me. “That photo is beautiful, baby.” His words hold warmth and sincerity, both reflected in his eyes. I know he’s talking about the photo of us.

“It is,” I say, just as softly.

“You gonna fill our home with more? Decorate with memories?” The pang of pleasure in my soul is a sweet relief, the last thread holding me from trusting this with my whole soul fraying and breaking away.

“Yeah, honey.” My voice is barely a whisper and the only way I know he heard me is the slight widening and further warming of his eyes.

“Good, darlin’.”

“You gonna kiss me, Tony? Not gonna break.”

“Yeah, baby.” And with that, he moves the millimeter he needs to so his lips are against mine. The kiss is sweet, soft, full of so much feeling my heart is pounding with it, near bursting. Feelings that make me want to cry, make me want to jump for joy, make me want to melt into a puddle.

Until something breaks, a damn of want and need and relief that we’re both okay, that we’re both here and together. His lips press into mine harder, his arm pulling me tighter, my arms going up to wrap around his neck and my feet coming to tiptoe. His tongue pushes at my closed lips, which immediately open to allow him access where it dances with my own in a way that seems natural, seems like it’s been doing forever.

A soft moan breaks from my throat as this happens and his other hand slips to my ass, grabbing a handful. “Tony,” I breathe, need seeping from the word.

“I got you, darlin’,” he says, assuring me of what I’ve always known. That Tony Garrison has me and will always catch me before I fall. His knees bend, hands gliding down my ass to my thighs where he grabs them, lifting until they’re wrapped around his waist. His mouth is still attached to my own, his tongue sucking mine into his mouth, a mockery of what I want our bodies to be doing. He takes two long strides and I think we’re headed to the bed, but my back slams into the wall, pinning me in place.

“I was so fuckin’ scared, Luna,” he says against my neck, one hand

leaving my ass to explore my body. It slips under my worn t-shirt, groaning when he realizes that I'm braless under the loose bar tee. His fingers grasp my nipple as his mouth sucks the sweet spot under my ear, pulling a desperate moan from my lips.

"I'm safe, honey, I'm yours." The words seem to be what he needed to hear as he presses his body closer to my own, grinding his hardness against my already swollen with want sex. I mewl, needing so much more and not feeling nearly enough through my jeans, with so much fabric between us.

After tonight, I need his skin on my own, need the reassurance that life will go on, that we will go on. That we're safe and together and here.

As always, he can read my mind, grasping my hips again and walking me to the bed when he tosses my body like I'm nothing more than a light doll. A giggle escapes my lips, and a smile hits his and through the frantic energy we're creating in our need, it's good to know that we're always us.

Rough hands fumble with the snack of my jeans before tugging them free and off my legs, fingers looking to pull the panties down simultaneously. His shirt is tossed aside as he kicks off his jeans. Watching him strip down in such a no-nonsense way has me rubbing my legs together, craving any kind of friction I can create as I creep a hand up under my loose tee to pinch my nipple.

"Jesus fucking christ so fucking hot," Tony murmurs under his breath, watching my hand that has disappeared under the shirt. I pull my nipple, tugging it to elongate, then pinching the way I love, the way I've done to myself, picturing his man in front of me for years.

It's always been Tony I've dreamed of, imagined.

"Shirt off," he says, kicking his boxers off and grasping his hard cock in his hand, a gentle tug bringing his tan hand to the end, milking a small drop of precut that makes my mouth water. I do as I'm asked, crossing my arms over my chest and pulling the tee off, laying in front of him completely exposed, legs open and completely at ease.

"Keep going," he says, hooded eyes on my hard nipples, hand working his cock with slow, measured pumps. My pussy clenches at the sight and his eye catches it somehow, drawing the sexiest groan from his lips as he clenches his fist. "Your pussy, Luna. Touch it."

I've never done this. I've had boyfriends ask, but never felt comfortable enough to, even with the lights off. Right now, with his eyes on me, so completely enraptured with every inch of my body, I want nothing more than

to touch myself for his pleasure.

A hand slips down, dipping to catch the wetness dripping from my hole and coming up to circle as I lock my eye to his. A mewl, the feel of my fingers grazing my swollen clit, the feelings exquisite and shooting through my body.

“Beautiful,” he says under his breath, his hand going more frantic, the head of his cock now looking red and angry and he pumps. My finger circles my clit more fervently, the feeling already rising with me as my hips squirm, needing more. “Inside.” He always knows. Two fingers enter me as I curl them and graze my g-spot, moaning at the sensation, my eyes drifting closed.

They pop back open when I feel his hand smack mine away and his mouth replacing it.

My back arches off the bed as I scream his name, the feel of his tongue on my clit a beautiful torture as he replaces my small fingers with his thick ones, the feeling tearing me apart with pleasure. “Tony!” The voice that comes out doesn’t even sound like me.

He looks up from between my legs, chin drenched in my juices as he licks his lips, a small smile on them, and I know I need him. I need him more than anything.

“Now, Tony,” I say, my voice small, but he knows. He’s just as frantic and needy as I am, climbing up my body and lining himself up with me in mere seconds. I’m ready for the combustion that is the two of us together when we’re on the edge, consumed with need.

But as soon as he enters me, something changes, like the frantic energy has abated, leaving nothing but soft and sweet. His eyes are locked on mine, telling me everything I need to know about him. I feed him the same back, giving him everything, how I feel, how I’ve always felt, my hopes and dreams.

Everything.

He slowly, so so slowly, pushes into me, my wetness making his glide smooth and effortless. His forehead presses to mine, his eyes still locked to mine but not kissing me. Just staring. Our breaths mingle, heavy, heated breaths filled with passion and lust and... love. It’s undeniable. In his eyes is love, so bright and beautiful I almost combust right there.

My hands travel up and down his back, gently grazing, exploring his skin, feeling every part of him. Brushing up his neck into his soft, short hair, down to his ass to push him in deeper.

“So fucking beautiful, baby. You’re so fucking beautiful,” he says, breaths getting impossibly heavier, my soul impossibly lighter. His voice is gruff and harsh, the sound bringing me closer to the edge as he thrusts a bit harder with each statement, his pelvic bone grinding on my clit, spreading warmth down my spine where it builds and builds until I can’t take it.

“God, Tony, it’s so good,” I say, and the voice that leaves my mouth is almost unrecognizable, a mewl of need and want.

“You feel fucking incredible. Made for me. Could do this for days, be inside you, You’re mine, Luna, you’re fucking mine.” His words make my pussy clench in need, gripping his length hard in a way that has us both moaning loudly. I’m so close, so close.

“Fuck, darlin’, you feel too good. You gotta come for me, baby, need it soon. Can’t take this anymore. Fuckin’ beautiful torture being in you.”

God, his words! His words are so hot, so filled with everything, that I can feel it pushing me to the crest, so close to dropping over the edge. “Oh, God, Tony, I’m close!”

“Come for me, Luna. Come for me now,” he demands, thrusting in and grinding once more and that’s all it takes. I come, exploding around him, everything around me fading to black and my ears going quiet, the only thing in my entire universe becoming him. He comes with me, groaning loud in my muted ears. And for the first time in my life, regardless of the indisputable fact that I had a beautiful childhood in a close, loving family, I feel like I’m home.

Waking up with Tony might be my favorite thing on the entire planet. Somehow in our sleep, we always gravitate to each other, him pinning me down and subduing my unconscious dance party. Since we started sharing a bed, I’ve felt more rested than ever and I imagine he’s to thanks.

His body is warm against mine and it’s then I realize that we both fell asleep naked, something I usually despise. But feeling his strong body cradling mine in the most intimate way makes me think I might want to do it more often.

When I’m about to slip out of the bed, throw on his tee and make us some coffee, I feel his soft lips on the bottom of my jaw, morning scruff scraping me there. “Mornin’,” his low, sexy voice says, rough and gravelly with sleep. His lips plant a soft kiss on my neck.

“Good morning, honey.” His lips dip lower, tickling my neck, and I can’t help but let out a tiny giggle. The leg hitched over my hip pulls me in closer, letting me feel his morning wood. “Well, hello there,” I say, the giggle still there but turning into something huskier, the thought alone waking me better than a cup of coffee.

Tony’s arm grips me around my waist to turn me. Immediately, all the warm and fuzzy feelings go out the window when a sharp pain shoots through my wrist and up my arm. I hiss a quick breath through my teeth, my entire body tensing.

“Fuck, baby, what’s wrong?” he asks, immediately letting go and moving back.

“My wrist. It’s tender this morning, I moved it funny.” His hand reaches out, turning me gently, minding my bad arm. Gently, like I’m made of glass and cobwebs, he lifts my wrist. The skin is a mottled blue, black, and purple color, and even though I know it’s my arm, I have to look at it twice, moving my pinky finger to confirm that as fact.

“Jesus Christ, I’m gonna kill that fucker,” he rumbles under his breath, and the frustration and furious rage are coming off him in near-visible waves.

“Tony, seriously, I’m fine,” I say, attempting to placate him.

“It’s not even fucking close to fine, Luna. Do not fuck with me on this, you will lose.” His eyes meet mine, pain, and guilt shining bright through the anger and my soul softens a bit at seeing it. He’s mad that I’m hurt - that much is obvious - but he’s also mad that he wasn’t there to prevent it.

“It’s not -“

“Not doing this right now. Had a great fucking night with you after that shit went down. We covered some shit we needed to get out in the open. Today we’re going to the station, they need pictures of your wrist and I need an update on the case. I’m on tonight, but I’m gonna see if Zee can cover for me. Don’t like the idea of being far from you.”

“Tony, seriously-“

“Serious as fuck right now, darlin’ not the time. Love it when you fight me on shit, fuck, I get off on it. But you gotta learn and you gotta learn now, there will be times when I need you to just say okay and follow my lead. Anytime it’s about you and your safety or my peace of mind regarding your safety, you back down and follow my lead. You hear?” I pause for a moment, but not longer.

“Yes, Tony.”

“After the station, takin’ you to the doctor, get that shit checked out.” I try to interrupt, to argue, but he cuts me off before I can even start. “Don’t wanna hear it. Probably just a sprain, but not leaving that to chance. Then you’re going to your apartment to pack shit up. Bring what you need, we can handle odds and ends and furniture later. Get your clothes, anything important to you, that kind of thing. You’re moving in.”

“Tony! We can’t-“

“We can, and as we talked about last night, you will.” I glare at him, unspeaking. “You got anything else to say?”

“Oh, you’re gonna let me talk now?” I say, attitude in full force. If I was standing I’d have a hand on my hip, but since I’m laying down I just raise an eyebrow and stare at him, trying to remember to be angry and now find him sexy. I’m failing miserably.

He knows this, so he smiles, then pulls me in close before placing a long, sweet kiss on my lips. “Gonna be fun, going through life with you Luna Sage,” he says, his voice a mere whisper, but the meaning comes through loud.

There’s so much I could say now, but all that comes out of my mouth is, “Yeah.”

TWENTY-FOUR

-tony-

WALKING INTO THE STATION, Luna's good hand tangled with mine, all eyes are on us. Every officer, every admin, every visitor is staring at us. I ignore them. Instead, I want in straight to the bullpen where Zander is sitting, chatting with Mitch.

"Hey man, Luna," Mitch says, eyes assessing and traveling down to Luna's hand that's once again bandaged. They flare minutely when he sees the vivid, angry bruising peeking out from above the bandage. Most wouldn't notice that small gesture, but he's my partner. I know the man better than most people know their wives. Every tic, every nuance of his personality, I know. And he knows mine.

Zander is less discreet. "Jesus, fuck Luna." His hand goes out like he's going to grab her arm, and I ease her from his reach. It's an unnecessary move - he stops himself before he harms her unintentionally. "Sister," he says, his voice low and soft, full of the pain and guilt I've been feeling since I got the call.

His arms go out and seeing his intention, I let my girl go as he wraps her up in his arms, holding his little sister gently. They've always been like this for as long as I've known the Davidsons. Close, protective. It's why I was so hesitant all those years ago to start something with her, worried it would come between us. It's a relationship I was envious of, with brothers to speak

of. Ace and Zander have a similar relationship as my brothers and me, but seeing them made me wish Ma had tried for that girl to give us a sister.

While Zee comforts his sister, simultaneously confirming that she is okay, I lean over to Mitch. I talk under my breath. “Any news on the asshole?” My voice is low, showing to him I want to avoid Luna hearing.

“He’s awake and responsive. Spilling his guts to anyone who will listen. They’re working to set him up in an interrogation room. Took a beating from McCloud but nothing long-lasting, A few cracked ribs, lotta bruising.” My gut clenches at Jim McCloud’s name.

“You get a good feel from him? His motive, that shit?” I say, watching Zander and Luna quietly talking, Luna reassuring her brother in that way she does, not wanting anyone concerned about her.

“He’s bitter. Lost his job, wife left him, took the kids. Says he wanted Luna to suffer because of it. Says it’s all her fault this happened like the fuckwad didn’t try to drug a woman.” Fury bubbles, but I tamp it down, knowing that interfering now would only benefit his case.

“No, McCloud. What’s your read on him?”

“I don’t know, man. Was convenient he saw what happened, but I was sittin’ next to him all night, never had his eyes off Luna. Remember him from high school. He was a nerd. In to computers and video games, didn’t have many friends. I think he just has a crush, right place, right time.” His shoulders shrug, telling me he thinks it’s no big deal before he looks my face over. “Why? You get a bad feeling?”

“I gotta bad feeling about any man who’s into my woman,” I say, my brows furrowed. My eyes are still on Luna and Zander and it looks like they’re about the break apart. “Never had to deal with this, never affected my job. Now we’re lookin’ into a case where my girl is the victim. Think lines are blurrin’ in my mind, seein’ things that aren’t there.”

“Well, he’s coming in tomorrow morning, says he’s busy tonight but will give his statement then. Wasn’t gonna push it because we got enough on our hands right now with Parsons.” Mitch looks over and Luna is heading back to where Mitch and I are. He breaks off the conversation saying, “Hey, Luna, lookin’ good.” Then he pulls her in for a gentle, respectful hug, winking at me.

“Hey, Mitch. Thanks for keeping my brother from killing a man last night,” she said, her airy, floaty voice filled with laughter that only Luna could have after the night she did yesterday.

“Jesus, Luna, I wouldn’t have killed him,” Zander mumbles, though I’m honestly not sure if that’s true. The man’s loyalty and sense of right and wrong runs deeper even than mine,

“Shut up, Zander. So, who’s keeping me company while you three knuckleheads interrogate a skeeveball?” she says, her voice still light and not even a small sign of discomfort or that her thoughts are plagued with trauma. *My girl.*

“Meeting room one,” Zander says, pointing to a closed interrogation room. “That one’s for you. Food will be delivered later. Gotta hang tight until we’re done, though. I do not want you leaving unless either Tony or I go with you.”

“Me. No offense, but I’m not leaving her for a while,” I say, and I can see the quick blast of hurt and guilt that fades into understanding as he nods.

“Lead the way, big tough officers,” Luna says, and fuck if I can’t help but bark out a laugh as we talk away.

“So you admit that you stalked Luna Davidson and vandalized her store?” Mitch asks the asshole sitting cuffed, bruised, and bandaged in front of me. Just looking at him, hearing his side of the story, if you can even call it that, makes me grind my teeth in an effort not to knock him out.

I’ve been staring into his eyes for the past hour as he talks and answers question after question, but I remain silent. Staring. Wisely, he’s been avoiding my eye, but occasionally he accidentally looks my way and goes a shade paler.

Good.

“Fuck, yes. I already answered this,” the man says, sounding both frustrated and, fuck me, annoyed.

“Sir, you are sitting here because you terrorized and assaulted a woman in her place of business. All because you tried to give a date rape drug to another woman and felt the consequences of that,” Mitch says.

“Aww fuck, this again? Look, it wasn’t even a big deal. The chick was fine. She was into me, I swear. I just didn’t want to spend the time impressing her. You know how it is, man.” He tries. He really tries to appeal to the four men in the room, but he’s also a fucking moron who is completely unable to read the fucking room.

“No, we don’t. We don’t know what would drive a man to assault a kind

woman, to coerce another into bed. No fucking clue. You deserve your life falling the fuck apart.”

“She’s a fucking bitch, that bartender. Always looking down at me, judging me. Asking about my bitch of an ex-wife when I’m out with my bitches,” he says and, although anger and aggression are surging, I can’t help but feel proud of Luna. She would purposely ask a married man about his wife while he was out with someone else.

“That bitch is my fucking sister,” Zander says. Sam, Zander’s partner, puts his hand on Zee’s arm.

“Zee, man, calm down,” he says under his breath to do the impossible.

“Fuck that, this guy’s a dick. And a dumb one at that.”

“I think we’re done here anyway,” Chief says, nodding at Mitch to end the recording.

“When can I go home?” Parsons has the fucking gall to ask.

“Gonna have to ask the judge that, if you get bail. And, unfortunately, the court is backed up. Won’t get you in until tomorrow. Until then you get to be our guest another night.” Mitch says, a little too gleefully. I try not to laugh.

“Alright, you guys handle this. Gotta take Lune to the doctor for her wrist. Did Roz get pictures for the file, or should I have the doctor do it?” I ask as I stand, straightening my shirt. I’m not in uniform since I’m not technically on, but I’m wearing a SHPD tee.

“I think she got them while we were in here, but double-check before you head out,” Sam says, waving goodbye as I walk out the door to my girl.

TWENTY-FIVE

-tony-

HOURS LATER, after an examination, x-ray and a lesson on how to bandage her wrist, Luna and I are driving back to her apartment.

The mere thought of Luna packing up what she needs and bringing it to my house - *our house* - is almost enough to erase the scum from the past day. Finally, after all these years, making good on the promises I made to myself when I said I'd wait until she was legal and make her mine. Mine forever. Mine in a way that I don't think she realizes yet, or at least doesn't trust.

Luna is off in another world during our quiet ride over. Thankfully, she told me the pain in her wrist has been minimal and she hasn't needed any other pain killer than normal drug store varieties.

"What's up, darlin'?" I ask, looking over at her quickly as I drive. The office we went to is in a neighboring town about 20 minutes from her place, so we had a bit of a drive to go.

"Hmm?"

"Got a look on your face. What's goin' through your mind?"

"Oh. Just.. thinking." Her voice is soft and hesitant and instinct tells me I need to dig.

"Thinking about what?"

"I don't want to dwell on it. We've been over it all enough already." I know then. It's about last night.

“Luna, you sittin’ on shit is dwelling on it. Letting it get sour in your stomach means that ass wins. Get it out now and it’s over.”

“What would have happened?”

“What would have happened?” I repeat her question, confused.

“If... if he did it.”

“Lune, you gotta give me a hint. He did what?”

“If he’d gotten me out of the bar. In his car. What would have happened? I know you. You would have found me. You always find me.” That warms me to the bone. “But if he took me and ran, somewhere we couldn’t have guessed? He wasn’t even a real suspect. Not on your radar. What would have happened to me?”

There it is. She’s worried about what could have been. It’s normal, but unnecessary. Without even thinking about what she might say, like the dumb ass I am, I blurt it out.

“I would have found you, you had your phone on you.”

“What do you mean?”

And like an even bigger idiot, I elaborate.

“App on your phone. I added it. Tracks you. I could have accessed it remotely with no one knowing. You had your phone in your apron and he doesn’t seem like he’d be smart enough to destroy your cell, which is what he would have had to do to cancel the tracker.”

Silence comes from the other side of the truck and I glance over, seeing Luna is wide-eyed and staring at me, her mouth open. God, she’s adorable. But I also know, from years and years of experience, years of watching her explode at her brother, that she is about to blow.

“Excuse me?” The sound is short and angry, the temper she gets from her dad flaring up.

“Luna-”

“You’ve been tracking me?!” she yells, her voice filling the cab, the accusation swirling around us. *Fuck.*

“Jesus Luna-”

“I cannot *believe* this shit.” Glancing over one more time, it’s clear that she’s pissed. I should have known this would happen. I can’t believe I didn’t see this coming.

“Luna, we-”

“No, Tony. Don’t *Luna* me. I cannot believe you’d violate my privacy like that!”

“Luna for fucks-” She cuts me off again. Now *I’m* getting pissed the fuck off.

“Seriously! You want to do some fucked up shit like that? We *talk* about it, Tony. You don’t just fucking hack into my phone and do whatever you want because it makes *you* feel better.”

“Luna, listen to me and if you try to fuckin’ cut me off one more time, I’m pull-in’ over and smacking your round ass until you fuckin’. Listen. To. Me” That, of course, shuts her up. I don’t miss the quick flare in her eyes, almost a dare. This *fuckin’* woman.

“Now, first, I put it on your phone just a few days ago. I do *not* like how this shit’s been playing out, this fucker stalking you, harassing you, threatening you. Takin’ pictures of us in my fuckin’ backyard.” Her face blanches a bit when I look over again at the reminder of what a true violation of privacy means. “Second, I was going to talk to you about it. But babe, so much has been going on. Tell me, in what world would I have had the time to sit you down, rationally talk to you about that, and not have you freak out on me?” Again, I look over and she looks... contrite this time.

“I’m sorry you feel I violated some kind of privacy. I really am. But babe, you gave me your phone password. I never once looked at the tracker. Just had it as a precaution. Shit’s goin’ down, Lune. You know that. But even if that wasn’t the truth, I would still want this on your phone. In my line of work, you learn never to get complacent, never to assume someone is safe. Something happened to you and I didn’t do everything in my power to keep you safe, that would kill me.”

Her eyes soften, but there’s still anger burning behind them. “Know you, Luna. You’re pissed. Fuck, when I was adding it to your phone, I called Zee, asked if you’d be pissed. He told me if I didn’t do it, he would.”

“Goddamnit, you two! I don’t need babysitting!” she yells, frustration and irritation bubbling back up from where it has receded.

“No one said you do. But there are some fucking crazy people out there who would love to hurt me or your brother just because of who we are and what we do. We live in a small town, Luna, but that doesn’t mean shit doesn’t happen here. It does. And you would be an easy target. I’m not asking you to hide away or have a bodyguard or only go places with me. This is it. And babe, you delete that app, I gotta guy who can add shit that’s way more discrete and you’ll never fuckin’ know it’s there.”

She gasps and I feel her turning to look at me, but I don’t look over.

“Seriously, Lune. I get it. You’re mad right now because I left you outta the loop. I get it. I meant to tell you, but life got crazy. But don’t be stubborn about this. Won’t ask much from you. This is one of the few things I’m gonna ask. You gotta let it simmer a bit, don’t wanna talk, that’s fine.” We’re pulling onto the street with the bar and the heat coming off her in waves is burning my skin. But I’ll take it. To keep her safe, to give me peace of mind, I’ll live with her anger.

My truck pulls into the lot in front of Full Moon Cafe, and I put it in park. We both stare out the windshield before she turns to me.

“I need time.” Her voice is soft and fragile.

“Take it. But I’ll be here, by your side.”

“I need time, Tony. Alone.”

“Luna, if you think for a fucking moment that I’m leaving you after what the fuck happened last night, you’re insane. I let you talk me into going alone last night. It was a mistake. You’re going home with me, we’re gonna order food and lounge in *our fucking home*.” That gives her eyes a hint of warmth. Okay, she’s still in there. “Now unbuckle and we’ll get some of your shit packed up. We can come again the next day we’re both off, get more.” A soft sigh drifts from her lips and I can’t help but smile. I’ve heard that sigh so many times over the years.

“Tony, I need you to give me some alone time. Just... an hour. I need to process. I need to be... alone. I’m used to being alone and in my own thoughts. I *never have that* anymore. And now, more than ever, I really, really need it. I need to be in my space, need to be with my things, go through them, decide what needs to come immediately *by myself*. I need to come to terms with what has happened in the last few weeks.” Her voice is pleading, begging me to give this to her. But...

“I can’t do that, Luna.”

“Tony, please. Please. I *need* this. Let me go up alone. You can stay down here, eagle eye the door. Nothing can happen. I just need.. the illusion of it. I’ll be safe knowing you’re here.”

“Luna, darlin’ I-”

“Nothing will happen except I’ll have time to clear my head. Everything that happened, this fucking tracker shit. You and me. It’s a lot. So fucking much. I haven’t - I haven’t had time to process. I need that.” I stare at her, her big, wide eyes full of emotions, each flickering for a moment before going to the next and then the next. Fear and overwhelm and anger and sadness and...

love. So much, so much love, and I know it's for me. She hasn't mentioned it, hasn't told me it's for me, but I know. I've always known. That look will get her anything from me.

"You keep your phone on you. If I call, you answer the first ring. Thirty minutes. I'll walk you up, lock the doors behind me, and take your keys. I'm coming up in 30 minutes. No lifting, no major packing. Put shit in a pile and I'll help you bring it down." Relief floods her face, and I see it now. My sweet Luna needed this. She needs time to process. I can't blame her, I've been hitting her over the head with.. everything for weeks, and that's not even factoring in the shit with Parsons.

"Thank you, Tony." It's all she says, but it's all I need.

We leave the truck and I walk her into the bar, through the back staircase, through the annex, and unlock her apartment. Before she walks away, I grab her good wrist and pull her to me, my hands cupping her face as she looks up at me.

"We're good, Luna. We're gonna get through this and live a beautiful life. You and me. Was always meant to be that way. From day one, met you and a piece of me recognized me. Was too chickenshit to notice then and too young and arrogant later to fight for it. But now? Nothing is stopping me from getting that beautiful life. You hear me, darlin'?" The words are low, almost a whisper, but I know she hears me when her eyes well and her head in my hands nods. I softly kiss her lips, so soft and warm, before I back up and let her walk in. When she does, a small smile hits her lips as she waves me off. Not another word passes between us as I nod and leave, locking all the doors and watching the front door like a hawk, knowing my girl is safe inside.

TWENTY-SIX

-luna-

WALKING INTO MY APARTMENT, a place I made my home for years, a place I perfectly curated to be mine, I feel... empty. This place doesn't feel like home anymore.

And really, maybe it never did. Maybe a part of me knew all along that this was temporary, just a crash pad above the bar. A spot where I wouldn't have to drive home in the early morning hours or worry about my precious bar when I was gone.

Closing that door behind me and flipping the lock, it's like I'm back in a life I've outgrown. But I need to use this time to think. I need to use this time as an opportunity to sort through my messy thoughts and come to terms with everything that's happened in the past few weeks - and God, has it been a ton.

First, the stalking and vandalizing of my bar. My baby. The business I poured my heart and soul into, grew into the place of my dreams. Then, someone tearing my apartment torn apart. Moving in with Tony. Making a... home with him. Becoming an 'us'. Fantastic, mind-blowing, life-altering sex with him. Getting attacked in my bar. Tony putting a tracker on my phone without my knowledge.

And that's the part that hurts, I think as I slip my phone into my bra. I really should have worn something with pockets instead of these comfy leggings. But knowing that Tony had not even bothered to find the time to

ask me, used the password I had given freely, downloaded an application, and was prepared to use it to track me? It hurts, and I can't quite pin down why.

I get that life has been busy. That he's been running himself ragged trying to find this creep, keep me safe, and build something with me. Most of which, I'll admit, I haven't been very helpful with arguing with him at nearly every turn.

Despite that, it's so hard for me to accept that he's into me. To change up my perception of the last 10 years, to read between the lines of what I assumed was him ignoring me, my embarrassment flooding and tainting every interaction.

As I'm walking through my house, still a mess from the intruder though a bit more presentable, thanks to my friends coming and cleaning it up a bit, I'm contemplating why I have this reaction. Why do I feel like I need to argue with Tony at every turn, turn small, innocent things that are trivial into a point of contention? And, in any other circumstance, tracking your... girlfriend would be a big fucking deal. But here? It seems almost reasonable.

My feet take me to the window that faces the street. I move aside the girly pink curtains to look down at the parking lot. Tony is standing outside his truck, leaning against his hood, arms crossed across his broad chest. The movement must have caught his ever-watchful eye because his face tips up to mine. Smiling, I wave at him from up above. His head slowly shakes as if to say, "what a goof," before one hand shoos me off, pointing to his wrist. Though he has no watch on, it's clear what he's telling me. *Hurry, you're on the clock.*

Grabbing things here and there, I make a pile of what I want to bring to Tony's, being careful not to tweak my wrist as I do. It's then that I see the frame, sitting on the floor with the glass crushed in, kicked under my bed so I didn't see it before. I sit down, gently cradling the photo in my hands. It's me, Tony, Zee, Ace and Tony's brother Gio. We're out at the nearby lake, all five of us coated in mud. Tony and Zee are probably 15 in the photo, making me 10, nearly 11. I remember the day with such vivid, golden memories. We'd gone to the lake because our dads wanted to go fishing. We packed everything up and headed out, Mom making us a huge picnic lunch to enjoy, but wisely staying home.

Dad thought he'd remembered everything but realized he forgot bait. So he told the boys to go look for worms to keep them entertained while they set up. I'm sure he thought it would be a wash, and we'd used lunch meat from

the sandwiches. But not long after, Zee came over to me, the boys trailing behind laughing, and said he had a gift for me. He wiggled the worm in my face and I *lost* it. Screamed and ran. Except, I ran right towards the marshy area that was muddy from a rainy couple of days and slipped, falling on my ass into the muddy waters. Each boy was running after me and, like a cartoon, slipped one by one into the mud.

Our dads laughed for *months* after.

But it's not the memory that strikes me. It's the photo. In it, a photo I've seen a million times, even framing it to eternalize the warm memory, I never noticed Tony. He's standing to my left, with Zee on my right. And he's staring at me. Staring at me in a way that is so achingly familiar now.

He's staring at my 10-year-old self like he's head over heels in love with me.

My breath stops in my chest, knowing, understanding it all at once. It's like a train hits me. All this time, I've been afraid it would end. It would end and ruin everything. The relationship between our families, the brotherhood he's created with Zee, and, most of all, all of my girlish childhood dreams. I've been struggling with the thought buried somewhere deep inside that it can't be real, that it's all going to come crashing down around me. Because how could he be into me? After all these years?

But seeing it now in full color, history preserved in front of me, it's clear. It's not that I have to make him fall for me. It's not that we have to work at it, make it happen. It's not even that we're testing the waters and figuring it out.

It's that he's been mine since I was seven. It's that all this time, he's been in as deep as I've been. That even when we were kids, too dumb and young to see past the day we were living, some part deep inside us knew we were meant to be.

My soul knew that he was mine.

And with that revelation, I'm ready to jump in head first, with no reservations.

It's then that I hear my front door open.

"In here, babe - gonna need your help boxing and bagging," I say, calling out to Tony from my bedroom. "Figure we'll fill your truck up today since we're already here. Turns out I've got a lot of crap."

I'm still looking down at the photo when I hear the boots enter my room through the door my back is to. "Look at this picture - do you remember it?" I say, turning to face him.

Except, it's not Tony in the doorway. Instead, it's Jim McCloud and ice runs through my veins at the sight of him.

"Hey, gorgeous." *That first text.*

"Uh, Jim? What are you doing here?" I say, trying to keep my voice steady, keep my voice steady. How the fuck did he get in here? I locked the door behind me as soon as Tony closed it and I know damn well that if he hadn't he would have opened the door back up and yelled at me.

And he locked the annex and bar doors on his way out.

"Beautiful, beautiful Luna. My Luna." His voice is reverent, like he's been yearning for something. It's creepy. Too familiar. Too devoted. Too.. everything. The ice in my veins sends my body into immediate shivers of fear.

"Jim, how did you get in here?" I say, my voice low and even I can hear the terror in it.

"Nothing can keep us apart, Luna. I'm here to rescue you." He holds up his hand that is grasping the keyring packed with a manager of keys. My keys. The keys Tony took downstairs with him. Oh my God. Tony. Where the fuck is Tony?

"Rescue me?"

"I need to get you out of here. Get you away from him. He's no good for you, my Luna. Not at all. He's bad. Bad Luna, do you hear me?" Oh God, what the fuck. What the fuck is going on? I'm still sitting on the floor, trying to look around and see what my options are. Fuck, why did I tell Tony I wanted to come in alone?

"Who's bad, Jim? Are you talking about Tony?"

"I don't want to talk about him. He's handled. No need to worry, my love." The words make my stomach turn, nausea creeping up my throat and threatening to spill over.

"Jim, did you do something to Tony?" I ask, my voice shaky but attempting to keep an air of calm about me. I've seen Zee and other officers do it enough to replicate the action.

"No need to worry about him. It's just you and me now." Holy shit, where is Tony? Is he okay? What the fuck is Jim talking about?

"Jim, you're scaring me. Why are you in my apartment? How did you get in here?"

“Don’t worry, my beautiful girl. I’m taking us where they’ll never bother us again and we can be together, finally.”

“I’m not going anywhere with you.”

“Yes, yes, you are Luna.” Jim reaches his hand in his pocket. “You need to come with me now.” I stand up, dropping the photo to the ground as I do. My eyes watch it float as if it’s the last lifeline I had to sanity, to reality.

“That fucking photo.” He cuts me off, eyes to the floor. “Thought I destroyed that,” he says and a part of the puzzle clicks.

“Did you break into my apartment?”

“I needed a few of your things,” he says. “You didn’t even notice, I’m sure. But I needed some clothes and your sizes. Some things to hold us over until we’re in our new home. I bought you some new things too, some pretty things for you to model for me later.” The nausea intensifies, the taste of acid burning the back of my tongue. It was Jim. It was Jim who broke in. Does that mean...

“Was it you? That’s been texting me? Messaging me? Harassing me?” I say, my voice now low and angry at the thought. This man I welcomed into my bar night after night. Someone I thought I knew, joked with, served for *years*.

“We’re meant to be together, Luna. I tried to tell you, but then you stopped talking to me.”

“You mean you started to be a total creep!” I shout. My temper might just get the best of me today, once and for all. That becomes clear when Jim raises a hand and backhands me across the face, pain searing through my cheek.

“Listen, you whore, it’s not my fault that you were a little slut, trying to get men when you are fucking *mine*,” he shouts. “That fucking dating profile. Such a little whore. But don’t worry, I forgave you.” My eyes well with tears, an intoxicating mix of fear, pain, and anger brewing. When I bring my hand to my face and look at my fingers, I see they’re tinged with blood seeping from my lip. Jim steps closer.

“Oh, Luna, look what you made me do to your beautiful face. You need to work on that mouth of yours. I don’t want to hurt you, Luna. I love you,”

“We need to get you help. It’s okay, I won’t tell anyone anything,” I lie. “Let’s get you downstairs and we’ll find someone to help.” I’m trying anything at this point. I need to get out of this apartment. If I can do that, I can get free and find help. I need to find Tony, make sure he’s safe. But he’s

so close, creeping in on me with a look of determination.

“Oh, Luna, everything will be just fine, don’t you worry.” As he says this, his hand that’s in his pocket lifts, holding a syringe. A syringe that he stabs into my arm.

Moments later, the world goes black.

When I wake, I’m in a tiny room. He’s sitting in a chair across from the bed I’m laying on, eyes on me like he’s been watching me, waiting for me to wake up.

“Ah, you’re awake,” he says, confirming my suspicions. Immediately my stomach roils. This wasn’t a nightmare. This is really happening. I’ve been taken from my apartment, Tony possibly hurt, and Jim McCloud is a fucking maniac.

Where am I?

Where is Tony?

What the fuck is happening?

“What is going on, Jim? Where are we?” I say, sitting up, my mind still hazy as I try to keep my cool. My face feels tight, reminding me of the strike he landed on me earlier. Oh God, fuck, fuck, fuck. Acid creeps up my throat.

“We’re at the Sunshine Falls construction site, in Tanner’s trailer. His is the nicest, only the best for you.” He reaches a hand out and pushes my hair behind my ear. I want to smack it away, but I need to play this smart. As I straighten, I feel my cellphone still in the band of my bra, giving me hope.

“Why are we here, Jim?” I ask, trying to get more information. If I want to escape, if I want to *survive* this, I need more information. God, I hope that app I was so mad about is working right now. Why the fuck was I mad about it again?

“I needed to get you somewhere safe, get ready to leave.” He stands and starts shuffling through papers. “Grab our things. We have a plane to catch at 10.”

A plane? “Why do we need to get on a plane?”

“We’re starting our new life, Luna. Me and you. Like it always was meant to be. We have new names, new identifies. Starting with a clean slate.” Oh my God. Oh my God.

“Jim, what are you talking about? You’re scaring me. I have a life here. My bar, a family.” *Tony*. My gut tells me to leave that name out,

remembering when he hit me.

“I’m your family now, Luna. And we’ll make ourselves a family.” My stomach sours once more. Holy shit. He’s fucking insane.

“How did I get here? How did you get into my apartment?”

“I had to get a little.. creative. I know a guy who makes a great concoction for subduing pretty things like you. You might know him - Kevin Parsons?”

“You’re friends? You beat him near to death just two days ago.”

“Yeah, well, he put his hands on what was mine. I saw the report, Luna. He had plans for you. I *saved* you. Now we can be together without that between us. You’re untainted,” he says and bile rises. “*The guy’s a computer wiz, Luna.*” The words flood back to my mind from when Tony was explaining the stalker to me. All this time. *All this fucking time*, the true perpetrator was in my life, night after night, laughing with me and drinking at my bar.

“How did we get here?” I ask, this time my voice solid and almost robotic. He sighs like I’m a small child who keeps asking questions.

“I was at the department this morning, giving my testimony. I scheduled it when you were there, wanted you to be close to me. I heard you’d be going to your place to pack up. When I got to the bar, imagine my luck when I saw that fucker outside. Why on earth he’d let you out for his sight, I don’t know. I’ll never, ever make that mistake.” Jim says, and I know that mistake is *my* mistake. A mistake I fought tooth and nail for.

“So I found a rock in the parking lot, a big one, and hit him in the head, knocked him out cold. Didn’t even know I was there.” My blood runs cold, thinking of Tony waiting for me, leaning against his truck, shaking his head at me through the window. *Tony falling to the ground, hurt, out cold.* Is he okay? Is he still there, passed out, no one knowing where he is? Where I am?

And then a selfish part of me wonders: if he’s passed out, and no one knows, does anyone know I’m missing?

I know the answer immediately and fight the urge to vomit.

“How did this... how did this happen? What is going on?” If I want to survive this, if I want to get out of this, I need to know everything. I need to keep him talking. Delay him.

“It’s always been us, Luna. It’s always been us. Since school. I saw you and I knew. You were a freshman, I was a senior. You looked at me your first day and I knew you felt it too.” I don’t remember ever *seeing* Jim in school

when I was there. It's like he melded in, just another in the sea. I only really knew of him once he started coming into the bar years later.

"Why, uh, why did you... wait? So long. High school was... forever ago." Fear is engulfing me but I need to do this. I need to get the facts straight. If I get out of this - no, *when* I get out of this, I'll need this information.

"He fucked it up the first time. I figured it was a sign. But then you went to school, came back, and opened up the bar so close to me. You should have just said something then, my love. Told me you were ready, ready for us. But I get it, you were shy. I kept coming in, giving you opportunities, but you were too shy and embarrassed to take them."

"The first time?"

"That party. Zander's graduation party. I was there and when you showed up, I knew that was my sign. I had something in my car, talked with Cole. You were going to be mine. But then *he* came and took you from me." It was him. All those years ago. It was Jim.

I wasn't just drunk that night. I'd been given... something. Jim drugged me at that party. He wanted to... he meant to... Oh, God. And Tony rescued me.

"That was you?" My voice is shaky.

"After that, you always stayed in, kept to yourself." He continues on, ignoring me. "Then you went to school, and I thought that was it. But you came back to me. Opened a bar one block from my house, and I knew. *I* knew, Luna. You loved me still."

"So I became your best customer. You laughed with me and talked to me. You've never treated me like some weird computer geek. But a person. I needed to build our relationship back again, of course. And then I knew, with your brother being an officer, that he'd... look into my past, talk you out of it. So I knew we needed to start a new life. I needed to make us untraceable, but that is expensive. So I saved, I took my time. Got a job working for Tanner, kept a low profile. Took some jobs on the side. We'll have a house in the Bahamas when we arrive, fully furnished. You won't have to work, Just be with me, raise our family."

"Jim. This is... sweet. But I um, I... I can't?" I start. "I have a family. I have friends. I have my bar. I can't just... leave." How can I convince him we can not hop on some kind of plane with new identities and... disappear.

I've listened to enough true crime podcasts to know that this is possible,

too. Even in this day and age. I know Jim is some kind of tech guy, and I know he's good. The investigators hit dead end after dead end with him. He can cover up tracks well.

"We have to. We have to go, Luna. It's our only chance to be together." There is an unhinged look in his eyes, full of panic and restlessness.

"I, I can't do this. I can't."

"You have to be strong, my love. You need to. And then we'll live our wildest, most beautiful dreams." His words remind me of Tony telling me we'll be living a beautiful life and the thought cuts through my soul.

"Seriously, Jim, I want to go home. Please take me-" on the same side as before, Jim smacks me across the face, this time the pain searing through a bruised jaw, the ache deep.

"Shut up, Luna. You need to do as I fucking say," he says, venom in his words. Then, like the total fucking psycho he is, his eyes warm when he sees the pain and fear in mine. "Oh, look what you made me do. See, you need to do what you're told, Luna. Be a good girl." I want to vomit. Terror is officially in every molecule of my being.

"Jim, I-" Except. When I'm cut off this time, it's not because of Jim.

It's my cellphone ringing in my bra.

He looks at me. Then at the side of my shirt where my phone is tucked.

"Luna, is that a cell phone?" he asks, his voice low and deceptively calm.

"It's, uh..."

"Luna, hand me over the phone."

"Jim, please, we don't have to-"

"HAND ME THE GOD DAMN FUCKING PHONE LUNA!" he shouts, the words vibrating off the walls in the small trailer. I pull it out, seeing 'Mom Calling' flashing on the screen.

"You no longer have a mom," Jim says, voice deadpan before he throws the phone on the ground and crushes the glass screen with his boot heel. It immediately goes black. "We need to go. Now." He grabs a small bag I didn't see earlier off the ground. "You'll need to be out for this. We don't have time if you're going to struggle."

This is my chance. If he subdues me again, he can get me out of here, somewhere where he can transport me to God knows where. And then it would be over. No one will find me. I'm not sure how I know this in my gut, but I do.

Because of this, I eye the door, still open and letting in cool, early fall air

into the trailer, adding to my shiver. I assess my body. Legs have awoken, but not for long. My head is clear. I think... I think I can do it.

Which he roots through the small bag, I do it. Just like Zander taught me.

I kick him in the knee, weakening him. I find something heavy nearby, a lamp, and I smash it on his head. But he's quick - he has a needle ready and though he's shouting in pain, he's reaching for my leg, ready to inject. One more object - a coffee pot.

I grab it off the counter, screaming at the top of my lungs, and hit his arm, then shatter the glass carafe on his face.

And then I run.

TWENTY-SEVEN

-luna-

OUT THE DOOR, into the cold air, I *run*. I run as if my life depends on it because it damn well does. Adrenaline courses through me, pushing me faster than I could ever run normally. Winding around trees, I'm running straight, I think. I've never actually been to this part of town, the acres of land owned by Hunter that they're turning into a camp. I know somewhere there is a long, winding road that will take you to the road, a waterfall, and a large gravel parking lot.

I don't know much about construction, but I assume Tanner, the owner of the construction company building the camp, would stage his trailer and the equipment I saw close to the entrance or parking area. But the forest is so dark I can't see much.

As I run, I trip on everything - roots, rocks, in holes and burrows. More than once I turn at the last second, narrowly avoiding a tree to the face. I need to be on guard. I need to find someone, find an escape.

Unfortunately, I know I'm making way too much noise. It's clear my attack didn't deter Jim too much, since I can hear him not far behind me, making a similar level of noise. My breathing is labored, and the noise sounds like a jet plane to my overly sensitive ears. Every crunch of a leaf, every rock being kicked into a tree sounds like I'm an elephant stampeding. I can't hide from him.

I'm losing hope, lose speed, lose energy. Loss is consuming me. I'm afraid I'm going to lose our race to Jim and be lost forever.

That's when I hear it.

A dog barking in the distance.

"HERE!" I shout at the top of my lungs, running into the woods, running for my life, instinct telling me that noise is my savior. Being quiet is out of the question now. "I'M HERE!" I shout, running faster towards where I hear the dog. Praying that it's someone who can help, maybe someone looking for me.

"This way!" I hear a man's voice say and relief, beautiful, sweet relief, rushes through me. Someone is here. Someone is looking for me. "She's this way!" The voice shouts again and another sweet wave of relief washes through me, recognizing the shout to be Mitch's.

"MITCH!" I scream, tears coming now, choking me, my voice hoarse.

"LUNA! We're coming! Keeping comin' this way, baby," a voice calls, and if I wasn't running for my life, I would crumble to the ground. It's Tony. It's Tony's voice echoing off the trees all around me, confusing me where to go. So I just keep running, running and thanking God, praying that he'll take me to my protector.

Unfortunately, with the noise I'm making, Jim can track me and I hear his feet crunching leaves behind me, much closer than before.

"TONY!" I shout, and even to my ears, my voice sounds scared and frantic. "Tony! He's behind me!" I'm shouting, running towards the barking, towards the boots in the leaves, trying to flee the psycho chasing me. I'm not sure what Jim intends to do with me if he gets me first, but I do know he is not mentally stable, he's trapped, and he has a knife.

"Keep coming this way, Luna! You're close!" That's Sam, and he's right, they're close.

But so is Jim.

A clearing breaks up ahead and I see them - Mitch, Sam, Sheriff Crawford, a few other men, and a police dog. And then I see Tony, a bandage across his head. My gut wants to revolt at the sight of him hurt, but my heart rejoices at the sight of him alive and well. Somehow my body produces just one more ounce of adrenaline to push me and I speed up, racing faster than ever towards them.

"GO! GO!" Mitch yells as Tony runs right past me, "LUNA, HERE!" He shouts, opening his arms at me and I run straight to him, strong familiar arms

wrapping to protect me. They're not the arms I want, but I know they need to do this.

"He has a knife," I yell, but the words are muffled in Mitch's shirt.

"KNIFE!" Mitch shouts over my head to the others. "He's got a knife!"

But it doesn't matter. Tony has tackled Jim, head to gut, and Same has his arms restrained. How many times did I see him do that same move on the field when I was a kid? Then they turn him together, Tony issuing a swift, probably unnecessary punch to his temple before they cuff him.

"Luna! I love you! You don't understand!" Jim shouts, spitting out broken leaves and twigs. There's a large cut through his eyebrow, dripping blood into the forest floor.

With that, I completely lose it and push out of Mitch's arms, stumbling a few feet and vomiting into the leaves.

TWENTY-EIGHT

-luna-

SITTING WRAPPED in a silver space blanket on the cold gravel road of the parking area, I'm shaking. Full body quakes. No matter how hard I try, how much I tell myself that I'm safe and nothing bad can happen to me, that it's not cold out and this is just adrenaline in my body, I can't stop them.

Tony saved me.

Just like I knew he would.

And now he's standing 20 feet away talking to another officer, red and blue lights glancing off his face. His face that's set in anger, exhaustion covering it from top to bottom.

He hasn't looked my way in 10 minutes.

Mitch is standing nearby, shooting me what I assume he thinks are subtle looks, checking to see that I'm okay, that I'm not slipping into shock or going to break down.

But I won't do that. Not this time.

This time, now that I'm safe - really, really safe, and not just the illusion of it - this time I'll wait until I'm home, in my bed, cuddled in a mountain of comfort and loneliness, and lose it there.

For now, I'll keep it together.

For now, I'll keep watching Tony. Tony, who refuses to look at me while he talks to the officers, books my stalker.

A few minutes later, Hunter shows up, Hannah in tow in his old Bronco. Before the truck even stops, Hannah is rushing out, running to me, her motherly instincts on full blast. Hunter walks to Tony, long legs and a purposeful stride taking him there quickly.

“Hannah, I don’t know if this is-” Mitch starts, looking at my friend and she collapses next to me in the parking lot of her boyfriend’s property, pulling me into her arms.

“You hush, Mitchell James.” She doesn’t say another word to him as she presses my head into her chest, enveloping me in a warmth that doesn’t touch the numbness in my center. “Honey, are you okay?” she murmurs in my ear.

Hannah was made to be a mother, full of comfort, understanding, and gentleness. I’ve cried in her arms this same way more times than I could count over the years. But not this time.

“I’m good, Han. You didn’t need to come all this way,” I say, and my voice sounds hollow even to me. She pushed back on my shoulders, holding me at arm’s length to look into my eyes, her open face that can never hide a thing flushed with concern and disbelief.

“Lune, you’ve a fucking crazy man that we’ve known nearly our whole lives kidnapped you. You’re one of my best friends. Yes, yes, I *did* need to come.” Her brow is furrowed, deep lines between her eyes not taking away from the pure beauty that is Hannah.

“Seriously, Hannah, it’s like two am. I’m fine. Just tired.” She continues to look at me, unsure and contemplative. But now that actual words are coming from me, no matter how hard I’m working to scrape them out and remain whole, I look at Mitch. “When can I go home? My house should be safe now.” These words scrape my chest raw more than the others, but they must be said.

My saga is done. It’s really, truly done and I can go... home. Especially now.

I don’t need to go back to Tony’s, with the gorgeous whitewashed kitchen and dark wood floor. I don’t need to go sleep in his huge, soft bed or to look at the photos I hung.

What I need is to make this easy, make this easy on him. As soon as he could, he passed me off to Mitch, going into full cop mode and ignoring me. He’s mad, I’m sure. But he’s always wondering what to do now, now that he’s realized what this all was, his protective instinct taking control and making me appear to be more to him than I am.

Just a bar owner and the annoying little sister of his best friend. The little sister he's spent the last month with, who has been in love with him since she was a little girl. Of course, that would blur some lines after time.

I need to make it easy on him. I need to break it off easy, to be understanding, so the relationship he has with my family isn't irrevocably damaged. Tonight, I'll go home, cry in my enormous bed that is filled with blankets and pillows but missing the warmth of him. And in the morning I'll let him off the hook.

Mitch stares at me, concern and confusion bright in his eyes as they flit from me to where Tony is in the distance and back again. "Luna, I-" he stops again when a truck flies into the lot, dirt and rocks spitting from the tires and the engine roaring.

Zander.

My big brother, here to save me.

The truck door flies open before he's even fully in park and he's hopping out, immediately locking eyes on me and jogging my way. In his passenger seat sits Tanner, who slams his door and jogs to the nearest officer. They must have been out together. That explains why he wasn't in his trailer.

When Zee gets to where I am, he bends down, picking me up by my armpits and lifting me into his arms where I cling to him, part from necessity and part in hopes his warmth will cut the chill. No such luck.

"Fuck, baby sister, fuck," The words are muffled by the space blanket still wrapped around me, the crinkling making it hard to hear him, but the rumble in his chest and the relief in his words are almost too much, almost overpower my promise to hold it together until I'm in my bed.

"Zander, I'm fine."

"Should have known it wasn't over. Tony said as much, but wanted it to be so I convinced myself..." I know what he's saying, so I don't make him say more.

"Zander, it's not your fault. We all thought it was over. You couldn't have known."

"It's my job to know, Luna." I get that. But I can't let him think that.

"Seriously, Zander, I gave the guy drinks nearly every night for years, never would have guessed."

"He always gave me bad vibes," he says, but I know he's full of shit. For the next year, we'll all try to see things we missed, try to find where we went wrong, but the truth is, I believe Jim was good at hiding it. None of us saw it

because he didn't want us to see it, and that's that. But I'll let Zee have this because he needs it.

"Can you take her home?" The voice comes from behind Zander, who is still holding me high in the air like I weigh nothing. Tony. I glance over Zee's shoulder to see him, his hair a tousled mess that I know comes from him, running his hands through it over and over. His beautiful face is hard, full officer mode in place, and I can't read a single emotion on it. My brother puts me down, tucking me close into his side while he turns to his best friend.

"What?"

"I've got a ton to do here. Can you take her home, make sure she's safe?" Tony asks, not meeting my eye. Here it is. He wants me out of his space so he can figure out how to salvage this.

"Tony, I think-" Zander starts, and when I look at him, his face looks as confused as my heart feels heavy.

"That's a good idea, I'm exhausted," I say, and now everyone is looking at me confused, Hannah, Zander, and Mitch's faces all awash with concern and worry. Except for Tony, whose face remains hard and steadfast.

"Tony is this-" Mitch starts, but again, I cut him off, softening the blow as I remove the silver blanket from my shoulders and ball it up, the noise drowning out his words. Tony's eyes flit from Mitch to me, a quick flash of confusion and irritation washing over his face before going back to indifference.

"I'm gonna be a couple of hours, at least. We were first on the scene and I need to wait here with Hunter so he can file whatever claims are needed." Tony addresses me for the first time. "Will you be okay by yourself? Once he drops you off and makes sure you're safe, I'm sure Zee could help here, make things go faster." I nod. I refuse to make words leave my mouth because I think at this moment, they would be accompanied by rivers of tears.

And once I start, I know I won't stop.

"Get in his truck, he'll meet you in there," Tony orders, leaving no room for negotiation. Once again I nod and Hannah stands too, grabbing my hand.

"I'll walk her over," she says, grabbing onto my hand. "Do you want me to stay with you?" she asks me, quieter this time as we navigate the vehicles in the lot to get to Zander's truck.

"No, Han, but thanks." The words take every bit of effort I have left to come out alone, without my waterfall of emotions. "We'll meet up for a girls' night soon though, 'kay? Me, you, Sadie, and Zoe." As I say this, I force a

small smile to my lips, trying to remember what muscles I need to make it happen. I'm sure it looks strange, painful and fake.

Because it is.

Hannah holds my eyes for what feels like an eternity before nodding and hugging me tight as we stop in front of Zander's truck. "I love you, girl. So, so happy this is all over. Now smooth sailing and happiness from here on out." I nod, the lump in my throat growing to engulf my vocal cords before we hug and kiss on the cheek. Climbing into my brother's truck, I shut the door and take a deep breath, looking vacantly out the windshield. Waiting.

Waiting to be alone.

Waiting to let it all go, to break.

Seconds later or minutes or, God, hours later, Zander pops the door, the cabin light coming on and shocking me out of my daze. He gets in silently, closing his door, but instead of starting the truck, his body turns to face me.

"Luna," he says, so quiet, I almost don't hear it. I don't answer. I don't turn to look at him. "Lulu, babe, look at me." My head turns, my neck feeling like a pole that controls a puppet. "You good?"

"I'm fine, Zander, just tired." God, my voice. He has to know, has to know the empty void that's creeping in, consuming all it encounters. Has to hear it in my voice. I try again, try to add... something more to it. Life. "I just want to go home, lay in my own bed, and sleep for a year."

"Your own bed?" he says this with a furrowed brow, clearly confused. I don't know why, I'm sure he knows. How could he not?

Tony dismissed me, leaving me to be taken care of by everyone but him. Leaving Mitch to babysit me. Zee to take me home. The anger in his eyes when he looked at me, the disappointment and regret... it was all there, clear as day.

My dream month with Tony Garrison was just that: a daydream that should have never happened. And now I will forever have to remember how perfect it felt while he moves on to better, more perfect, and less complicated things. But not me. I will forever compare everyone to him, and they will forever come up short.

But I'm no longer a damsel in distress. I'm no longer in need of my protector. And I'm just not it - I'll never be the sweet stay-at-home mom who kisses boo-boos and bakes apple pies like Jeanette, the wife he deserves, the future mom his kids deserve.

I will always be wild and crazy, work long nights, and fraternize with the

town drunk. I'll always want to go to rock concerts and go on adventures. I'll always be argumentative and frustrating and I'll never be the woman who does what he asks of me. And all of that is what Tony wants and needs and *deserves*.

It just burns knowing it took him this long to realize it, long enough for me to feel the warmth of the sun, long enough for it to dig deep in me, too deep to dig out.

"Take me home, Zee," I say, soft and resigned.

"But I told-"

"Take me home, Zander!" This time I shout it, my voice bouncing off the glass and one tear breaking free.

"Okay, honey, I'll take you home," he says, soft and sweet, a consoling tone as he turns the key he never removed from the ignition.

We sit the 15-minute drive in utter silence; him driving and me staring out the windshield, counting the oncoming cars I see at three am. 24. 24 cars passed, their headlights blinding me and momentarily helping me forget just how badly I fucked up.

As he parks at my building, I dig in my bag, catching the keys that Mitch got me back on my finger and handing them over to my brother. We walk into the bar and then up the two flights of stairs to my apartment. He unlocks each door, surveying the entrance before calling me in and repeating the process each time. He sits me in the kitchen, still covered in random broken things from the break-in before going room to room to make sure it's all clear.

My brother, being a good brother, offers to stay, of course. I swiftly decline. I'm tired, I say. I'll be fine and promise to call in the morning. He stares at me, unsure where to go, what to say, what to do, but ultimately agrees.

"You'll need to call Dad in the morning. I'm not being a dick, but you know you have to - he'll find out." I nod. He's right.

"I will," I say, my voice barely a whisper at this point as we stand near my front door. "I'll call you in the morning, too. Let you know I'm okay."

"I love you, Luna. We all - *all* of us, Luna. We all love you. Things like this, they shake up men like me. Like us. We act differently when it's our own. Just... just give it time." It's then I know he knows. I know I haven't been able to hide it, to shroud my grief and mourning. Instead of responding, I simply nod, knowing any words will cause the break I'm avoiding, and

open the door. He stares at me a moment longer, nods, then hugs and kisses me on the top of my head before walking out.

My apartment is still a mess, but thankfully I know Sadie, Zoe and Hannah were here last week, helping to clean up the worst of it, so most of the mess is in organized piles and my bed is clean. I stand in the middle of my living room, slowly turning to take it in. The room feels like a physical manifestation of my life - a shambled, a wreck that someone intruded on and tore everything out of, making so nothing will ever be quite the same. Sure, I'll be able to get it close, but never, *never* will I be able to make it pristine again.

With that realization, I drop my bag that I'm still, for some reason, holding on the floor in the center of my living room and walk away, kicking off my shoes as I go. Once again, I mentally thank my girls because otherwise there would be shattered glass to worry about. Instead, I'm able to simply crawl into my perfectly made bed in my room, snuggle into the blankets and pillows, and cry.

Hours later, I wake with a start, my heart pounding, unsure of what woke me until I hear it again.

BANG, BANG, BANG.

My heart stops. Is it Jim? Did he somehow get out? Did whoever was on Luna watching duty, patrolling my bar, let him slip past? My hand slaps around in my bed searching for my phone, throwing soft toss pillows before I remember I left my purse in the living room. *Fuck.*

BANG, BANG, BANG. It comes again, the sound from my interior apartment door, not the annex door, which means the intruder bypassed two other locked doorways. *Holy shit holy shit holy-*

"Luna! Open the goddamn door!"

It's... Tony. Tony is banging and screaming at my front door, demanding I open it. God, what happened? Zee? Is Zander okay? I rush to the door, dodging mess and piles, undoing the chain, then the deadbolt, then the small door key before opening it, dread curling deep in my belly, cold and sinister.

He's there, looking gorgeous, of course, which adds just another layer of horror to my stomach. He's still in his uniform, the buttons of his shirt undone, revealing the white tee he wears underneath, a fine layer of beard scruff showing through his normally clean-shaven face. Exhaustion is

clouding his eyes, and it hurts me to realize that too is my fault - we were up early because of me and now it's probably closer to six am.

But alongside the exhaustion in his eyes is... fury. Pure, unadulterated fury of a man who is absolutely enraged.

"Tony, what the-" I start, but then his hands are on my shoulders, pushing me back into my apartment. In hindsight, I'll remember this was gentle, with a care that should have melted the cold stone, but at the moment, I only feel confusion and fear.

My back hits the wall next to my door and the boot of Tony's boot hits something with a thunk, slamming the door shut. My lips do the same, so lost as to what is happening and still groggy from my nap.

"What the fuck are you doing here?"

"What?"

"I said, what the *fuck* are you doing here?" Tony repeats himself, his hands now on the wall on either side of my face, boxing me in with his large body.

"Tony, you need-"

"Why are you here, Luna?" he asks it again, but I'm so gone, in such shock and confusion that I don't answer. "Why did you have your brother bring you here when you don't fucking live here anymore? Why would you have him bring you somewhere where it is not *secure*? Why the *fuck* would you come here when you know well and good where the fuck I was going to be when I got off, got off dealing with *your fucking shit*?" he says, his face just inches from mine. He's leaning down, his tall frame requiring it to meet my eyes.

"That's not-"

"You might not have asked for this shit, but you sure as fuck didn't do anything to prevent it. And that aside, you still forced your fuckin' brother to *take you here* where I can't *keep you safe*."

"Tony, you-"

"I don't know how to get it through that thick fuckin' skull of yours that this is it, Luna. Me and you. That means you're not in this fuckin' heap, surrounded by fuckin' disaster from some creep who broke in, went through your shit, and *kidnapped you*. Me and you means that when I get off shift, you're home, sleepin' in *my fuckin' bed*. It means you don't make a long night fuckin' longer, makin' me run around town to find you. You need to get your head straight, Luna, because I'm not lettin' you run off, lettin' you hide

from me for 10 years again.” With that, his chest is heaving, his face so close to mine I could just purse my lips and kiss him.

Any other moment, I probably would have.

But now, *I’m* mad.

“Okay, look, Tony, you do not have to right to come into my fucking house, shouting at me like we don’t both know the damn truth!” I say, pushing on his strong chest with both hands, his frame unmoving.

“The truth about what, Luna? What is this shit? What have you twisted in that beautiful fuckin’ head of yours now?”

“The truth about us! That it’s done! You’re done! You don’t have to protect me anymore, Tony! I’m safe and I’m fine. God, I saw it in your eyes. I saw it!” I say, getting into it, my breath becoming labored. “I saw it, Tony,” my voice is softer, breaking. “I saw the regret, knowing that you’ve fucked up. I saw the anger in your eyes when you asked Mitch to watch me, told Zee to drive me home. God, you couldn’t even look at me! And now you’re here, keeping up the facade so that you don’t fuck it up more. Don’t worry Tony, I’ll tell Zee and my parents it was on me. You did good by me, none of this is on you.”

“What look Luna?” he asks, and I’m too far gone to notice his voice has softened, that his grasp on my hip has softened, his jaw has stopped clenching.

“The look Tony. The look you had in your eyes at the scene. I’ve seen it before. I’ve had men, I’ve seen them realize that I’ll never be Susie Homemaker. The regret that they’ll have to hurt a good woman. You got caught up in it, caught in the chaos and the drama, and you forgot. It’s not your fault,” I say before taking a deep breath. “But don’t come barging in here and putting that shit on me. That’s not fair.”

“You need to get your fucking eyes checked,”

“What?”

“You heard me.”

“Tony, I-“

“Serious as fuck, darlin’, I’ve had a long fuckin’ day. I had a fucking amazing night last night after everything and not 24 hours later I’m wonderin’ if I’ll ever be able to make good on the promises I made to my woman about letting her decorate my kitchen. If I’d find her in time, before someone does something fuckin’ sick to her, changing her forever or worse. At that scene, Luna? Where you think you saw some kind of fucking regret?”

Some kind of anger? I *was* angry. I was fucking furious, wanted to wring someone's neck." His eyes are fury and fire, rage and desperation, all wrapped in one. "I was so fucking mad because *I was not fucking there*. I made a fucking promise to you, to be there for you, to keep you safe, to be your goddamn *protector*. And there you were, shiverin' in the goddamn woods, a torn shirt, and fear in your gorgeous eyes. Fear that I didn't stop. A fear I should have *fucking stopped*."

I try to break in, to talk, to stop him, to do... anything to ease the pain I can hear plain and clear, but he continues. "And yeah, you probably saw some lingering fuckin' regret, because the reason he got to you, the only reason you were out of my fucking protection was because I was so busy doing everything that I didn't let you in, forgot who you are, the woman I'm so fucking crazy in love with." I gasp, the cold rock that's been sitting in my stomach for hours down melting, the warm flush of it leaking into my veins and my limbs, bringing new life and hope everywhere it touches. "I was fucking drowning in regret for not sharing with you, trying to shelter you, because if I hadn't, if we'd been the team we always fuckin' thrived as, you wouldn't have run off angry. So yeah, there was anger and there was regret, and I had to let Mitch take care of you, so I didn't smother you. And I had to let the only man I trust with you take you home because I needed to make sure that sorry excuse for a man got booked and that my statement was fresh. I needed that so we could make sure his ass gets locked up, and not for a short amount of time. But what you're not seeing is the fucking exhaustion that was there, the want to get home, to take care of my woman, to make sure she was okay. Did you really think I wanted to be running around town trying to find your ass after I damn well near lost you today?"

"Zee knew where I was," I whisper, shock flooding me so deeply.

"Yeah, Zee knew where the fuck you were, but he didn't fucking tell *me*. And when I got home, and you weren't there, he wasn't answering his *fucking cellphone* because it was five in the goddamn morning and he passed out after the adrenaline rush to end all goddamn adrenaline rushes. And when I finally got a hold of him and found out where you were, the doors were locked and you weren't answering *your* goddamn phone. And, babe, you're gonna need new locks on the annex and the bar door."

"What?"

"Kicked in the back door downstairs. The annex door opened with a fucking credit card. Another issue that, if you weren't packing all your shit up

first thing after a long-ass sleep, I'd give you shit about, but you're moving in so I could give two fucks about that."

"I'm sorry, what?"

"And another fucking thing, Luna, while we're on it. You have a problem, you have a question about how I fuckin' feel about you, especially after we *just fucking talked about this bullshit* you. fuckin'. Talk. To. Me. You don't go to your place and cry yourself to sleep, thinkin' we're over. We talk about shit, every time, no matter if you think I'm angry or regretful or whatever twisted shit just came out of your mouth."

"Tony, honey, please--"

"I love you, Luna. I fucking love you, have since I was 17, and I realized you were it for me, that you and I were gonna be it. Love you like crazy, gonna make babies with you and let you name the girls crazy hippie names and you're gonna suck it up when I name the boys strong names that won't get them laughed at. We're gonna finish our house, make it the place you're gonna raise those babies in, have family dinners and crazy Christmas mornings in. Fuck, I'll even let Maggie come over and rub sage on it if that is what you want. But what I'm not gonna do is let you constantly overthink and overanalyze what we are and what you mean to me. I'm not the kind of man who likes to repeat himself, Luna. You need to get this shit through your head, you hear me?"

I stand silent, looking into Tony's gorgeous eyes, eyes that when I was 16, I daydreamed about seeing in the eyes of baby boys and baby girls and then when I was 17, the eyes that haunted my embarrassed dreams. Eyes I avoided looking into for years, eyes that were burning into mine, anger, and exhaustion, and, God, yes, there it is - love shining in them. Love shining so brightly I can't believe it took me this long to see it. I can only guess it was shining so bright, it blinded me.

When moments turn into silent seconds, it becomes clear that Tony is looking for an actual answer - finally. And I give it to him.

"You love me?" My voice doesn't sound like my own, soft and fragile, hopeful and shaky. His lips turn up at the edges, relief washing away the anger, and his body melts into mine, pressing me further into the wall as his hand combs into the back of my head.

"Yes, Luna Sage Davidson, I love you."

"And... and you wanna have babies with me?"

"Yes, darlin', we're gonna fill that house up with messes and laughter,"

he says, a chuckle in his voice.

“You’re gonna let Aunt Maggie smudge the house?” I ask, a small laugh in my voice, drowned only by the frog also taking residence in there.

“If it keeps you lookin’ at me like you are right now, I’ll let her do whatever she wants.”

“I’ve loved you since I was seven,” I say, so quietly I’m not sure if he hears me.

“I know, Luna.” His voice is just as soft, but I hear it all the same.

“You gotta ask my dad to marry me before we have babies or you might not live to see them.”

“Yeah, I know,” he says, rubbing his nose on mine, a laugh pushing hot air against my lips. “You good baby?” he asks and I instinctually know he’s talking about what happened last night with Jim, not him and me. Because I’ll always be good if I have him and me.

“I got you, I’m just fine,” I say, and it’s clearly the right answer because finally, *finally* Tony kisses me in the apartment I’ve lived lonely in for years, over the bar I built from the ground up against all advice. I kiss the man of my dreams, my protector, my *brother’s best friend* and fuck, does it feel perfect.

TWENTY-NINE

-luna-

THE NEXT MORNING I wake up in a sea of pillows and blankets, my body sore from running in the woods, the shivering, and the general trauma of the night before. But looking over, I see Tony's handsome, sleepy face, and I can't help but smile. Smile remembering last night, the good part, the confession. All of it.

But looking at him, I also see the bandage taped to his forehead and I remember that I never asked what happened, how Jim got past him. My fingers move from where they lay on his warm chest to caress the bandage, guilt hitting me square in the gut.

I know that neither of us should feel guilt at all. I also know we both feel it. Only time can heal that wound. The best way to get back at him, to conquer that guilt, is to be together, live our life together and happy and... in love.

A small part, a tiny teenage part that lives in every woman forever and always squeals at that thought.

Anthony Thomas Garrison loves me.

My lips tip up with that thought at the same time his eyes crack open, meeting mine.

"Now that's how I want to wake up every morning for the rest of my life," Tony mumbles sleepily, lifting a hand to cup my jaw gently. I wonder if

there's a bruise where Jim backhanded me. His hand brings me close gently before his lips graze mine.

Yes, I could get used to this.

"Good morning," I say against his lips. His hand goes down to my ass, squeezing gently and making me smile.

"Morning, beautiful," he says back, his voice gravelly and sexy with sleep. "How are you feeling?" Mentally I evaluate my body head to toe to give a suitable answer.

"Alright, I think. A little achy, a bit of a headache, but all things considered, I feel great." And I do. Being safe, this nightmare over and ending it with the man of my dreams laying next to me? Yeah, I'm feeling good. "How's your head?" I say, glancing up at the small butterfly bandage on his forehead.

Tony smiles before using his hand on my ass as leverage to roll me on top of him so I'm laying across his body. "Which head? Because one feels fine and the other could use some attention," he asks, pure laughter in his voice sounding lighter than it has the entire time we've been together.

"Anthony Thomas!" I shout, laughing as I smack his arm with my good hand. "I cannot believe you just said that!"

"Darlin', wakin' up with you in my bed, no other way to feel." To prove his point, he pushes my hips down while he pushes his own up to show me exactly what he means. The feel of his hard length pressed against my softest parts sends a shiver down my spine and pushes a breathy sigh from my lungs.

"Jesus, it's like I'm 17." His lips press to mine, soft and slow, and not even a small part of me is sleepy anymore.

"Do you think it will stop?" I ask against his lips, already breathing heavier and ready for him. His hands are slipping up my back and down into the ass of my panties, grabbing two handfuls of flesh and pulling my body even deeper into his. He groans.

"What, baby?"

"How badly we need each other. I don't know if I'll ever get enough of you," I say, running my lips down his neck to kiss and lick, nip and suck all along the stretch of skin.

"We got a lifetime to test it out," Tony says, and goddamn it if that isn't the most amazing thing I've ever heard. My head pokes up, looking him in the eyes. They're full of lust, need, and want, but overpowering all of that is love. Love so deep, so all-consuming I can feel its warmth on my skin.

“Yeah?” I ask, my voice hopeful. Last night - the good part with the confessions of love and future marriage and babies - feels like some beautiful dream I may have concocted in my sleep.

Tony’s hand is on my cheek, holding me, a thumb swiping over the skin. He stares at me, taking me in. “Oh yeah,” he says, then uses his body to roll mine under his, caging me in.

“I love you, Tony,” I say, the words falling out of my mouth for the first time feeling natural, like I’ve said them a million times over. His eyes soften, still boring into mine, but now with a different intent.

“Love you too, darlin’. Now I’m gonna make love to you if you’re ready to stop talking. Then I gotta get some food in my girl and take her to see her parents so they can see she’s okay.”

“Okay,” I say, my voice breathless as he once again pushes his hips into mine, then his hands push my shirt up. I help him get the top over my head, carefully avoiding my cheek and my wrist, leaving me in the tiny boy short panties that I slept in.

One hand trails back down to my ass, holding me on him, dragging callused fingers down my bare skin. The other comes up to my face, a thumb brushing the curve of my jaw. “Wanted to kill him.” He says this, eyes hyper-focused on where his thumb is. If I wasn’t sure before, now I know there is definitely a mark.

“Tony, I-”

“Right there, didn’t give a fuck about witnesses. Just saw the fear in your face, heard it in your voice, you runnin’ for your life through a fuckin’ forest. Wanted to kill a man.”

“I’m fine, honey.”

“Been doin’ this a while. Never felt that urge. Always knew it was my job to get them in custody and let the systems serve justice. Isn’t always perfect. Know some of ‘em got off. But that isn’t my job, not my purpose.” He sighs, hand leaving my face to run through my hair. “Last night, I wanted to serve that justice.”

“Tony, I’m fine. I’m here with you. We’re fine. He’s locked up with an airtight case. End of story.”

“And you’re by my side. No more convincing me you need space. No more telling me you don’t want a man on you. Serious as fuck, Luna, you pull that shit again. I’m locking you away for a month and spankin’ your ass every night.” God, why was that hot? Regardless of this serious conversation,

I couldn't help but squirm on top of him, just a little. His angry, annoyed face breaks into a smile.

"See that didn't have the desired effect on you. We can explore that another time." A thrill runs through me at 'exploring' with Tony. "But before we go any further, need you to understand that. I get a gut feeling, you've got some kind of protection. You got me?" With two incidences where I didn't follow this protocol going bad, I can only nod.

"Yes, Tony. I promise," I say, sincerity ringing in my voice clear even to my ears.

"My fuckin' girl," he says, clearly pleased. He rolls, taking me with him so I'm pinned beneath him and his lips hit mine.

Every time we kiss, it's like the world stops spinning, chaos stops reigning. The world around us quiets, stilling until it's just us, just Tony and I in our own world. A world where we know each other, everything about each other, nothing to figure out because it's just... right. We are right. And we have been, always.

His forearms frame my head as his lips slowly, leisurely slide along my own, his tongue delving in to taste, to explore my mouth. My breathing ratchets, the awareness of every inch of my body on high alert. His shirtless chest presses against my own, warm skin against warm skin and somehow, somehow, this kiss is more intimate than any moment I've ever had with his man. With *any* man.

"Tony," I whisper, overwhelmed by it all, so completely and totally at a loss with the intensity of what I feel.

"I know, darlin', me too," he says, and that's it. That's what makes the overwhelm sweet and tolerable. He's right there with me, feeling it too...

He loves me.

With that thought, I arch my hips, eager to feel more, to be closer. Two thin layers of fabric are between us, but it's too much. Too much. I need it all. I need him.

"Tony," I say, desperate measure in my voice.

"I know, baby, I know, I've got you, baby," he says through kisses, his lips never leaving mine. One hand reaches down, hooking a thumb on the hip of my panties and clumsily tugging them down. If I wasn't getting more and more frantic to be with him, to remember that we're alive and together and safe and *in love*, I would laugh. I don't know if I've ever seen Tony clumsy in my entire life. And here I am, making him that way with just a few kisses

and even fewer words.

I love that for us.

When my boy shorts are lower than he can reach, I used my legs to kick them off myself while he tugs off his boxers. And then there's nothing, just us. Nothing between us. He settles back and we both let out a breath, a sigh of relief mixed with a groan of need.

Tony's hand slips between us, gliding up and in on my leg, up my thigh until his thumb reaches my center. Another groan, deep and virile, slips from his lips when he hits me. "Thank God, ready for me," he says, his thumb rolling my clit with slow circles, trailing my wet up and down my slit. Through all of this, our bodies are still pressed together, lips still on each other.

"Always, honey," I say, and it's true. One word, one look from him and I'm ready, craving and needing him. His hand leaves me and I mewl in protest, but he just chuckles at me as he grabs his length, lines himself up with me, sliding the head through my wetness before it notches and he thrusts in.

Immediately my body tenses, fully body shakes at the feeling of relief already pulsing just from having him inside me. The fullness is exquisite and feels... right. My moan of pleasure, of utter rightness, is swallowed by his mouth, his groan drowning in my own.

He stops there for a moment, two, three, both of us basking in the feel of home, of feeling completed before he starts. Lazy thrusts followed by a slow reluctant retreat draw low moans and heavy breaths from me. My lips continue to devour his, little nips, teeth clashing occasionally, both moving against each other. It's as if we're both afraid to stop, afraid that if we do, this beautiful dream will shatter.

With each thrust, his public bone grinds against my clit, driving my pleasure higher and higher, the need and want coiling in my gut as he drives into me, hitting what feels like every nerve ending within my body.

"Tony!" I teeter on the edge, so close, but refusing to go without him.

"Almost, darlin'," he says, knowing in a way that two people who are deeply and truly connected, mind, body, and soul what I want.

"Tony!" I say, my voice desperate. His hands come up, intertwining with mine and placing them next to my head.

"Almost, Luna, hold on to me," he says, and I do. I hold on to his hands, tight and intertwined. Our eyes are locked, staring into each other, saying it

all without a single word. But I have to.

My voice is faint and contrastingly steady when I say, “I love you, Tony.” His eyes flare, he thrusts deep, and he shouts.

“Now, Luna!” And we both tip over the edge, our lives forever and always intertwined, love deep and burning bright.

As we come down, as I start to drift back to sleep, I hear his voice in my ear, feel scruff on my temple as he says, “I love you too, my sweet Luna.” And I fall asleep, sweet dreams in my mind and my protector keeping safe.

“We won’t be long, promise. Just need to check in, get some info, then we can head home.” We’re in Tony’s truck, driving to the station hours after our first wake-up. Tony let me doze another hour or so before we finally rolled out of bed and drove home, where he made me breakfast that we ate in the kitchen we fixed together before getting ready.

It was after that I saw the bruise on my jaw, a livid purple that I tried my best to delicately cover with makeup so as not to draw even more attention.

The truck is quiet, music softly playing in the background, too soft for me to identify anything other than the rock genre. But the silence is comfortable, companionable. Safe.

“I want to move out today,” I say, staring out the front windshield of Tony’s truck, his hand in mine rubbing tiny, soft circles on my thumb with his own. With my words, his hand freezes. “For good.”

“Luna, not playin’ this fuckin’ game with you.” His voice is stern, anger bubbling underneath.

“No, no, Tony, not from your place-“

“Our place.” His words are firm, with no room for argument. Not that I would - I love it. A small smile forms on my lips.

“*Our* place. I want to gather everything I need from my apartment today. We’re both off and I want to get it done with.” I don’t tell him I want to get it done today, the day after I was kidnapped. I don’t tell him I’m afraid if I put it off that something dark will form there, even after the magic and love and confessions that happened last night and this morning.

But, of course, he knows. Tony always knows. “You ready for that?” he asks, taking his eyes off the road quickly to check me over.

“I want to get it done. I had most of the things I need in a pile before...” My voice drowns off, unwilling to expand.

“Got it,” he says, not forcing me to. “We’ll do that but you gotta know, at some point tonight we gotta see your folks.” My eyes roll into my head, already exhausted at the prospect. “Luna,” he warns.

“Can’t we wait?”

“Fuck no, Luna. Already got a few calls from your dad that I’ve fielded. Even Ace called me once, all the way from fuckin’ Colorado. Zee told them you’re okay, but you know your family. They’ll want to know you’re good, and not just physically.” I sigh. “Not to mention, Ma’s already called me twice, asking ‘bout you.”

“Your mom?” That’s unexpected.

“She loves you, babe. Loves me. Knows what you are to me. Of course, she’s worried.” Warmth rolls through me. “See that means somethin’ to you. Glad, darlin’. Hope the also means that when I tell you, everyone’s comin’ over tonight to grill out and check in on you, you won’t flip out on me.” I *totally* want to flip out on him.

“I don’t flip out on you!”

“Luna.” His eyes stay on the road, but a smile on his lips.

“Not always, at least.”

“Luna,” he says again, laughter in his voice now. I cross my arms over my chest, minding my still achy wrist.

“Whatever. What time is everyone coming? Who’s everyone?”

“Your parents, Zee, my parents. Knowing that lot, I’m sure Maggie will be by, and if Maggie comes she’ll tell Hannah, who will bring Hunter, maybe Sadie. Mitch might drop by, maybe Sam. Sure you’ll call Zoe, she’ll tell her dad. He’ll call your dad, so probably Chief and Sue.” This was all true. God, I *loved* this. I loved that this will be my life from now on.

“I love this,” I say, quietly, not sure he even can hear me.

“Yeah, darlin’. Me too.” He parks the truck as he says this, then stares at me, and I see that he’s not talking about having it all, having friends and family and people who care. That we have this built-in history and support network. He’s talking about me.

“I love you too, Tony,” I say, and his eyes warm, softens and sweetness settling in.

“Let’s get this over with. Get to your place, grab what we need, move you in,” he says, opening up the door and coming around to open mine.

THIRTY

-tony-

“HE WAS TAKING her out of the country,” Mitch says, his voice steady and eyes watchful, waiting for me to erupt. But lucky for him, Luna already told me this. I didn’t blow up then since she’d seen enough chaos and emotion. Instead, I buried that shit deep for a drunk night with my guys where I could let it all out.

“She told me.”

“How much did she tell you about what happened while he had her? About what he told her?” Jim McCloud, supreme psycho that he is, kidnapped Luna from her own apartment with me standing out front and had her for four hours. Three and a half of those I was conscious for.

When I woke in the parking lot of the bar, I was in a confused daze, trying to figure out what happened. Security cameras have since helped me piece together a bit of it - Jim came over to where I stood leaning against the truck, staring up at the small road-facing window that was Luna’s apartment. He said hi, said he was sorry, and then slammed me in the temple with a large rock he’d found in the parking lot.

He then went up into her apartment, spent five minutes up there, and came down with my girl hoisted over his shoulder, driving off towards Sunshine Falls where he worked for Tanner’s construction company part-time. His other job was doing intensive tech jobs for corporations. Most of

his time was spent trying to hack into their computer systems and then building new, impenetrable systems. The jobs paid extremely well, which is how he had created a healthy nest egg.

A nest egg he was using to take Luna away from me.

I'm man enough to admit that if he'd succeeded, we probably would have never found her. With his tech skills, hiding an identity for however long he wanted would be simple.

Jim had told Luna about this plan, a plan she had relayed to me. That he wanted to take her away, build a family with her in some kind of sick and twisted hideaway. The thought alone made me want to go back in time and throw one more punch at his gut.

"We talked. Don't know how much she told me, how much he left out."

"Did she... tell you about the party?" Mitch is cautious, which has me on edge.

"What party?"

"Ahh fuck. Fuck." The words scrape through gritted teeth as he runs a hand down his face. He looks up at Zander who is standing next to him in the interrogation room we're currently debriefing in. Luna is out chatting with the men and Chief, being Luna and charming them all regardless of the fact she was kidnapped and assaulted just last night,

"What party, Mitch?" I ask, getting frustrated.

"Okay, okay, look, I'm gonna tell you but I need to you keep your cool, okay Tony? Keep your fuckin' cool. It's history, nothing we can do about it now. He's in custody. Dumb ass is pleading not guilty so we can fuckin' slam his ass when everything blows up in his face." Frustration, fear, and anger are bubbling.

"Get to the point, Mitch."

"Okay, okay. Do you remember Zee's graduation party? You told me about it." I feel a hand on my shoulder as I think back. Not that I need to. It's a day ingrained in my mind for eternity. Looking up, I see Zander, a stoic face of calm collection in his face. Fuck.

"Yeah, what about it?"

"Remember you told me that Lune came, and you found her. She was drinking, but it was more than that." The sour in my gut is churning, growing. I nod at Mitch, telling him to go on. "It wasn't Cole." My vision goes white. The hand on my shoulder presses me down. "Tony, you gotta fuckin' chill out," Mitch warns. I stare at him, not really seeing, barely hearing.

“What the fuck happened?”

“It was Jim. He had a thing for her in high school. She caught his eye when she was a freshman, he’s fucking whacked in the head, thought it was true love or some shit, who knows. Saw her get to Zee’s party. He was there for some fuckin’ reason, no idea why. He wasn’t a friend of yours or Zee’s. Anyway, saw Lune get there and convinced Roberts to spike the drinks he was giving her. He planned to take her home when she was too messed up. But... you showed up.”

He had drugged Luna all those years ago.

He had drugged a 17-year-old girl when he was at least 20 at the time.

He had drugged *my fuckin’ girl*, intending to do God knows what.

“You saved her, Tone,” Zander says, voice angry, but he’s had time. Time to process. He also didn’t see her that night. Didn’t see how out of it she was. How dangerous.

“*He fucking drugged my girl when she was fuckin’ 17,*” I say, the words a rumble that feels like it’s shaking the walls.

“She wasn’t your girl then, Tony.”

“Fuck off, Zander she was always mine and you fucking know it.” His mouth snaps shut. But all I can think. All I can see. All I know is those 10 wasted years.

Ten years of thinking Luna hated me.

Ten years of Luna thinking I rejected her.

Ten years of Luna avoiding me.

Ten years that we could have been together,

We’d probably be married by now.

Probably would have a baby.

“*God fucking dammit!*” I shout, standing and pushing Zander off and away from me. Pain is stabbing through me, regret and anger overtaking every molecule of air in my body and turning it into shards.

“Tony, you need to calm the fuck down.” What I need is to go out and find my girl, hold her, shake her, ask why she didn’t tell me. Protect her. *Protect her. I need to protect her.* It’s all that’s running through my mind. Mitch’s hand reaches out to grab my arm and I hear the two of them arguing, but I just elbow him, shaking him off as I leave the room to go find Luna.

Then I stop, dead in my tracks.

Luna is sitting, ass to a desk, legs swinging, her head tipped back, laughing. Men sit in chairs they pulled over around her and they’re shooting

the shit, all laughing and... normal.

I've seen it a million times.

Luna has a light that draws people to her, always has. Her aunt says she's a moon bean and we're all moths, inexplicably drawn to her. Seeing it in action has always stopped me, made me watch.

And there she is, laughing, safe, happy.

It doesn't matter what happened 10 years ago.

It doesn't matter that all this time was wasted.

She grew. I grew. Who knows if we'd gotten together, then if we'd be the same people today. She went out and blossomed, started her business, grew confident and snarky and beautiful inside and out. I'm grateful that I have this version of her, the strong, tough, untouchable version that doesn't break when she faces terrible circumstances.

Mitch and Zee catch up to me and stop, too. Whether it's because I'm stopped or because they're caught in her trap too, I don't know. I don't care. Because sitting there is my universe. The woman of my dreams. The woman who I will spend the rest of my life protecting and keeping safe, will spend my life keeping the babies we make together safe.

When her head tips back down, laughter exhausted, her eyes meet mine and they soften as a smile shines on her face and I know I need to have that talk with her dad.

Soon.

THIRTY-ONE

-luna-

Two Months Later

“KATE! Can you grab me three Buds and a Coors?” I shout from one side of the bar, where I’m shaking up a margarita for Sadie. She and Hannah are sitting across from me at their regular seats, dressed to the nines to sit in my little dive bar. I *love* these girls.

“Got it, Lune!” she shouts, digging under the bar and grabbing the bottles, popping the tops off as she does. I tip my chin over to the group of barely legal guys sitting close to where the girls are as I pour the drinks into two rimmed glasses. Leaning over, I pass them to the girls.

“I’ll cover the drinks for these beautiful ladies,” one of the cuter of the boys says, winking at Hannah. She looks at Sadie and all three of us fight a laugh. But Sadie turns her chair to face the group.

“Isn’t that so sweet! Thanks, boys,” she says, tossing her golden hair over her shoulder with a sweet smile. Two of them break off from the group with their beers in hand. One with a white polo hands me his card.

“Start a tab, will you?”

Now, I rarely allow my friends to pay when I’m here. Of course, they do their best to do so, sometimes paying one of my other bartenders or sneaking cash under a glass, but generally speaking, my girls drink for free when

they're here. But another guy's money? Sure, I'll take that. "Got it," I say, taking his card and processing it while I listen to the conversation that's brewing.

"So are you from around here?" he asks and God, it's mean, but I can't help but roll my eyes. "Haven't seen you around." This time I snort. Both women have lived in our small town their entire lives and being that this is both my bar and the only bar in town, the boys just showed their hand.

"Oh, we come every once in a while, maybe we should come more," Hannah says, elbowing Sadie with a smirk.

"I definitely think that's a good idea," one of the boys says, sidling up to Hannah, and God, it's such a sad sight to see as an outsider looking in. This is the shit I *live* for as a bar owner. Awkward interaction of the human-kind.

"Yeah, I think I've had enough of that," Hunter, Hannah's boyfriend, says, gently pushing the poor kid out of the way and wrapping an arm around Hannah's waist. As always, Hunter wasn't far, sitting in the corner with Tanner as the girls drink and dance too much on a busy Friday.

"Hunter, that was rude," Hannah says, false annoyance on her face and a hand shoving his chest gently away. Instead of letting go, he pulls her in closer and angles her head back to look at him. Her long dark hair curls and drapes over his arm and he bends low, touching his lips to hers. A soft sigh that can be seen rather than heard over the music escapes, and I smile at the intimate moment.

I look over at the boys who are slowly heading back to their group of friends. "Sorry, fellas, these two are just shameless flirts. I'll cover their drinks for you," I say, and the one who shot his shot sends a small wave and awkward smile. He's cute. There will be another girl within the hour, I'm sure. Hopefully, more his age and single.

"Ugh, please, can we stop for once? It's so depressing to be the single one." Sadie says with a roll of her eyes, gulping her drink.

"Tell me about it," Tanner says, leaning into the bar. "Can I get another, Lune?" Tanner is taller than everyone, almost always a head above the crowd and built. His longish sandy blonde hair is finger-combed back, but more often than not, it's falling in his face. Ever since an employee of his kidnapped me and brought me to his trailer at this work site, he's been extra attentive and kind. I guess it's the kind of thing that creates a bond between people.

All the men in my life have been extremely attentive and protective. If I

hadn't learned my lesson with having a babysitter, it would probably get to me, but it just makes me roll my eyes and do whatever I want, anyway.

That part drives Tony and my brother absolutely insane, but I think they secretly love it. It is my job to bug them, after all.

"Shut up, Tanner, if you wanted you could snap your fingers and have a chick at your side," Sadie says, rolling her eyes.

"Oh, and you couldn't?" I ask, popping the top off a beer for Tanner and sliding it over to him.

"Oh. I totally could," Sadie says, a wicked smile on her lips. "But why settle when I can just play all the time?" I almost believe her. Except right after she says it, a quick sliver of darkness or betrayal flits through her eyes. Hmm.

"And what about you, Tanner? You don't seem to play or settle," I ask, going into bartender mode. If I remember correctly, when I was a senior, Tanner got engaged to some chick he dated throughout high school. He graduated a year after Zander and Tony and I remember them chatting about it over dinner one night when they were home from the Academy.

His eyes shutter, telling me everything I need to know. "I'll settle one day. Got a lot on my plate with the business for now," he says.

"I've heard that before," Hannah says, a laugh in her voice. Hunter pulls her in close once again, pressing his lips to hers.

"Just took the right woman." She melts into him. *Oh, God, I love Hannah has found this.*

"Okay, can we go dance or something before I puke?" Sadie says, sliding her empty glass my way before looking at Hannah, a hand on her hip.

"Gotta go dance with my girl, babe," she tells her man, kissing him once more.

"We'll be here watching," Hunter says before watching her ass move as she walks away. Laughter follows the girls into the crowd as they go off to have some fun.

"Tony on tonight?" Tanner asks, settling into Sadie's abandoned bar stool.

"Yup," I say, nodding at a customer to his right and grabbing her a drink.

"Is he coming in when he's off?" Hunter asks, sitting in Hannah's seat, his eyes in the spot in the crowd I know Hannah and Sadie are.

"Yeah, later," I say. Our schedule hasn't changed much since the days when I had an active stalker. Most mornings, Tony wakes before me, getting

in a workout before he comes back into bed and works *me* out. Sometimes he drags me into the shower, sometimes I mosey into the kitchen to get started on coffee. Then we go about our days. If he's off and I'm on, he'll sit in my bar, at the seat most everyone knows not to sit in because it's *his*. Just like he told me he wanted. We spend the night laughing, talking in between orders. Sometimes he drags a friend, sometimes it's just him. Sometimes he has to put on his officer hat and handle a rowdy customer.

It took about a month for him to feel comfortable leaving me unattended. This means for a month I was *never* alone. Even when I was 'alone', I either was in our house behind the updated security system or had some kind of not-so-secret watchdog with me. Like Hunter magically coming on a girl's night or Zander's patrol car driving by three times in one hour when I was out to lunch with Jeanette. But as promised, I was fine with it. I got it, completely. He needed this to feel okay, and I was here to give it to him.

But eventually, that fear wore off into a comfortable day-to-day. He still threatens to spank my ass anytime I don't answer when he calls and I'd be a liar if I said sometimes I purposely miss that call. I love to get that man all riled up.

"You seem good, Luna," Tanner says, looking at me in a way I know he is talking about something other than my physical appearance. "Happier. Not just because that fuckin' creep is gone. But happier than you've been in years." Tanner and I have a strange connection now, having spent some of the most horrifying moments of my life in his trailer. I just wish he'd open up more himself.

"I am, Tan, I really, really am." I wink at him before serving a few more drinks as he chats with Hunter.

"Uh, Luna, looks like you might see your man sooner rather than later," Sadie says from the bar where she magically appeared, Hannah at her side. I look at her to see her tipping her head towards a corner where two men are arguing, one getting closer to his foe, pinning him in the corner.

"Jake!" I shout, pointing to the commotion. My bouncer, Jake, looks that way before throwing a thumbs up and heading over.

"Is it fucked up that I hope someone lands a punch so I have to call the station?" I say out loud.

"No," Sadie and Hannah say at once.

"Yes," Tanner and Hunter say at the same time.

But it's too late for that. Before Jake can even get there, the bigger of the

two cocks his arm back and slams his fist across his opponent's face in a move that is going to leave a mark in the morning. An admittedly sick jump in my step, I head to the bar phone where I dial a number I have memorized by heart into the old school landline, a smile playing on my lips.

Then men are sitting on opposite sides of the building outside, Jake sitting with one and friends of both men sitting with the other. The man who was hit has a bag of ice help to his face courtesy of Kate, but music is still playing inside, drinks still being served.

The night must go on.

In the dark of night, the faint gleam of red and blue lights glimmers down the street before I can even hear the tires of Tony's cruiser, Mitch in the passenger street. I made sure dispatch knew it wasn't an emergency, just a typical Saturday at the bar. It seems that means lights, but no siren.

Parking right in front of the bar, Mitch hops out first, walking towards the man being watched like a hawk by Jake. I know the drill by now. They'll assess both men for injuries, decide if a medic is necessary. Then they'll get statements from both and ask if there will be charges pressed. Depending on the night and the attitude of the perpetrators, they might get a fine, they might let them off.

But always, always, Tony walks to me first.

His thumbs are hooked on his belt, a small smirk playing on his lips as he walks over to me. "Couldn't have a single peaceful night, could you, Luna?"

"Sorry Officer, I can't help it that your citizens are hooligans," I say, smiling as I lean into the lamppost in front of the bar.

"What happened this time?"

"Fighting over a girl. One punched the other. Jake broke it up, and it seems fine now. But you know the rule. You start a fight, I call the cops." It's actually a sign on my front door, letting patrons know before they enter.

"Good rule to have," Mitch says as he walks from the assailant to me, where I stand between both men.

"See, I gotta cop boyfriend, and he's totally uptight. If I don't and he finds out something happened at the bar, I get punished." I wink at Mitch, a smile fighting its way out.

"Gross, I do not need to know about how my partner punishes you, Luna."

“Okay, enough of this,” Tony says, grabbing me behind the neck and pulling me up for a kiss. He plants one, hard and fast, nothing special, but even now it still gives the butterflies a chance to stretch their wings and makes me feel lightheaded. “Who should we talk to first?” he asks, face still close to mine, arm resting at my waist.

“Doesn’t matter. Big guy over there threw the first punch,” I say, tilting my head to the left.

“Got it. Stay out here in case we have questions, yeah?” he says, and I know it’s less about having questions and more about wanting me in his line of sight any time he can have it. I give him that play. Partly because of what happened, partly because I love to watch this man in action.

An hour later, both men are off, once again friends with neither pressing charges.

“Got another call. You closing normal time?” Tony asks, pulling me into him as Mitch says goodbye to everyone. Jacob is already back inside, monitoring the rowdier late-night crowd.

“Yup, Hunter and Tanner are inside with Sadie and Hannah,” I tell him what he already knows.

“Got it. I’ll send the guys a text. Ask them to stay until you lock up if I’m running later.

“Tony,” I start, ready to argue.

“We have a deal, Lune,” he says and I sigh, nodding.

“If I fight you on it, will you spank me tonight?” I tease, with a smile in my voice. His hands pull me into his hips tight, driving a shiver down my spine.

“Luna...”

“I’m just asking.”

“Darlin’, you want me to spank you tonight, you just say the word and when I get off I’ll make your ass red,” he whispers, his head dipping down to my ear so only I can hear. “You just have to ask.”

“Yes, please,” I say, gravel in my voice and he groans before pulling back when Mitch bleeps the siren, indicating our time is up.

“Jesus fuck, Luna, please for the love of God, hold on to that thought.”

I wink before pushing him away. “Go, babe. I’ll see you after close.” His eyes are still blazing as he turns away from me and jogs into his cruiser, my eyes on his ass the whole time.

My bare stomach is laid across muscled thighs, my breathing heavy as a callused thumb trail up the inside of my thigh to graze the line of my lacy panties.

Tony is about to spank me and *holy fucking shit* if this isn't the hottest thing ever.

"You want this, darlin'?" he asks and God, I really do love this man. He's not asking to be hot or sexy. He's asking to make sure that it's what I want, to make sure that he's within my boundaries. Even though he can probably see the damp spot on my panties, he asks to make sure. *This fucking man.*

"Yeah, Tony," I say in a whisper. The sound comes out like a soft breath of air, but I know he heard it when he starts to rub small circles with the flat of his hand on my exposed ass cheek. *Holyshit* this is so fucking hot.

"You gonna tease me when I'm at work again?" he asks, his voice gravel, rough and hot, and scoring through me. He wants this as bad as I do.

"Probably," I say, purposely snarky, part because it's who I am and part because I want to get this show on the road. That one word seems to have been his breaking point because his hand leaves my skin, quickly comes back down with force and a loud smack that I feel straight in my pussy.

The sound is more impressive than anything, the feeling itself not even registering on the skin but my core which clenches tightly. A soft breath leaves my throat in a shallow moan. He immediately lifts his hand and brings it down again, this time in a different spot.

This strike draws a deep moan from my throat.

"Fuck, Luna," I hear Tony groan as he rubs the raw spot he just created.

"Tony." I'm begging now, needing... everything. More. But it's unnecessary, as he always knows exactly what I need, when I need it. His hand comes down again and again, each time in a slightly different area, each time forcing a rush of wet between my legs until I'm moaning and squirming in his lap, so needy and so empty.

Right when I think I can't take anymore, when I think that if he doesn't stop and slide into me right away I'll combust, he stops, rubs, and lifts me from his lap. Always in tune with what I need.

He grabs my body, positioning me so I'm on my knees and elbows, facing the mattress, my ass in the air, wearing just tiny panties. A hand goes to the flat of my back and presses gently so my ass, sore and I'm sure pink from his hand is raised well above the rest of my body. Stepping back to check out his handiwork, Tony groans with satisfaction, a hand rubbing over

my skin before grabbing a handful roughly.

“This fuckin’ ass. So fuckin’ pretty, darlin’.”

“Tony,” I moan, desperate and needing him in me. Without a word, his finger hooks into my panties on either side and pulls them down until they’re halfway down my thighs. I go to move a leg to help them down but he stops me. Tugging my legs apart so that the panties create restricted movement.

“Don’t fucking move,” he says before I hear the distinctive clink of his belt being undone, his pants falling to the ground. I took off his shirt when we arrived home, so logic tells me he’s naked and hopefully about to fuck me. Finally. Since he left the bar, his threat and promise hanging in the air between us this is all I’ve been able to think about.

His warmth radiated off him as he stands behind me, right between my legs but it’s a shock to my system when I feel his hot, wet tongue drag from my clit, through the slit of my pussy, and up until he dips into my hole. Tasting me. Another moan drags from my chest. He places a hand on each ass cheek, using his thumbs to part me, exposing me to the cool air of the room.

“Tony, I need you, fuck me, please.” I’m begging now, needing more, needing him. Needing this.

“Be good, Luna, or I’ll smack your pretty ass again.” The idea makes me clench and drives another rush of wet between my legs. His deep voice groans at the sight before his hands are on either side of my sex, thumbs pulling me apart. “God, so fucking pretty,” he says before placing a wet kiss right at my center and standing. Finally, finally, *finally*, he lines himself up and I’m ready for him to slam into me, my hips moving backward where I’m positioned at the very end of the bed, the perfect height for him to slide in perfect.

Right as he does, slamming into me and bottoming out one hand leaves my hips and smacks hard and I cry out, clamping tight on him as I scream at the blissful mix of pain and pleasure cracking through me. “FUCK! TONY!” I shout, my voice going hoarse as he pulls out again and slams in, both hands on my hips, driving me back more forcefully onto his cock. I start to move with him, rearing back to get him deeper, to take what I need.

“Fuck yeah, Luna. Fuck yourself on my cock,” he says, and his hands move to run down my back where they cup my shoulders, bringing me up onto my hands. One hand stays on my shoulder as the other tangles in my hair, pulling firmly but gently to guide me. But rather than guiding, he lets

me take the lead, lets me use him for my own pleasure as I fuck him relentlessly, bucking into his hardness.

We're fire, combustible and dangerous together like this, when the sweet goes out the door and just leaves need and grit. It's like nothing I've ever felt before and I crave it every single fucking day.

"Oh, fuck, Tony, I'm close," I moan, my voice raw.

"No, baby, hold on." His words drive me higher, his hands tugging on my hair and sending a bolt of desire through me. I love this, love when he's like this with me. When he doesn't treat me like a girl who needs protecting, but as a woman who needs him to destroy her.

"Tony, God, I'm gonna..."

"No, Luna, hold the fuck on," he demands, and somehow I obey. The pleasure builds in my spine, tingling in my spine, a tidal wave approaching in my gut, the ache getting deeper and deeper with each thrust hitting me just right.

"Jesus, Tony, I need to. Let me come, honey." I'm desperate, my body on fire.

"Go, Luna. Come on my cock, baby." He roars out the words, his hands going back to my hips and digging in, so tight that it's almost a pain, a beautiful pain and I explode. A guttural noise falls from my lips, the sound not even recognizable as Tony's hands pull my hips to himself, sinking deep as I feel pulse inside me as he groans deep. "Fuuuuuccck, baby," he says as he slowly pumps my hips again, a slow glide as we both come down from the most intense orgasm of my life.

"Gotta get in trouble more often, Lune," he whispers in my ear as he presses his chest to the stretch of my back, bare skin on sweaty, sticky skin. I can't help but giggle, the sound girlish and so opposite of what just happened. His hand brushes the loose hair on my neck to the side and presses his lips there, soft and sweet.

After a few moments, he slides out, and I sigh a quiet, sated sigh at the feeling of him leaving me, the feeling of him sliding past sore tissues.

"Fuck, baby, keep that up and we'll have to start again." When he's out, I collapse on the bed, dead after a long night at the bar and then an incredibly.. energetic session in bed. But fuck if the thought of another round... I roll over, body languid, and raise a suggestive eyebrow at him, trying to gauge him.

He laughs. "No, Luna. No, sleep." I pout. He lays down next to me,

pulling me into him as we both settle from our wild ride. He does this every single time. Whether it's seen or dirty, quick or all night, he holds me close after for a few minutes. Every time it gives me butterflies. The same ones I had when I was seven and he was 12 and I knew, *I knew*, I was already in love with him and he would be mine.

"Love you, darlin'," he whispers, breath grazing my ear in a hot caress.

"Love you, Tony."

Since that night, things have been great. Perfect even. Every night I fall asleep in his bed, cuddled to his warmth and wrapped in his safe cocoon. If he's off, he hangs out at the bar, still not okay with leaving me unattended, and nights that he's working he drops me off and picks me up, taking me back to the home that we've finally, for the most part, finished renovating.

Luckily, sleep hasn't been such an issue with Kate taking on more responsibility. The mysterious Kate joined the team about a month before my drama but she's a quick learner, super responsible, and was able to take on more of a manager position, which means I'm able to line up my schedule to fit Tony's on-call days better. She even took up my old apartment, staying there with her five-year-old son.

"Talked to your dad today," Tony says, breaking the silence as his hand runs up and down my bare back. I freeze, my entire body stopping.

"What?"

"Before my shift. Went over there. Zee told me he was home, talked with him."

"With my dad?"

"Yeah, baby." His hand moves from my back to my hair, combing through it and holding it back as he looks me in the eye.

"And, uh, what, uhm. What did you guys... talk about?"

"Think you know what I talked to him about, Luna." He's not wrong.

"Oh. And. Uhm. Well, did he talk back?"

He smiles big, his white teeth shining in the moonlight. "Yeah, baby, he talked back."

"What did he... what did he say?" The words come out soft, so soft I'm not sure he can even hear me, but he responds anyway.

"It was all good, darlin'." His voice is just as soft and then he leans forward, pressing his lips feather soft to the tip of my nose. *It was all good.* I know what that means.

"Tony, are you...?"

“Not askin’ you right now Luna. But want you to know where we’re at.”

“Oh,” is all I can say.

“Love you, Luna. Always have, know to my gut that I always will. You’re fuckin’ beautiful, inside and out. And you’re brave - too brave, but I knew what I signed up for when I got tangled deep with you.” I smile. “So I went to see your dad today to do what he knew I was going to do, what he knew I would do no matter what he said. Thankfully, the meeting went in my favor, but Luna, telling you right now, no one, not your brother, not your dad, not some fuckin’ psychopath, is going to keep me from making you mine forever. Got me?”

Tears wells in my eyes, my heart full, and my soul complete. “Got you, Tony.” He looks at me a moment longer, using a thumb to wipe the one tear that escaped before using the hand at the back of my head to pull me into his chest. His lips touch the top before his hand travels down and smacks my ass, hard. And goddamnit if, even though we just had explosive sex that made me come harder than ever before, my legs start to squirm, wanting him again.

“Luna,” he says, his voice a warning.

“I can’t help that you make me all hot and bothered all the damn time,” I say, running a hand up to his chest before starting its path down. He grabs it, halting me before i hits his toned abs. I pout up at him and he laughs at me.

“You get to bed in the next 15 minutes and I’ll skip my run in the morning and wake you up with my mouth.” That gets me going and I pop out of bed to clean up, brush my teeth and throw on one of his tees.

As I scurry to the bathroom, Tony’s deep chuckle follows me, flowing through me like warm honey, knowing this man, this protector, is mine and mine alone. Forever.

THIRTY-TWO

-luna-

“DO YOU THINK SHE KNOWS?” I lean into Sadie, who is studiously watching our friend as she laughs with her boyfriend, Hunter. The band is getting ready to perform on the small stage in my bar as a fundraiser for the Center. It’s surreal to see my little brother up there once again, now a big star in a tiny hometown bar his sister owns.

“She has no clue,” Sadie says, a wicked smile on her face. “I talked to her this morning. She’s so hung up on the fundraiser that she completely missed every clue his dumb ass accidentally dropped.” We’re all here for an exclusive show by Hometown Heroes, the band my brother joined in high school and followed around the country until they hit it big. Now they play huge venues like Madison Square Garden or the Hollywood Bowl. But today they’re back in our tiny town of Springbrook Hills and smiling at the crowd, ready to kill it.

When Hannah came to me with the idea of hosting an exclusive concert as a fundraiser for the Center, it took me three seconds to agree, pull my phone out, and guilt Ace into it. The amount we’ve raised from tickets alone will fund much-needed repairs on the building and the profits of the drinks tonight will go towards some scholarships for next summer’s campers.

Once the date was set in stone, Sadie came to me to break the news: at the show, Hunter is going to propose to Hannah. Immediately, of course, I cried.

Hannah is the sweetest woman in the entire world who went through so much shit in her childhood. She deserves nothing more than prince charming and soon, she'll have that forever.

"Where are the kids?" Sadie asks, looking around.

"Upstairs with Aunt Maggie. They'll come down as the first song starts, then Ace is gonna call them on to the stage."

"Do you have waterproof makeup on?"

"Of course. I fully plan on being a sobbing mess," Sadie admits and I laugh but agree.

A thick arm wraps around my front before pulling me back into a warm, familiar body. Lips come to my neck just below my ear, grazing them as Tony's low voice murmurs, "What are you laughing at, darlin'?" His thumb dips under my loose tee, grazing my belly button and sending shivers down my spine.

"How much I'm gonna cry when Hunter pops the question."

"Ahh, woman tears." The tips of his fingers dip to the very top of my jeans, resting there. It's not meant to be sexy or sexual, just comforting and close and God, I love this man. The way he always wants to be holding me or touching me, protecting me. Never out of arm's reach if he can help it.

I'm sure that with time, that will ease. That need to be reassured that I'm okay. But for now, I savor it.

"Yes, man's ultimate Kryptonite," Sadie says, overhearing Tony's word. His head leaves my neck to smile at her.

"Hey, Sade. Hannah ready for tonight?"

"As ready as she can be, considering she has no idea what's going on. What about Hunter?"

"Nervous as fuck. Made him do two shots before he left. He kept checking his pockets, wouldn't stop making sure the ring was still there." Tony's laugh reverberates through his chest to my back.

"Don't make fun of him, it's sweet."

"Fuck, I hope he does the same for me when it's time." My body melts a bit more into him, the same way it does whenever he subtly and casually references marrying me.

"Will you be nervous?" My head turns to look up at him and catch his eyes that are already turned down to me.

"Fuck yeah."

"But I'm a sure thing."

“You’re not a sure thing until my ring is on your finger, babe.”

“I’m a sure thing, Tony.” I turn in his arms and wrap mine around his neck, pressing my lips to his in a hello.

“Oh, God, please. It’s enough that my bestie is getting engaged today. I don’t need yet another reminder that I’m going to die an old cat lady.” Sadie moans from beside me.

“Sadie, you don’t have a cat.”

“Yeah well, soon I’m gonna get one. Or three. I don’t know, wouldn’t want the cat to be lonely while I’m at work.” I burst out a laugh, and she rolls her eyes, about to respond before the lights dim and music starts.

It always blows my mind when I see this. My little brother, if only by one year, on a stage, playing with his band, all of whom he met in this town, who grew up with him and broke free together. Sometimes I’ll be scrolling on my phone or flipping the channels and I hear his voice or I see his band and it makes me freeze for a moment, pride running through me.

As the first song ends, movement in the corner of my eye brings my attention to the side door. It opens and Maggie leads out about 15 kids, including Hunter’s nieces Rosie and Sara. My eyes shoot over to Hannah, who is preoccupied with watching the band, her hips swaying at the slower song. In contrast, Hunter’s eyes are pointed at the door, hyper-focused on everything happening. Until Hannah looks up at him, beaming with happiness. He looks down and smiles back, and if that isn’t the most beautiful sight I’ve ever seen, I’m not sure what is.

Between the bridge and the chorus of the song, Ace steps to the mic. “Alright guys, tonight we’re here for something super special!” The crowd cheers and looking at Hannah, I see her cheer loudest of all, a smile engulfing her pretty face. “The Center is an amazing place. You all know that Springbrook Hills is literally the hometown of Hometown Heroes. We all grew up here, all went to school and learned, and hung out here. All four of us went to the Center at some point and we’re so happy we can give back in this way.” More cheers erupt as the background riff of the song still plays a bit quieter.

“Tonight, some of the people who will directly benefit from this show wanted to come up on stage and say thank you to you all. They have something special to say. Come on up guys!” My brother waves his hand to the kids in the back, holding blank pieces of paper in hand. Aunt Maggie leads them up, one by one, organizing them at the front of the stage. Looking

at Hannah again, I see her face is shining, tears in her eyes. She still has no idea what's happening, as always, just thinking of the awesome experience these kids are getting. She doesn't even notice Hunter has disappeared from her side, replaced by his sister and her husband, Steve.

When Ace sees the kids are lined up and that Hunter is standing in the wings, ready for his cue, he makes the magic happen. "Okay, guys, now!" he shouts into the mic, a smile on his face.

It's then little hands flip over their papers and written in dark black, manly letters is "Will You Marry Me?" It's beautiful and sweet and simple, perfect for our Hannah, and immediately my eyes water. Sadie reaches over, grabbing my hand so hard that it almost hurts. Both of us have eyes on Hannah, whose mouth has dropped, chin near her neck in shock and confusion. Then she looks to her side, expecting Hunter but seeing Autumn and Steve. Steve places a hand on her shoulder, turning her to look at the stage with a smile. A stage that now holds the band, the kids, and Hunter, a microphone in his hands.

"Hannah, baby, can you come up here?" he says and although there's a smile on his face, a smile that is nearly breaking his face with its sheer size, his voice is wavering, nervous. It's adorable.

Hannah stands there, unmoving, still in shock. Autumn leans forward to whisper something in her ear and give her a slight push forward. Being Hannah, she stumbles. She recovers, then walks straight up to the front of the stage rather than the steps at the side. It's like she's in a daze and can't quite figure it out.

"Go around, baby," Hunter says, laughing and pointing to the stairs. Her lips form a small oh and her cheeks redden, but she walks around and up the stairs, giving the kids a wave and laughing when Rosie runs over and hugs her before she goes back to her spot. The music has stopped now and an expectant hush overtaking the bar, a quiet that is rarely heard in this room, especially during open hours.

She walks up to Hunter, standing in front of him, finally, and he takes one of her hands, holding the mic in the other.

"Do you know why you're up here?"

She looks around at the kids, all smiling and excited, holding papers in their hands that spell out the most important question. "Uh, I think I can guess?" The whole room laughs.

"Hannah Marie Keller," he starts, and she chokes, already overwhelmed

with emotion. I squeeze Sadie's hand now. "Hannah, you are the most beautiful woman I've ever met, inside and out. You went through so much, struggled, and fought. You could have turned out bitter and angry at the world, but instead, you used that fire inside of you to build up others, take care of them. You're my best friend, the woman who helped me see I need to be taken care of, that I need to open myself up. That I needed to let things go and move forward with my life. *You did that, Hannah.*" A sob breaks free from my throat.

"You love my nieces fiercely. Love the kids at the Center with the same intensity and, God, I know when you have my babies that love will blow me away. I want to be there for you, help you remember to take care of yourself, be the one to care for you when you don't. I want you to bake me cookies and con Autumn into watching all the kids so we can get away for a weekend."

A clear "Fuck that!" is shouted from the crowd and I laugh through tears. Tears are rolling freely down Hannah's face now. She *deserves* this.

"I want to live life with you and give you the chance to be the mom you want to be. I want to be yours forever, Hannah." He digs in his pocket, pulling out a box before bending down on one knee. Another sob tears from Hannah's chest, the most beautiful sound because it's not sadness or fear or disappointment but elation and love.

"Hannah, will you do me the greatest honor and marry me?" Before he can even fully get out the words, Hannah is nodding, her hand still in Hunter's as he smoothly slips on the ring Sadie helped pick out. Her hands go to his cheeks and pull his face to hers. She doesn't even look at the ring, she doesn't care. That's not Hannah's style. I'm sure it's beautiful, I'm sure it cost a fucking fortune. But it could be a damn Ring Pop and Hannah Keller, soon-to-be Hutchins would be over the moon.

The crowd cheers, the kids on the stage circling Hannah and Hunter as they kiss, mic forgotten as they whisper to each other. Sadie is full-out sobbing next to me.

But all of that is forgotten when Tony leans down, lips to my ears, and whispers beautiful words to me. "You're next."

"Let me see, let me see, let me see!" I shriek over the music that's once again playing, Sadie and I making our way to Hannah, who is showing Autumn her ring.

“I’m looking at my *future sister-in-law’s ring*, thank you very much,” Autumn says with a laugh. All four of us look at each other and squeal, loving that for Hannah.

“CAN I CALL YOU AUNTIE HANNAH NOW?!” Rosie yells from her perch on her father’s shoulders.

“Me too!” Sara yells from next to them...

“Of course! I’m so excited to be your real aunt!”

I grab Hannah’s hand and see a perfect, obnoxiously large princess cut diamond in a platinum setting. It’s simple and girly, just like Hannah. Sadie told me that Hunter picked it out himself, not a bit of input from her. She just approved the buy.

“Oh, Hannah, it’s beautiful!”

“It is, isn’t it?” she asks, looking down at the sparkling ring. “He did good. My *fiancé* did good.” The sweetest giggle escapes and I see out of the corner of my eye Hunter approach Tony, doing that hand slap man hug thing all guys do. There’s some back-patting and congratulations and a mention of a bachelor party.

“OH MY GOD. BACHELORETTE PARTY!” Sadie yells like she just realized this, though I’m sure it’s been ruminating on her brain since she bought the ring. We all cheer, Hannah rolling her eyes.

“Calm down, Sade. I just got the ring.”

Throughout the night, we keep talking and listening to music, different people coming to congratulate Hannah and Hunter, shots taken and drinks served. I’m here tonight, but Kate is handling the employees, so I can enjoy it. I’m so incredibly grateful to have her.

Eventually, Autumn and Steve decide it’s time to take the girls home. We all walk out into the cold winter air together to say goodbye where it’s less loud, though the rest of us will go back in until the event is over.

“Bye, Hannah! I’m so excited you’re going to be my sister!” Autumn says, slightly tipsy and tearing up once again as she hugs her sister-in-law-to-be. Both sway side to side in the tight hug, nearly tipping over more than once.

A short, curvy woman with strawberry blonde hair comes into sight, looking nervous and anxious. She bites her full bottom lip, looking from person to person.

“Can I help you?” I ask her when she catches my eyes.

“Uhm..” Her hair is covering half of her face, long curtain bangs swirling

into long curls down her back. “Uh, are you... Hunter? Hunter Hutchins?” she says, eyes to Hunter. He looks at her, brows furrowed in confusion.

“Yeah, that’s me. Can I help you?”

“And you... you’re Autumn?” The woman looks to Autumn, whose face has closed off, not giving anything away.

“What do you need?” Steve says, always protective, pulling his girls closer.

“I... I’m sorry, this is so weird. But... I think I’m your sister. Your half-sister.”

And with that, the entire group freezes.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Writing has been my calling for as long as I can remember. There's a framed 'page one' of a book I wrote when I was seven hanging in my childhood home to prove the point. My entire life I've crafted stories in my mind begging to be released but it wasn't until recently that I finally decided to give them the reigns.

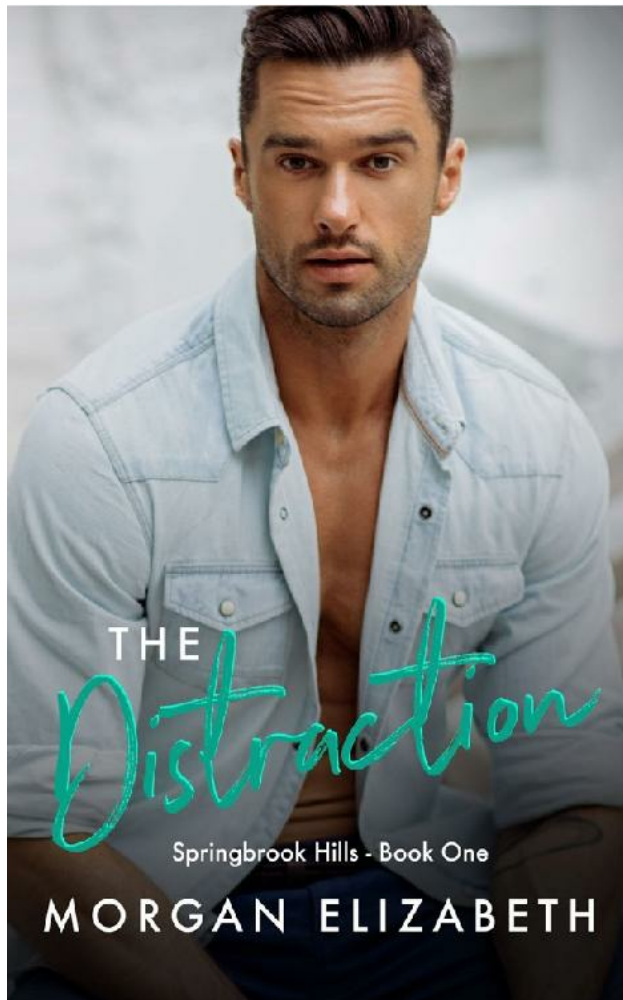
I'm so grateful you've agreed to take this journey with me.

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When Hunter's dad gets sick, he's forced to leave the city and move back into the small town he grew up in at his sister's house. Ever since he watched Hannah dance into his life, he's finding himself drifting from his goals and purpose - or is he drifting closer to them?

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