



what
we
were

JEN SAMSON

What We Were

Jen Samson

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For the ones whose sadness knows how to smile

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Content Warning

- Major religious trauma
- Abuse (additional info at the back of the book)
- Grief
- Major homophobia
- Suicide (side character, past)
- Child neglect (off page, past)
- Brief mention of the rape of a side character
- Sickening behavior of religious leaders, including inappropriate remarks about a minor
- Brief sexual situations that may be considered blasphemous by some readers
- Potentially discomfoting sexual fantasies, consensual between the MC's and within the safety of the relationship (additional information at the back of the book)

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About the book

I wrote Ethan's character and parts of this book ten years ago, because I was beginning to rage about why God allowed so much suffering in the world. I grew up in a time when the West went on one of the biggest campaigns in history, to evangelize Africa. I remember members of our community clambering for a space in one of the many revival tents pitched all over. It was a magical time, and we knew that if we just believed in Christ, we would all be saved. We loved God with all our hearts, and we loved our church.

Then, the little girls grew up, and the passing glances of the church band members began to turn into covert, and, sometimes, open sexual inspections.

And the pastor's hand lingered a little too long when he laid his hands on you and prayed.

And parents were visited and disciplined over their daughters' wearing spaghetti strap tops.

I wanted to tell that story – the ugly story no one wants to hear. The story of men of God who (try to) get away with driving eleven-year-old girls up to the church at night, and touching them inappropriately.

I wanted to tell the story of those children who become adults, and have not breathed a word of it to another human being, because who would believe that good, Christian men would do such things?

What We Were provides a voice for those who have been harmed by religion, and, therefore, does not offer any positive views about religion. The thematic truths in this book may infuriate some readers.

Also, *What We Were* may weigh you down heavily with the religious detail at first, but I ask you to be patient with me while I take you through the insanity of religion, and deliver to you, Noah and Ethan's soft, beautiful love story.

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Playlist

My playlist always includes books I read while writing. This time, I struggled to get in as many books as I'd have liked, so I have only one mention:

Loud Places by AE Jensen

I usually listen to one song on repeat when I write. This time, the song I chose was a song used by bookstagrammer, @shortandwordy (Jamie), when she reviewed my previous book, *The Sound Of Us*. This song makes me cry every single time.

Minefields by Faouzia and John Legend

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Acknowledgments

To my sister, Lynette – get some sleep. You need it after this.

Anja – Girl, I'd swim the ocean for you. Thank you for your beautiful friendship, for believing in me, for helping me believe in myself, for the depth of your care. Thank you for beta reading tf out of this book. Like we say in South Africa, *love you long time*.

Lola – Thank you for taking the time to encourage and support me while you worked so hard on your book.

Stefka – You set me straight when I'm falling apart. Thank you, thank you, thank you. You believed in me first.

Season – Thank you for just who you are. Not just your beta reading and your wildly entertaining Instagram stories when you review books, but for being such an integral part of my journey this past year.

Bookstagrammers: Oh, gosh. Where to start? MM Bookstagram is the best place in the world, and there are so many people who touch my life in different ways, so if I've not mentioned you here, it's only because my brain is fried after writing this book.

So, Heidi and Trista, @lizareadsromance, @bookiebeereads, @bookworm.247_, @sabrina_romance_addict, @read3rslut - THANK YOU.

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Prologue

Who are we to judge? It was their cross to bear, the things men did when they'd lost their way, and all that mattered was their fattened coffers and what other men thought of them. Some will steal, others will lie and still others will cheat, and that's just the way it is.

But the ones who turn against their children in the name of God, how can we not judge them?

Those two boys, one—the older of the two—his father's own child; the other—a replacement, if you really need the truth about how that beautiful little Noah ended up here—couldn't be any more different than if one was human and the other, alien. Night and day, they were. One soft, the other abrasive. Angel and... well, fallen angel.

They were both beautiful, if you ask me. In their different ways.

The older one was rough with a chip on his shoulder. That *FUCK HEAVEN, LET'S GET HIGH IN HELL* he and his friend had embossed so meticulously on the side of his father's church had been a drag to wash clean.

I'd wanted to suggest we just paint over it, but Pastor John Evanson had a hard time concealing his hell's fury that day over his own son's heathenism, so offering such advice had been out of the question.

Now, these two boys stood at the threshold of the old Oakwood Inn Express. As far as express inns went, this was a good one. Small and comfortable. Clean and neat. Quiet.

Quiet was very good for these young ones, so full of life and vitality and needing somewhere to go to keep their secrets. God knows, I'd seen enough of them come and go over the years. I don't judge. Well, maybe the married ones that snuck in here, and, even then, only just a little, because we don't know everybody's story.

Nobody notices this old lady, so it was easy for me to stare when those two boys walked in.

Ethan Evanson was the older of the two. Beautiful, with his intelligent blue eyes, overgrown black hair, and looking like a hobo with the face and physique of a boy who needed to be on the cover of a magazine. My God, what a beautiful little troublemaker he turned out to be.

He must be done with college by now, if he ever went in the first place. I hadn't seen him in years. Not since he stopped coming to his father's church and, well, after some years, I stopped going too. Too much politics in The Lord's house, I'll tell you that much—Pastor John Evanson, standing behind that pulpit every Sunday talking so much nonsense it used to make my head spin. And don't get me started on how he spewed all that garbage at every town hall meeting. Abortion rights, gay rights, reading rights, school curriculums . . . you name it, you can bet your ass Pastor Evanson would be in the thick of it pushing his right-wing agenda.

I heard, even to this day, he uses Ethan Evanson as an example of the prodigal son who went astray.

'Sadly, I still await the return of my wayward son. That The Lord will deliver him from the wickedness in which the Devil has ensnared him. To this day, his bedroom is as he'd left it, waiting for his return to the Lord.'

If you asked me, *gay* didn't mean *wayward*. I couldn't deal with that kind of hypocrisy. Too much hatred for the innocent ones.

Ethan Evanson never turned from his 'wicked ways', it seemed.

It looked like nothing had changed about the preacher's older son. But, even then, what was he doing here? This wasn't going to just get him into a bit of trouble. It was going to get him *hurt*. Because the boy next to him wasn't just anybody's stepson. And not just anybody's stepbrother.

Noah Evanson came to a halt a step or two behind Ethan. Several inches shorter than his brother and so pretty, he lifted his face, his big, gray eyes wide with worry. Even when he was in Sunday school asking for more milkshake after class, those eyes could get him anything he wanted.

Right now, they both ought to have been worried. If ever there were two boys who had no business looking at each other like that, it would be these two.

"Noah." It was barely audible, Ethan's voice, but I heard it all the same. And when I saw that unmistakable adoration in Ethan's eyes, my pulse sped

up for the fear in my heart. They hadn't even noticed me, so wrapped up in each other they were.

Noah cast a backward glance into the night. The wind outside howled like a crazed animal and the oak trees bent in defeat under its lashing.

Ethan called to his brother again softly, a question this time. "Noah, baby?"

A smile touched my lips, despite my growing concern. Noah was hardly a baby. He must have just got done with high school, but I understood the terms these young ones use these days. Back in my day, we stuck to *Mr. Remington* and *Mrs. Remington*. It was said with a great amount of love and respect even if it didn't quite sound like it sometimes: You sure look beautiful today, Mrs. Remington. To which I'd respond: Why, thank you, Mr. Remington.

Oh, how I missed that man of mine. Ten years gone.

In any case, *baby* sounded like a lovely pet name for these kids. But such a pet name for Noah Evanson? That kind of bravery was careless. And dangerous.

"Your jacket, Ethan," Noah said.

Ethan sighed, but I think there was a smile hiding somewhere at the corner of his mouth. He didn't look mad about his jacket, whatever had happened to it.

"Don't worry about it, baby."

Noah scowled and shook his head. "But I let it fly away. Let me just—"

He turned once more and made to step back into the freezing night.

Ethan reached for him, his hand on his younger brother's forearm urging him forward, toward the warmth of the foyer. It was a good thing, not letting him go back out into the cold.

Noah stopped, looked up at Ethan, hesitating. Ethan leaned forward to steal a kiss. Noah ducked his head, but I didn't miss the sweet smile playing on his lips. Even with my old age eyesight, I couldn't miss the stars in their eyes. It was all very sweet, and it made me think about the old days with my Mr. Remington.

Oh, but theirs was an impossible situation.

Their father would sacrifice them both—or Ethan, at least—at the altar of *Yahweh* for what they were doing right now. It didn't matter how sweet they looked together. Didn't matter that they were not brothers by blood. What mattered was that their father was the most radical right wing man of God I've ever encountered.

My Lord. Who knew his beloved Noah would not only turn out just like the son he'd thrown away, but that the one to cause those stars in his eyes would be Ethan himself?

When Ethan pulled back, Noah's face was turned away. From this angle, the security camera to the left corner of the foyer wouldn't have caught his face. Another moment of hesitation and Noah allowed Ethan to pull him into the foyer of the Oakwood.

Those damned security tapes.

SODOMY, Pastor Evanson bellowed over and over again. And then, when they took Ethan away, I sure as hell heard him tell Officer Purnell in that heaving voice of his, 'about time we lock up these damned gays.'

If only my knee had been good. I'd have rushed upstairs to warn them. But, even then, I'd never have made it. Hatred and bigotry and cruelty could outpace any good thing when left to run rampant.

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PART ONE

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CHAPTER 1

Ethan Salvatore Evanson

The worst thing about evil people is that sometimes they're not. Sometimes they adopt homeless children and give them a life they'd had no chance of having otherwise.

It was raining that day, ten years ago, when Noah arrived through those hard-polished, wrought-iron gates which stood so tall and majestic you'd think you were entering heaven itself.

In reality, they were the gates of hell—at least, they were for my mother—before she decided she'd rather be wheeled out through those gates in a body bag than walk out and live the life she really wanted. And, when I woke up one day with a voice as deep as the King of the Castle himself (my father), I couldn't have given a fuck about what he had to say about my comings and goings. I walked in and out of those gates as I pleased.

Noah sat at the back of his brand new father's brand new Mercedes (paid for by humble, faithful, tithe-paying pew warmers, bless them). He looked like a pampered prep schoolboy arriving home after a long, but fruitful school year.

I watched him exit the car from my upstairs bedroom window, standing just far enough away to avoid detection. Our groundsman, Thomas James—Mr. Tom, to 'his favorite boy' (me)—helped the new arrival out of the back seat, keeping a steady hand on the boy's shoulder when he seemed to have tripped over his own feet in the two seconds between sitting and standing.

My father—now *our* father—rounded the hood and dropped to his knees, unbothered by the light rain. Whatever it was our father was saying to his new son down there on bended knees seemed to make this boy happy because he beamed and nodded. I watched him gaze up at the house, and I guess I was a little unsettled by his eyes, and that's what made me pull the curtains shut harder than it deserved.

You see, I'd always wanted to have gray eyes. Not these disgusting electric blue eyeballs stuck inside my face, courtesy of the man kneeling in front of the boy who had the very thing I wanted. It hadn't seemed fair that I couldn't share the same eye color as my mother, yet some stranger from

god-knows-where could. I understood the stupidity of it all, but, sometimes, I let myself get petty about things.

I'd done the calculations. From conversations I'd eavesdropped on when my father had been making all the arrangements for his new stepson in his prayer-room down the hall, I'd pegged him at about eight years old when he arrived—still in the first grade because someone in his family forgot to send him to kindergarten at the right age, but 'smart as a whip' and 'he'll catch up and be top of his class in no time'. He was, and he did.

As far as siblings went, I'd figured he would do. I was thirteen when he arrived, which meant there were enough years between us for him to remain cute and little, and out of my way. Although, after that first moment he almost fell out of the car, I had a feeling he shouldn't be left all to himself. I mean, I wasn't going to be carrying him to my bed after he'd had a nightmare or anything like that, but it just seemed right to maybe look out for him every now and then. He seemed too timid.

I wasn't interested in being some model big brother, but I felt a little sorry for this boy who had no one to call *family*.

To be honest, I didn't like that whole *family* thing. My only family had been my mother and she fucking *died*. What if I made this Noah my family and then *he* died? I could look out for him, but that's about as far as I'd been willing to go.

He looked like one of those kids my mother would have looked at and said, '*Now Ethan, like I always tell you, sadness knows how to smile and pain understands when it must hide, but you'll always find the truth in their eyes.*'

I said okay because I was five when she'd uttered those words, and I didn't know what else to say. But it all made sense after she died and I read those same words in her diary. Her eyes used to tell me everything, too. It'd just been too late when I pieced it all together.

Anyway, this Noah looked like someone my mother would have wanted to take care of, with his gray eyes, large pools of uncertainty, his fragile frame moving cautiously toward the front door, so it made sense that I should try to look out for him. I guess it wasn't a surprise how pitiful he looked, since he'd been 'taken from the gutter' and 'needed a lot of rearing' because 'what kind of mother would do that to her own child?'

I know a thing or two about your mother leaving you to fend for yourself, so I felt a little sorry for Noah when I heard his sob story. We all have them.

I have a fantastic one of my own too. But knowing that Noah's mother was *still alive* and didn't take care of him was just a whole other kind of sin.

At least my mother had loved me endlessly while she still walked this God's-green-earth, and she never intended for us to be separated the way we had been. Her diary contained pages and pages of how she couldn't bear to leave me behind and how much she loved me. I loved her back so much I hated her after she was gone. But not really. I hated that she was gone. I learned the difference very early on after her death and I held on, for dear life, to the feel of her soft hands enclosing mine and memories of her magical giggle when I whispered nonsense in her ear and then screamed in it: '*hasha-fasha-gasha-fasha-BOOO!*' I don't know why that was such a fun game.

I still wish she'd succeeded in her plan to take me with her. Two body bags instead of one.

I used to wonder if Noah hated his mother or if he just hated the fact that she's in prison. In all of these last ten years, he never talked about her. It's like she doesn't exist.

In any case, once he straightened himself up and stepped away from the Mercedes on that first day, I caught sight of a big, brown leather bible tucked under his arm, and that was when I'd lost all hope. This boy and I were already worlds apart. I didn't change my mind about looking out for him, but this Noah was already truly Pastor John Evanson's son. Luckily, he was too young for me to have anything in common with him, anyway.

It hadn't been long before Mabel—Ms. May—our ever loyal housekeeper, started calling Noah all sorts of names: pretty as a peach in June, that one time he came downstairs for breakfast with sleep still in his eyes and his brown hair sticking up in every direction.

It was the whole truth, too. Noah was the prettiest boy I'd ever seen with his permanently blushing cheeks and those large, gray eyes I was always jealous of. That same day when Ms. May called Noah pretty as a peach, he asked not to have his hair cut.

"Why not?" Great Pastor Evanson (or, just Evanson to me because that cunt didn't deserve any kind of honorific title as far I was concerned) asked. "It's your day to have your hair cut."

"I want to keep it long. Like Ethan's," Noah said quietly with his thumb nail stuck between his front teeth and looking up at his father with those big, gray eyes.

I almost choked on my piece of toast trying to keep my laugh inside my chest when Evanson glared at me from across the table. Oh no. Don't want the pastor's golden child looking like a heathen.

Anyway, Evanson told Noah, "Absolutely not," and Noah kept his hair short and brushed to the side ever since. Such an obedient little church boy.

Ms. May also called him her sweet little cutie pie, 'unlike that heathen over there' (me). Everyone calls me a heathen, but, when Ms. May does it, she means it in an I-love-you-but-you-drive-me-insane way.

"Ethan, you little heathen, you could drive a preacher to drink. I swear to God, I swear to God," she said every other week. Along with:

"I haven't seen you eat in this house since last week."

"When was the last time you had something in that belly of yours, you little heathen?"

"You don't say where you're going, who you're going with, what time you'll be back. You're thirteen, not thirty. Keepin' track of you is like nailing jell-o to a tree. I swear to God, Ethan honey, I swear to God."

And when she was being really serious, it came out like 'I swearder Gaaaad, Ethan, I ssswearder Gaaaad'.

And then she always ended with:

"Why can't you be like this little June bug over here? So sweet and polite."

Then Noah got a big peach to eat under the White Oak tree outside because it was June and the peach was bright like the sun, and I got a plateful of fried chicken and potatoes because apparently I hadn't eaten in a week. But who was I to argue with the woman who raised this young heathen since my mother offed herself when I was six years old and I got stuck with some creepy preacher for a father whose faith was so strong I could never drive him to drink, no matter how hard I tried.

All the lovely young Sunday School teachers summed it up perfectly almost every Sunday out there in the hot summer sun after church with their fat King James Versions tucked into their armpits: 'Gaaaad blessya for your patience with that boy, Pastor. *Gaaaad blessya.*'

And then, they would all get giggly and sugary sweet: 'Now you let me know if you need anything, and I do mean *anything at all*, okay?'

I would stand right there, next to their precious pastor, rolling my eyes, because I knew exactly what *anything* meant. Apparently, the Pastor *still got it* (gag me) even years after his wife's, uh, untimely, but definitely all-

natural-and-not-suicide-related death. Sadly, he'd gotten strapped down with that heathen of a child who wouldn't sit still.

'How did his mother ever deal with him?' was a common question among all the church ladies clamoring for my father's affections. I don't know if my word counts, but I'd say she dealt with him just fine because she was kind and patient and fun and unjudging, unlike them.

I should have gone with my mother. That had been the plan, according to the diary. Just the right amount of prescription drugs for the preacher's wife and a dash of poison for their son's juice bottle. Fuck if I know why I didn't drink the fuckin' thing.

MURDER-SUICIDE is what the headlines should have read in the morning paper if I'd drunk the fuckin' juice. Also, an apt headline would have been: PASTOR'S WIFE KILLS HERSELF AND CHILD, FULL SCOOP IN HER NOW-MISSING DIARY.

Instead, it said: *With heavy hearts we announce that Pricilla Salvatore-Evanson has gone to be with the Lord, whom she loved with all her heart. Sister Pricilla passed peacefully in her sleep (sort of true, but not quite the full story). Heartfelt condolences to Pastor Evanson and young Ethan Evanson.*

"God has a plan for him, Pastor," Officer Purnell had said about me after church one Sunday a few weeks after they put Priscilla Salvatore Evanson in the ground. "You'll see. This young man is going to grow up to be strong like his father, soft-hearted like his mother and livin' for The Lord."

LOL. Joke's on you, Officer Purnell.

By the end of the first year after Noah arrived, Officer Purnell's new name was Pedro Purnell, courtesy of our eighth-grade class because he was creepy like that. I refused to go to church anymore; and I told the whole fuckin' world I liked boys.

Immediately after that stunning announcement, my father, Great Pastor John Evanson, sat me down on his leather office chair in his prayer-room and said, "I'm going to pray for you every single day of my life, that you'll turn from this wickedness. In the meantime, let this be a warning to you. If you ever, ever go near Noah, I will end you. Do you understand me?"

The leather was fuckin' cold beneath my ass, so I shifted a bit and lifted my shoulder in the most arrogant way I could. The fuck was this cunt *talkin'* about?

“You stay away from him and you leave this house the moment you turn eighteen. I won’t have pedophiles living under my roof, grooming the only son I have. That boy has a great future ahead of him. He’s everything I ever wanted in a son. So, if you so much as *look* at him wrong, I’ll have you committed. Do you understand me, Ethan?”

“Or I could just leave right now,” I’d drawled.

“What, and let everyone think I kicked my own son out of the house for being a homosexual? Don’t make a bigger fool out of me, Ethan.”

“Isn’t that the whole reason you want me gone, though?”

“We loathe the sin, but we love the sinner. So, you just keep your homosexual sins to yourself until you turn eighteen. And stay away from Noah. Or I swear on your mother’s grave you’ll regret it.”

Wow. So threatening. So, I shrugged and gave him one of my smirks he loved (not) so much. I’m sure he thought I was high with how bored out of my mind I looked watching him have his little hissy fit. I wasn’t. High, that is. But it was the icing on the cake that he thought not only was I, his gay son, a pedo and a groomer, but also a junkie.

And what the fuck was this whole *end you* thing? Like take me out? He’d be doing me a favor, didn’t he know? And as for that *have you committed* thing? Like, to an institution? Like, dude, I was fuckin’ *fourteen*.

Anyway, since he already thought I was a meth monster blowing clouds, I got up off the ice cold leather chair and said, “I’m not interested in your precious, perfect Noah.”

And I wasn’t being funny about it. I really believed that Noah was precious and perfect, and I would never, ever have done anything to hurt him. I was only fourteen, but I knew a little right from wrong. My mother didn’t birth a total asshole.

“Don’t for one minute think I’ll ever let you get away with it if you ever do anything to make him lose his way,” Great Pastor Evanson had sneered.

So I told him to fuck off and left him to his bible study. It was Wednesday, and it was time for him to hear from the Lord about Sunday’s sermon. It was the least I could have said to him for calling me a fuckin’ pedo and a groomer when we both knew he was the sick fuck. Too bad my mother’s diary went ‘missing’. Only two people knew about this asshole of a father of mine. One of them is six feet under and the other is me, and, well, my word is as dead as my mother.

Ah, the good old days. It’s nice to reminisce, sometimes.

Now, I stand at the front door of my mother's house, generously given to my father, the grieving widower who drove her to suicide, by her estate.

It's a nice, warm Friday afternoon, and it feels good to be out in the free world again. Jail has a certain stench that makes you appreciate the fresh smell of freedom. Also, I spent my twenty-third birthday just five days ago in the slammer, and well, I'll admit that sucked just a little.

Just as I raise my hand to knock, the large wooden door swings wide open and Ms. May stands there with her hands on her hips. Her five-foot frame takes up much more space in the doorway than is anatomically possible.

"Ethan, you little heathen. Where have you been?"

Ah, I missed Ms. May too.

"And don't you dare walk on my wet floors. Have you eaten? When was the last time you ate, you little—" She peers up at me through the thick lenses of her glasses like I can't just reach down and flick her forehead with my thumb and middle finger. I'm six-foot-three, but I wouldn't dare. I'm just presenting a hypothetical situation of trying to intimidate Miss. May with my size.

"Sister Mabel, let him through. He'll leave his shoes at the door." Mr. Tom stands at the bottom of the porch in his overalls, bargaining on my behalf.

"Hi Mr. Tom." I lift my hand in greeting. "How're the trees doing?"

The older man's eyes crinkle at the corners as his lips lift upward in a smile. Mr. Tom always beams like a kid in a toy store anytime someone asks about the orchard he tends to on the other side of the property. "You know I'll be bringing in the best blueberries you've ever eaten one of these fine days and by the end of the summer my apples will be—" he brings his fingers together and kisses them— "perfect."

"And the peaches, Tom? What about the peaches? You know how much these boys love them."

"Oh, do I have the juiciest peaches for them this year, Ms. May."

Ms. May, seeming to remember that she's in the middle of a world class scolding, narrows her eyes at Mr. Tom. "Well, thank you, Thomas. We appreciate all your hard work, but I'll bet you know exactly where this little heathen has been the last two months. You keep all his secrets. I know you." She points at Mr. Tom with her stubby little index finger and then pokes my pectoral with it.

“Ow.” I rub my chest and moan dramatically. Of course, Ms. May is right. Mr. Tom knows exactly where I’ve been the last two months. She does too, I’m sure, but it’s easier for her to not have to face my heathen lifestyle.

“Ah, he’s a good boy. Let him be, Mabel.”

As a general rule, I don’t like people, but there are a few exceptions. Besides my best friend, Jono—Jonathan Archer, for formal introductions—who holds the fort when I take my little ‘breaks’, Mr. Tom is my only other friend. He knows I live in a dump a couple miles from here with Jono, and I bus tables for rent and food, and, when I’m not living my best life as a loser across town, he can usually find me at the local jail for an assortment of Class C misdemeanor crimes.

My latest stint was for unauthorized access to and examination and sharing of Pastor Evanson’s tax information. Not his personal information. His church’s files. Apparently it’s an invasion of privacy if you take screenshots of the pastor’s last bonus (one hundred and fifty thousand hard earned American dollars). All I wanted was to make sure it was all structured and documented properly.

Lies. I wanted to see if there was anything I could find that would ruin my father’s life with a little IRS situation.

Outcome: Negative. That man is squeaky clean. *I* think he’s a fucking asshole, but my vote doesn’t count.

In any case, I posted the documents on Reddit for fun because I can be stupid like that sometimes. Turns out my father googled his name, and the Reddit thread showed up. I’ll be honest, I never expected that he’d actually find out. And who googles themselves anyway?

I’m the only one who ever causes trouble for him, so obviously he came to the restaurant where I work and confronted me about it. I’m also the only one who knows how disgusting he truly is and I think that’s why he hates me so much. The feeling is mutual, so I don’t care.

I didn’t deny that the Reddit handle *duck_my_sick_2106* was me and, yes, I did access those files without permission, and, no, I wasn’t sorry about it.

Judge Shelley Brown told me to get my act together and put my brain to good use and stop violating the privacy of private citizens. It was the last time she was going to be lenient with me. Then she sent me away for two months. Enough time for a transformation? I didn’t think so, but I didn’t tell

her that, obviously. I think sending me to jail was her way of trying to put some of that fear of God in me.

It hadn't been my first time digging into my father's personal files. Last year, I hacked into his computer and checked out his last will and testament to make sure he'd put Noah in it. I didn't want any of the money, even if seventy-five percent of it had been earned through my mother's death. I just, one day, had the urge to know that if we ever had the good fortune of Pastor Evanson fucking off from this earth, Noah would be taken care of.

Outcome: Noah would inherit everything. No one found out about that little investigation of mine.

The whole bonus documents thing wasn't my first rodeo at the School-Of-Hard-Knocks-But-With-Bars, but I won't get into the details of my other petty crimes. Let's just say I have the self-preservation skills of a doorknob, and I didn't know that flipping off an officer of the law and asking him if he ever had a dick in his mouth was 'disorderly conduct'. Open for interpretation, is what I told the judge. *Protected speech*, I said, like I was some kind of Columbia Law graduate, when actually, I'd googled it on the way to jail.

Judge Shelley told me that the officer had interpreted it as disorderly conduct. What a wet fucking prick, but I kept my mouth shut about it.

Jamming in the slammer became a little hobby of mine, and prison was starting to feel like home.

"He's a good boy, you know that, Sister Mabel," Mr. Tom says again, but Ms. May ain't listening.

"Go on, Mr. Tom," I say. "I'm starving, but I'll be okay." Mr. Tom grins. He knows the drill.

"You hungry, Ethan?" Ms. May says, concern growing in her voice.

See? Never gets old. "Starving, Ms. May."

"Get in here, you little heathen, before I whip yo—"

I raise an eyebrow while I take off my sneakers and place them on the shoe rack inside the front door. "We don't whip in this house, Ms. May." Every once in a while, Ms. May needs a good scolding too.

"I wasn't gonna—oh, hush. I knew it in my bones you were comin' today. I was wondering why I had this feeling that I needed to make some fried chicken yesterday—your favorite. I'm gonna go heat that up for you and you better still be here at dinnertime. I'll make something special."

I follow Ms. May into the kitchen, walking around some of the wet spots as she rattles on: “So much food goes to waste in this house. Noah hardly eats. I make sure not to put any bell peppers in his food to get him to eat, but, even then, Ethan. Even then, he won’t eat. Boys your age are supposed to be eatin’ through the roof, but that kid just spends every second in that room of his and comes out for a bite or two every now and then. Kids shouldn’t pray that much, Ethan. We gotta live in the real world at least sometimes.”

She doesn’t stop for a breath, but I stop to admire Ms. May’s lung capacity. This woman can *talk*. “I’m just glad he doesn’t do that fasting thing anymore. I’m all for the Lord, Ethan, you know that, but dear God, the fasting that boy used to do was just—God forgive me for saying this—was just *wicked*, Ethan.”

I settle into the stool at the island while she gathers whole wheat bread, leftover chicken, lettuce, and mayo.

There’s a much needed pause while she makes the sandwiches. Then, she murmurs to herself, “Mayo for Noah. No mayo for Ethan,” and puts the mayo away.

“I’ll have to call your father to say you’re here,” she says while she busies herself with the sandwich. Her voice has gone soft and worry lines form as if by magic across her face. Some strands escape her graying bun when she swipes her hand over it and her motherly eyes search mine.

“I know the drill. Go ahead,” I say.

She wipes her hands on her apron and reaches across the counter for her phone. “I know, baby. I hate it, but he put it in my contract. Your father is too strict, but I have to follow the rules. You understand, sweetheart?”

“Sure do.” It’s nothing new. I don’t come around here often, mainly because of this rule that Ms. May or Mr. Tom always has to report back to my father. Just in case I steal something for my big (non-existent) drug habit. Or just in case I need somewhere to stash all the drugs I apparently sell.

My father is a delusional asshole.

When I do come around, it’s only because I still look out for Noah sometimes, and my visits here are to just get a feel for how he’s doing. Why not just call him, you might ask. Well, Noah’s phone is monitored, as is much of his entire life. You don’t get to have any kind of access to Noah Evanson if you’re ‘that gay son’. I tried once. To wish Noah good luck on

his tenth grade finals. Pastor Evanson texted back from Noah's phone to tell me he would call the police if I 'continued to harass his son'. I never texted Noah again because I didn't want him to get into trouble.

Ms. May puts her phone to her ear, clears her throat and puts on her job description voice. "Pastor? Yes, it's Mabel here. I just wanted to let you know Ethan arrived at the house today." Pause to listen. "Yes, yes. I'll be here the whole time. No, pastor, I won't leave the house. Under no circumstances, I understand. Oh, and uh, Pastor? Do you think he could stay the night—?"

My head snaps up. Nooo. I shake my head. For reasons still to be disclosed, I cannot sleep under the same roof as Noah. Not after what I saw two months ago, just before my trip to the joint. I only came here today because I enjoy torturing myself with the idea that my little stepbrother might have checked me out in a big way, and I want to figure out if I imagined the whole thing. It's all I've been able to think about.

Ms. May waves her hand at me, telling me to shush.

"—No, no. He didn't ask. I was just wondering—No, it's fine. I understand."

She gives me a pitiful look after ending the call.

"He said no?" I ask, laughing.

She gives out one of her famous mom-sighs and gets back to making up the sandwiches. "I'm sorry, honey."

"No need, Ms. May. He thinks I'm a delinquent. I don't mind."

"You're a handful, Ethan, but not *that* much of a handful. He's not here for the weekend. I could just let you stay and no one will know."

"No, Ms. May. I can't stay."

Another great, big mom-sigh. "I didn't even want to know this time, so I didn't ask Thomas anything, but you got in trouble with the law again, didn't you?"

"Just a little," I answer lightly.

"When did you get out?"

"Yesterday."

"And it took you a whole twenty-four hours to come over here and let me know you're okay?"

The truth is, it took me a whole twenty-four hours to prepare myself for seeing Noah again, but that's not something I can explain to myself, let alone Ms. May.

“You spent your birthday in jail.”

I shrug.

Ms. May shakes her head. “When is it ever going to end, Ethan? More chicken on your sandwich, honey?”

“Yeah, more chicken.” And then, “This is the last time, Ms. May. I promise. Jono and I have this thing we’re trying to do. An app. We’re trying to build an app, and, if we can get someone to invest in us, we might make some good money.”

She studies me hard from across the counter, so I reassure her again. “This was the last time, I swear. It won’t happen again. I promise.”

“I hope so, Ethan. I really, really hope so. I don’t know a whole lot about this technology you kids are so good at, but I just know it’ll all work out. You’re not meant for a mediocre life. You’re meant to do amazing things.”

“Thank you, Ms. May. I appreciate that.” I don’t believe a word she’s saying.

“Well, it’s true.” She hands me my chicken sandwich. “Jonathan’s father preached at your father’s church last week. Guest speaker.”

I squash down a grin, but Ms. May is too quick for me. “You stop your giggles,” she says sternly, but her mouth pulls to the side too. “The two of you were little terrors. Every time I get into church I look at that wall—”

“Ms. May, that was over five years ago.”

“And you’re not even the least bit sorry you sprayed all that graffiti on your father’s church building.” She says it like a statement and she’s right, so I don’t need to give her an answer. *Fuck church. Let’s get high in hell* was my idea, but Jono is the one with the artistic hand. He created that rage-y font, and I spray painted in the white spaces.

I’d been happy to claim one hundred percent responsibility. Jono had still been firmly under his preacher-father’s thumb at the time, so we had to keep him out of the spotlight until he exploded after high school graduation and told his whole family to fuck off cos he’s a proud bisexual man and he didn’t need no *Gaaaad* to be all judgmental about it.

“How is that boy?” Ms. May asks after we’d both relived my wild teenage years for a minute.

“He’s good. Can I take back some fried chicken for him?”

“Well, of course. You boys could do with a nice meal, I’m sure.” She gives me another mom-sigh. “You’ve got no business struggling out there when your father has all this space and money, Ethan. It’s not right.”

“I wanted it this way, remember?” Of course, I’m talking about my best life as a loser across town and not my criminal life. My criminal life is just an added bonus.

“Yes, but you were too smart for community college. You and that friend of yours. Two geniuses runnin’ around like God gave you rocks for brains.”

She turns to the refrigerator for a soda and then places it in front of me. “You were supposed to go to Harvard or whatchmacallit?”

“Stanford?”

“No, the other one.”

“Yale? Princeton? Duke?”

She throws a kitchen towel at me, and I laugh. “You could have gone to any of them, but I’m talking about the one you were interested in.”

“MIT.”

“Why, Ethan? Why didn’t you go? Is there anyone smarter than you?”

“Noah,” I say, dodging her real question. The truth is, I had no interest in going to an Ivy League school. I considered MIT for one insane moment but . . . I don’t know. I was never going to fit into those schools, so I settled for community college. Me and Jono. We were both ready to leave home as soon as we turned eighteen, and that’s exactly what we did. Jono and I did some courses, but we still ended up bussing tables so we could eat and that was okay, too. We don’t expect much from life.

Pastor Evanson once told me I’d be sleeping in the mud with the pigs as soon as he kicked me out of the house, and guess what? That’s exactly what I did, metaphorically speaking. I should have drunk from that juice bottle and that would have fixed everything.

Anyway, Jono and I talked it over and we both decided to try and do something with those rocks in our heads. Maybe this app we’re working on will pay off.

Ms. May laughs lightly. “My precious Noah is very smart, Ethan, but there is no one smarter than you.”

“Where is he?” I ask. My stomach dips. That is one question I hadn’t wanted to ask, and, now that I’ve asked it, one I don’t need an answer to. I don’t even know why I’m here.

Wow. The lies. I know *exactly* why I’m here, but that doesn’t mean it’s not a sickening thought. I can hardly stand the fact that the first person I wanted to see after my holiday behind bars was *him*.

Ms. May looks at the time on her phone. “He should be home any minute now. He’s at band practice, but they should be done now.” And then, with a wide smile and a giggle, she adds, “He’s driving now.”

“Oooh, he’s *driving*,” I mimic.

“You know how nervous he was when he was getting his driver’s license. Your father turned him into a jittering cat on a hot tin roof trying to teach him, and it took him nearly two years to get behind the wheel by himself, so stop teasing. I’m proud of him.”

And just like that, the gentle whirring sound of the main gate opening sends Ms. May giggling all the way to the front door.

I sit right there, chewing the last of my fried chicken sandwich, hoping this visit will do what I need it to do—confirm that what I saw in Noah’s face the last time I was here was just my imagination. It had been all I could think about in prison. What I’ll do with the information I might gather today, I haven’t quite figured out yet.

Ms. May shuffles back into the kitchen with the world’s most loved human being. “Noah, your brother’s home,” her sing-song voice makes the last bit of my sandwich stick inside my throat.

I keep my eyes down, so the first thing I notice when he walks in is that his shoes are off. I’ll bet no one even had to ask him to remove them. So perfect.

His feet are covered in fluffy white socks. The toe part of the socks is blue, which means they’re mine. If the socks are white, then the blue toes are mine and the red toes are his.

My dick stirs, and I’m ashamed and horrified that this stupid thing of Noah wearing my socks has sent a dangerous surge racing through my body.

But the real danger is in the moment suspended in time when I lift my eyes to his face.

Dark brown strands of hair pushed to the side. Big, gray eyes fixed on me. The same blush-pink cheeks and lips like a soft, red bow.

This is why I came.

This is why I shouldn’t have come.

The last time I was here had been the first time he’d looked at me the way he’s looking at me right now. I’m not stupid. I know what that look is.

The problem is, I don’t know how to not look back.

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CHAPTER 2

Noah Evanson

I spent the afternoon after school at band practice, like I do every Friday. My father had dropped by the church on his way out of town and that's how I knew Ethan had gotten out of jail. My heart had jumped right out of my chest when I overheard him telling one of the deacons that 'that troublemaker got let out and he's gone to the house, can you believe that?'

Even Jessica Crompton noticed. "I love it when you get all excited for praise and worship," she'd leaned over and whispered.

I smiled politely, but that had not been the reason at all.

Jessica is a model daughter like I'm a model son: anointed and highly-favored by the Lord. The hand of the Lord is upon us to preach the gospel, bring back the lost sheep; and declare righteous war on sin.

Jessica is also one of the back-up singers in our youth band, and I don't know another person as dedicated to the Lord as she is.

Her father is the captain of the police department and also in active ministry. My father is North Carolina's favorite pastor, a guiding light leading the lost back to Christ. The two men of God go way back. They've been best friends since high school and have been in ministry together for more than two decades, so obviously their children would be perfect little Christians, like them.

I'm Beth-El Fellowship's Praise and Worship leader, but my voice is only good for singing the praises of Jesus. Anything else I have to say isn't important. Youth Pastor Noah Evanson—unofficially. That's who I am. The title of *pastor* will become official in a few years when I'm done with bible school.

I'm also an unofficial counselor. Besides giving me the title of *pastor*, my father also instructed me to get involved in prayer counseling nearly two years ago. I was mature enough to counsel members of the congregation, he'd said. The only rule is that everything they tell you must be kept a secret—like a doctor keeps his patient's information confidential. But, if they confessed to something serious, like hurting someone, especially a child, we would have to tell my father and he'd decide what to do with the information. The only person you could tell was Pastor Evanson.

The love of the community for my father is almost cult-like. It's not normal for a person to be so revered. *Servant leadership*, they called his style of leadership. Sometimes, I wonder if *self-serving* was a better term, but that kind of thinking is dangerous because my father has the gift of dreams and visions. Sometimes God tells him things about people. That's how he catches out the liars, and that's why I watch my thoughts very carefully.

So, although my heart had leaped in my chest over the thought that Ethan had come home, I didn't let myself think about it too much. Instead, I listened to my father while he inspected the band members as they made their way to the stage.

"Alison Jones needs to cover up a bit more," he murmured. Alison is a gifted fourteen-year-old who plays the piano in our youth band, and today she wore a pair of shorts and a white tank top. I hadn't seen anything wrong with her clothing, but I knew how to hold my tongue.

"I'll have to talk to her parents about that because the next thing you know, she's accusing one of the boys of something, but she's the one walking around like that." He turned to me then and said, "We need to chastise our people when it's necessary, Noah. Always with love, but discipline is necessary. Learn this early in your ministry."

He sounded as delusional as he'd done whenever he talked about Ethan.

"*He'll stain you, Noah. You're a spotless lamb, like Jesus, and he will stain you. He's no son at all. You're the only son I have.*" A line I'd heard nearly every day until Ethan finished high school and disappeared, returning periodically to see Ms. May or Mr. Tom.

Now, I stand in the kitchen, my heart pounding in my ears and my blood rushing to all the wrong places.

"Hi, Ethan," I say, lifting my hand in a non-committal wave.

Ethan nods. "Hey, choir boy."

I have to steel myself against that old nickname. These days, it doesn't feel as innocent as it used to. "Happy birthday for last week."

His mouth lifts in a half smile and my stomach dips. "Thanks. Happy birthday for yesterday."

To have my birthday so close to Ethan's had always been one of the great highlights of my life.

"Thanks." Ethan is a carbon copy of his father—same height; same deep blue eyes; perfect nose; same rich, black hair. Ethan would age well, if his

father was anything to compare to. But that's where the resemblances end. Ethan is nothing like our father. I always thought it was strange that, although they look so much alike, I didn't consider our father to be handsome, but Ethan was the most beautiful boy I'd ever laid my eyes on. Maybe it's because Ethan is beautiful on the inside too.

Ms. May flutters around us. "Can you believe our little Noah is eighteen now?" My eyes remain on Ethan. He looks at me, then at Ms. May and back at me. His eyes linger, but he says nothing.

"I'll make you a sandwich, Noah, sweetheart. I know you're hungry," Ms. May says.

"I'm not really hungry, Ms. May."

Ethan drops his gaze.

No one will see my dampened palms. No one will hear the banging of my heart against my rib cage. And if no one knows, then I can pretend it's not happening.

"Never mind, just eat something. How was band practice, sweetie?" She turns to Ethan. "And I mean it, Ethan, you stay for dinner. You make me old before my time; I swear to God."

"I'll be here. I'm just going outside for a second," Ethan replies.

"Yeah, it was good. We had a good time." I insert myself into the conversation, answering Ms. May.

"Ethan, those cigarettes will kill you," Ms. May tells Ethan. And then to me, "Yeah? And you went okay with your new car?"

"Yeah. No problems."

"What cigarettes?" Ethan asks innocently, as he heads for the outside. Ms. May clicks her tongue and shakes her head disapprovingly. "You're an angel, Ethan, but, my Lord, you're also a little heathen."

Ethan just grins.

I'm still standing near the doorway when Ethan passes me on his way out. I could have moved out of the way. I *should* have moved. Instead, I shove my hands into my pockets and stand there, frozen. He passes me, his arm brushing against mine. Ethan isn't the cologne wearing type. I don't think he's ever been and that's why his scent is just uniquely him. I'd know his scent anywhere. It's a monumental effort to keep myself from inhaling deeply; from gathering all of him into my lungs and keeping him there, trapped inside me for as long as possible.

I'm so glad he's home. Of course, I could never express it like that. Being happy to see him, even as a brother, is prohibited. My job is to remain unstained.

"You and Ethan need to spend more time together," Ms. May tells me while she lathers my chicken sandwich with mayo. "You'll be good for him. He can learn a thing or two about staying out of trouble, and you can take some lessons from him about, you know, enjoying your young lives a little."

She looks up at me. Ms. May reminds me of my own mother. Not in the way she looks or speaks. Ms. May is stately in her appearance and the kind who always looks you straight in the eye when she has something to say. Confident in the way she walks and talks. My mother was a waif of a person with fidgety eyes and hands that permanently jittered, even when she wasn't high.

She was a terrible mother. That's what Pastor Evanson told me over and over again when he came and got me.

Two counts of house burglary, thirteen counts of shoplifting. And the one that sent her to prison for eighteen years: twenty-seven grams of heroin threaded into her curls at the back of her head. All of which resulted in her parental rights being terminated about three years into her sentence. I guess it was the right thing to do. Which judge wouldn't have granted my new father's request to seal off all contact with my mother? I never saw her again, but I thought about her every day, and even if she was a terrible mother, all I remember is how tightly she held me at night, telling me that one day we would be okay.

By the time I turned eleven—three years after I arrived at No.82 Prescott Drive in a sparkly Mercedes—I had a father who made me swear to forget all about her, a stepbrother who attended all my school musicals, soccer games and academic achievers ceremonies but never said one word to me when we were at home, and a mother no more. Half the time, I didn't know if I should be happy or sad.

But I loved her, my mother, more than anything in the world because of that one thing that I saw in her that I see in Ms. May. A curious sadness. A look that said *I see you, and I want you to be happy.*

I remember that the most. Sometimes I would catch my mother looking at me like that when she thought I was asleep. Those nights her eyes weren't glasslike. Those nights, she smiled and played with my hair while

we lay on my mattress in the corner of the bedroom. And her smile was comforting. Sad, but also happy. She loved me. She was just sick because of her drug addiction. And one day, I'll have the courage to ask my father for permission to dissolve the agreement we have between us that I'll never contact her, and then I'll go and see her in prison.

Now, Ms. May gives me that same smile. "You need to live your young life, Noah," she repeats earnestly. "You have a big brother who's a little rough, but he has such a beautiful heart. You're grown up now. Learn a little from him. And teach him a few things, too."

"Yes, Ms. May," I say around a bite of my chicken sandwich. Although, my thoughts about Ethan lately have been about a different kind of learning.

"Is that sandwich good, sweetie?"

"Yeah, thanks. I'll take it up to my room, if that's okay."

"Okay. Make sure you finish it. I worry about you, but I'm glad you're not doing all that fasting like you used to. God will still love you, fasting or no fasting, Noah. You remember that."

"Yes, Ms. May."

Although, I'm not sure about that. Fasting is about discipline, not just for yourself, but also for your fellow soldiers in the Lord's army. Sometimes you have to hold each other up. Catch them when they fall. Hold their hand and fast with them while they fight against the powers of the devil.

In any case, I guess Ms. May is right. I, too, am glad I don't need to fast anymore like I used to.

Now, if I fast, it's only for me. My father overcame Lucifer, the Prince of Darkness, who had tried to destroy him, and now I'm free. We're both free. Even if I'm bound by my agreement to protect a great man of God, at least I'm free. And I had been the only one, he'd assured me many times.

I leave Ms. May to get dinner started.

It turns out I was starving because my sandwich was finished before I reached the landing. I head back down to grab a soda and Ms. May is standing at the foot of the stairs with a Pepsi in her hand and a smile on her face. "That fried chicken needs something to wash it down with," she says.

I laugh. "Thank you, Ms. May. You're the best."

I head back up, and, at the landing, I have two choices—turn left to my room and go over my sermon notes, or turn right.

I have one task when Ethan visits: search his bedroom for drugs because our father is convinced that Ethan is a junkie, and all we need is one lucky

break to catch him and then he can go to jail for a longer time than just a couple of months here and there for petty things.

If I don't do it now and our father questions me about it later, I won't have a valid explanation. I could say Ethan was in his room the whole time, but that would be a lie. And I can't lie because the thought of getting caught in a lie is sickening. *No matter how bad the truth is, the lie is always worse*—my father's world famous line. But sometimes I think *my* lies are better than the truth.

I turn right.

The rapid increase of my heartbeat and the dryness in my mouth serve as evidence of my horrifying excitement as my body responds to what I'm about to do.

Because it isn't to catch Ethan *out* that I go so eagerly into his room. It's to simply *catch* him. Any part of him will do. Wearing his socks. Holding his Calvin Kleins in my fist . . .

His room is neat as a pin. Not a thing out of place. Even when he lived here, it was like this. Ethan hates messiness, which is not something you'd expect from him when you look at him. On the outside, his black hair is always overgrown, his hoodies two sizes too large, and his jeans riding so low on his hips that the waistband of his underwear was almost always on full display.

Not that I mind—

Cut it out, Noah.

I haven't been in Ethan's room in five weeks. It isn't something I need to fast about, but pray? Yes, I've been praying and applying the wine and olive oil mixture to my forehead for five weeks before and after my prayers just to keep myself from coming in here.

But today is different, right? Today doesn't count because today I *have* to come in here so I can go back and tell our father that I checked Ethan's room and I didn't find any drugs.

I rush over to his closet, setting the soda can down on his desk. The comforting smell of detergent and a faintness of *Ethan* whiffs through the air. I've been coming into Ethan's room for reasons other than to check for drugs for the last six months, and I know how to set things back exactly the way they were. I don't know if he'd notice since he's hardly ever here anymore, but I'm not about to take any chances.

My fingers trail over a faded black hoodie. I don't know why he doesn't just take all his clothes over to wherever he lives. I pull the hoodie out from its place where it's folded and bring it to my cheek. A lump forms in my throat, and I quickly swallow it down. The tightness in my chest is harder to get rid of. The thing about the smell of Ethan's clothes is that it reminds me of the warmth of the autumn sun. When you're lying on the crunchy red leaves like it's nature's bed and your eyes are closed and the sun is on your face and there is an inexplicable feeling of happiness. But not just any happiness. It's a happiness that is *freeing*. Like you can be and do whatever you want and everything works out just right.

I swallow hard again. And as always, I tell myself that it can't be this way. It's just the weak flesh. I'm standing on the mountain, and the devil is tempting me, promising me happiness in exchange for my faith. I'm stronger than my worldly desires. I'm *stronger* than my worldly desires. I *am*.

There are no drugs in Ethan's room. There has never been. But still, I can't make myself put the hoodie back and leave. I can't get my feet to start moving. But I can't just stand here rubbing this hoodie across my cheek, either. Just like I should never have done the other things I did in the past months when Ethan wasn't around. I should never have dropped to my knees, spreading my thighs wide, rubbing Ethan's underwear over my pants between my legs.

My shame is so great, I almost instantly step back from the closet, but the softness of the hoodie is hard to let go of.

"Noah."

Oh *shit*. My head zings. I fold the hoodie hastily and put it back in its place.

Pinpricks engulf my body. My palms tingle, and wave upon wave of humiliating heat tumbles over me. My face is inflamed and likely reddened with horror. With nowhere to hide, I have no choice but to face the doorway.

"Some of our clothes got mixed up in the laundry?" Ethan says from the doorway.

He walks over to me and takes the hoodie back. Pressing it into my chest, he says, "Here. Take it."

I avoid looking at him. I'm not the hoodie wearing type—my father would rather have me go back to where I came from than let me dress like

Ethan (his words). Hoodies are for heathens—like Ethan. But my excitement over this odd way of getting to keep Ethan’s hoodie trumps the terrible situation I’m currently in.

“I hope you get to wear it,” Ethan says. “I know it’s not usually your style.”

“It’s my style,” I say defensively, but who am I kidding?

His grin widens. Ethan is the most beautiful man I have ever seen. His mouth is wide when he smiles and I don’t know if it should be allowed for a person to have a smile as captivating as his. “You’ll look good in it,” he says lightly.

I stand there with no intellectual coherence in sight.

“So, did you find anything?” Ethan asks. His electric blue eyes sparkle. “Any drugs? Stolen goods?” he clarifies when he finds me dumbstruck.

“You know?” I ask, my eyes wide like dinner plates. He knows I check his room for drugs?

“It used to be a calculated guess. Guess I was right.” He laughs.

This all is getting worse and worse by the minute. I should have just kept my mouth shut.

“You shouldn’t let him do this to you, you know,” he says after a pause. The lightness from just now is replaced with a comforting seriousness.

I remain silent. It’s not that simple, even if his statement makes me feel like he cares about me. I know he does, but rarely does he interact with me like this.

“You’re your own person, Noah. You’re not some kind of puppet.”

“He’s our father, Ethan, and he takes care of us,” I say weakly. I *am* a puppet.

Ethan laughs lightly. His laugh is magical, like it could make everything in the world right. If I were to press my ear to his chest, maybe I would feel the rumble of that sound.

“He’s *your* father,” he says.

“Did you really change your last name?” I ask, my only way to get back into safe territory and away from all this talk about ‘being my own person’.

“I—I overheard . . .”

He nods. “It’s been a couple of months now.”

“So now you’re just Ethan Salvatore?”

“Yeah, dropping the *Evanson* felt like dropping rocks from my shoulders. Now I’m only my mother’s son.”

I don't know how to feel about that because the best thing that ever happened to me was when our father came home and told me that my last name was now *Evanson*. I finally belonged to someone. I belonged to people with whom I could share a last name.

There were two things that had defined my place in the *Evanson* household when I got here. One was the fact that my and Ethan's birthdays were only a week apart and the other was that I got to share a last name with the coolest kid I'd ever met. And now, there is only Pastor *Evanson* to share a last name with, and I don't even get to see Ethan on his or my birthday anymore.

"Why do you hate him so much?" I ask suddenly, surprising us both with my boldness. Maybe it's because I don't like how he and I no longer share the only thing we had in common.

But he's not mad about it. "You don't have to worry about that," he says.

But I will. I've worried about it almost since the day I got here, and I realized I wasn't going to finally have a real brother, like I finally had a real father. What I got was a person who seemed to care about me but from way out in the distance. So being brothers in name only was all I had. Until now. Now there's nothing but this strange way he cares about me and my fantasies about—

In any case, what could 'my' father have done that was so bad for Ethan to hate him that much? *I* don't hate him. And if I don't hate him, then why would Ethan?

But I guess you could hate a person just for being a hypocrite.

Our father took great care of his image. Everyone said Pastor *Evanson* was a model example of gentle but firm parenting. I was the evidence of how gentle he was, and Ethan was the example of how firm he was. In both instances, he was considered a wonderful parent. But behind closed doors, our father was cruel to Ethan.

It was in the small things where people on the outside wouldn't notice. Like buying me a chocolate milkshake after church and nothing for Ethan. Or when I would get heaps of toys for Christmas and Ethan would get devotional books about being a good son. Or when our father would have huge birthday parties for me, but Ethan would get nothing. Just yesterday, we had a dinner party with all the church leaders.

Ethan was always told that he needed to leave our house after high school, but his bedroom was still kept after he left. Our father often told

people that Ethan was welcome back home anytime if he stopped *his lifestyle* and that he still kept Ethan's bedroom just the way it was with the hope that Ethan would one day return to the Lord—not return *home* but return *to the Lord*. Because according to our father, Ethan deserved to live in his own home only if he followed the Christian bible, which Ethan loudly and unapologetically refused to do.

“Ms. May said she made you a chocolate milkshake,” Ethan says. He's been watching me a little too closely this last little while, and I can't ignore the quietness in his voice now. It feels like he's been inside my head, found all my secrets and now he's trying to act like it's okay.

I take the out he's giving me.

“Okay, thanks. I'll go get it,” I say.

Clutching Ethan's hoodie to my chest, I slip past him. My shoulder brushes against his arm, and, God help me, but did he just turn his body ever so slightly so we would touch when I passed him?

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CHAPTER 3

Ethan

I bring the back of my forearm over my eyes, trying to block out the sun as it sinks toward the horizon.

He thinks he's being inconspicuous, Noah. He thinks I can't read every single thing written right there all over his face. It's in his eyes. In his pink cheeks. In the way his voice drops just that little bit when he talks to me.

He must not know what a *fuck me* voice sounds like, but, it should be stated for the record that Noah has the most fuck me voice I've ever heard. And it's not because he's some kind of forbidden fruit with his whole pious vibe that makes it all so sexy. I've fucked plenty of church boys. Great Pastor Evanson would scream blue murder and get his good friend, the Senator, to pass a few more laws if he knew how many gay boys went to his church. All undercover, of course. And a little hesitant at first when they realize I'm the pastor's son, but not for long. Soon, they were all rutting underneath me moaning like perfect little gay boys—rough and manly but also sweet and lovely.

But none of them come close to the melody of Noah's voice when he simply utters a few meaningless words—*hi* and *Ms. May said dinner's ready* and the one I've become dangerously attached to: when he simply said . . . *Ethan*.

Now, with my eyes closed and my arm still slung over them to keep it dark at the back of my eyes, I let my vile thoughts run a little rampant. My hand slides over the waistband of my sweats, trailing lightly over my rock hard dick, my mind reaching for the sound of Noah's voice again.

Ethan, he'd whisper against my neck, his pretty pink lips wet and brushing against my skin, while I slide my palm over his cock. And then again, *Ethan*, when he presses his body up into mine, wanting more—

I yank my hand away from my dick.

Jesus Christ. Get a fucking grip, asshole. He's too young. Let's just start there.

He's eighteen, some devil on my shoulder whispers.

Nobody fucks anybody that much younger, eighteen or not. And he turned eighteen literally one day ago.

If he's eighteen and he wants it, he's fair game.

And I'm five fucking years older than him. Five years ago I was his age, and he was fucking *thirteen*. It's gross and creepy. *And* he's my fucking brother.

Not really.

I swear to fuckin' God, the devil is talking to me. Except, I know the only devil here is the one lying on this bed fantasizing about my stepbrother who is as off limits as off limits can get. My father's words from the first time he found out I was gay remind me of one very important reason all of this is simply crazy: *'if you ever go anywhere near Noah, I'll end you.*

I didn't get the details of all that *I'll end you* bullshit but I haven't forgotten how convicted he looked that day. Like he would find a bus going to hell and haul me into it with strict instructions to Satan to make sure I burn *real good*.

I thought I'd eaten enough chicken sandwiches to last me a few days, but, by late evening, my stomach is screaming again.

"Youth Camp starts soon. Noah's taking over from this year," Ms. May says when I enter the kitchen. "I'm a little surprised your father went through with it. You know how he likes everything done his way, especially with church things. But, if he went and handed the reins over to Noah, it must be God's will."

I don't know what to say to that except that I think it was a waste of time for someone as young and beautiful as Noah to spend his time on his knees for reasons other than—

Shut the fuck up.

To my credit, at least I didn't call him *hot*. I called him beautiful. *Hot* would have been inappropriate, but *beautiful* is, well, not *that* inappropriate.

"You know what, Ethan," Ms. May says. "Your father is a good man—" (mentally, I roll my eyes all the way to the back of my head) — "but we're all human, you know? He's too strict. He was far too strict with you." She gives me a knowing smile. "But you really pushed his buttons, and he's only human too."

"I know," I say, just to participate in the conversation. Personally, I don't believe the Great Pastor Evanson is human. Empty gray eyes from a distant past would testify to that if she were still here. And if not, then her diary would have, if anyone could find it.

I've long since accepted that Evanson must have destroyed that diary the first moment he got it away from me. I found it when I was up in the attic one day looking for some baseball cards for Noah. What I found, instead, was a book filled with pages and pages of a young girl talking about her dreams, the books she read, the movies she watched—(*'I shouldn't have watched Splash because she walks up from the beach totally naked, but how could I not watch a movie about a mermaid'*), and then the handwriting changed.

Big scribbles like the tip of the pen had been dug into the pages. Angry writing. By the time I was done, I hated Evanson more than I ever did before, but the most surreal part was reading about how I was to die. How we were both to die. I read my mother's plan, meticulously thought out, and committed to memory the date she chose for our deaths:

June 21st. Age: 6. Cause Of death: Poisoning

June 21st. Age: 25. Cause of death: Overdose on prescription drugs

I cursed the day the diary went missing, but I also know I wouldn't have done anything different that day. Noah was playing his first soccer game. For someone who was Father of the Year, according to Noah and the whole city, our father was not around for any of those things. 'The Lord's business is important, Noah,' I heard him say more than once to an innocent, wide-eyed Noah.

When I got home, the diary was gone. I called my father every stinking name under the sun when I accused him of stealing it. He denied it, but the knowingness in his eyes told me he was a liar.

The only thing I have left of my mother's is her bible and her car. If someone saw me in that car with her bible on the passenger seat they might have thought I was a young, faithful pastor burning for The Lord, like Noah.

The truth is I drive a 2002 Toyota Camry because it belonged to my mom and when I read her bible it hadn't been for God's words. It had been for *her* words—the notes she made in the margins. Her thoughts about life and the scriptures she'd marked with my name next to it. '*For Ethan*' written next to the verse that said, *I knew you before you were born, before you were formed in your mother's womb, I knew you.*

I hated that she looked to that verse for comfort, believing it had been God's will for her to have my father's semen forced into her the night she went into his church office. But it made me happy to know that despite the horror of her life, she always thought I was the big win in all of it.

"Why don't you and Noah watch a game or something?" Ms. May says while she mixes egg whites in a bowl.

"Chocolate cake?" I ask, nodding at the ingredients on the counter.

"Yes, for you and Noah."

"There's no game tonight." And even if there was, it would be the worst idea in the history of the world.

"Okay. Then the Fireworks Festival. It's only about two hours long. It's over by the beach so none of our little animals will be too frightened. If you leave soon, you'll get to watch it."

"I don't think Dad will let him go out with me." I hate referring to that man as *Dad*, but it's just easier with Ms. May. She sees the best in everyone.

But a fireworks display? In the dark? With Noah? Lord, have mercy. How romantic.

"He'll only be back tomorrow afternoon. His diary said he'll be back in time for a meeting with the Preston couple." She gives me a taste of her batter. I tell her it's perfect. "I think it's marriage counseling," she tells me conspiratorially. "Abe Preston has been a real jerk to that sweet wife of his. But you didn't hear it from me, okay, Ethan?"

"My lips are sealed."

"I believe they'll be here again next week. Pastor Evanson asked me to make dinner on Saturday. I want you to come over because I'm making a ton of food."

"I can't come back so soon."

"Yes, you can. Pastor Evanson likes to have the whole family together when we have guests, so he won't say no." She swiftly moves on. "Okay, I'll go tell Noah about the fireworks festival, and you two make sure you have some fun for a few hours."

Ms. May is asking for nothing but trouble.

CHAPTER 4

Noah

I'm sure Ethan has plenty of plans for tonight, although I hesitate to imagine exactly where Ethan spends his Friday nights. Or with whom. I'll be going over my study notes for Sunday's youth sermon. That's what *I* do with my Friday nights after school and band practice.

I didn't hear Ethan's car start up, so I'm pretty sure he's still here. Maybe he'll stay for dinner.

Ms. May pokes her head through my bedroom door. "Noah, sweetheart, I told Ethan the two of you should go to that fireworks display over by the beach."

Oh, my God. "What?" I set my bible and notepad on the side.

"Yes, Noah, and I don't want to hear anything about it from you. Now I know Ethan is a little hard to keep up with sometimes, but that boy's heart is always in the right place. And you two are brothers. It's about time you started acting like it." She steps into my room holding a plate of food and a chocolate milkshake. Ms. May's mission in life is to feed us.

"What fireworks festival?" I ask.

"The one they have all through summer down by the beach. You see; you don't even know about it. You wanna know why, baby? It's because you have your head stuck in these books all day and night."

"Did Ethan agree to this?" I ask. "Whose idea was it?" Because I don't think there is a universe that could ever possibly exist where Ethan would volunteer to take me to a fireworks display, or anywhere for that matter.

"Well, mine, of course," Ms. May says.

"Ms. May, you shouldn't do things like this," I say, cringing from second hand embarrassment over how the whole conversation might have gone. I feel like the annoying kid everyone feels sorry for. Still, my palms tingle and my stomach somersaults at the thought of going somewhere with Ethan.

"He didn't mind. I told him the two of you act like strangers when you're brothers, and that's just not right. So the two of you can go and look at the fireworks for a little while."

“But what if he had other plans?” I ask. “He’s not exactly a kid, you know.”

“Then he’d have said so, Noah, sweetheart. Ethan has a good heart, but he’s no pushover, even with me. So, don’t you worry your pretty little head about it, okay?”

Suddenly the plate of roasted beef and a heap of fried potatoes and a chocolate milkshake is in my hand. “Now, eat this for me real quick. Then get showered and put on something nice, whatever you young boys are wearing these days.”

I take a tentative bite of my fried potato.

“Pastor Evanson is only back tomorrow afternoon. I told Ethan the same thing. I know the pastor is strict about these things, but you don’t have to worry about it tonight.”

My building excitement comes to a grinding halt at the mention of my father. “What if he comes back earlier?” I ask, searching for all the ways this thing that I want with all my heart could go wrong.

Ms. May frowns, catching the panic in my voice. “Well, if he comes back earlier I’ll just tell him I told the two of you to get out of the house for a while. How’s that?”

“You’ll get into trouble,” I say. Ms. May is also subject to the rules about Ethan staying away from me.

“I can take a little bit of scolding,” she says with a smile.

I’m not convinced, but the thought of being near Ethan out in public, in the dark, at a *fireworks display* is too exciting to keep me worried for long.

“Okay,” I say, and, because it feels too good to be true, I add, “Are you sure, though, Ms. May? I’m sure Ethan has a hundred other things he’d rather be doing.”

She pinches my cheek affectionately. “Noah, honey, all you have in your life is school and church. There is nothing you do for fun.” I love how she implies that church isn’t ‘fun’.

She sits on the bed next to me and I eat my beef roast and potatoes.

“It’s been bothering me for a long time that you and Ethan don’t do things together. When you were younger I understood about all that sibling rivalry and whatnot you kids go through. It was the same with me and my sisters, but, when you get older your siblings should become like best friends; people you can rely on. And I want that for you and Ethan.”

What about lovers, some evil part of me screams and I squash that thought down so fast it leaves me reeling right there in front of Ms. May.

“It finishes at nine or nine-thirty, the whole fireworks thing, so, if you have some bible studies left to do, you can still come back and get it done, okay?”

I nod, still stupefied that this is happening. “Uh, where’s Ethan?”

“Oh, he just got back from the orchard acting like the whole world doesn’t know about his rotten smoking habit.” She rolls her eyes and checks her Mickey Mouse watch (a gift from me three years ago for her birthday). “He’s showering. Come on now,” she says. “Go and get ready and you can go and have some fun for an hour or two.”

I shower thoroughly, a strange excitement building inside me. Not like from earlier when Ms. May told me about this fireworks festival. This kind of excitement has my body shaking so hard I have to clamp my jaw shut to keep my teeth from chattering. I have friends at church. Good people who have the same interests as me. Jessica is one of them. So, I’m not some kind of loner. But this . . . this is so different.

I take an unnecessary amount of time choosing a pair of pants and a basic black t-shirt. Followed by an obscene amount of cologne which I regret exactly one second afterward, so I change out of the t-shirt and into another black T-shirt and cover it up with a light knitted sweater. I look like I’m going to church, but I don’t have any other kind of style.

Then I wait for Ethan at the kitchen counter like a nervous bride.

“You ready?” His voice comes from behind me. It paralyzes me. Like he can put me under a spell just with his voice alone. I force myself to turn. “Uh, yeah.” And then in a moment of panic I turn to Ms. May. “Don’t you want to come with us, Ms. May? I bet you haven’t seen a fireworks display in forever.”

She laughs. “Anything past eight p.m. and you’ll have to carry this big, ol’ lady to bed, Noah, honey.”

“We’ll take my car,” Ethan says. I look at him fully now. He’s wearing a pair of black sweats and a hoodie. Both hang on his body in a way that makes you think about exactly what kind of form those clothes are hiding. His hair is still wet from his shower. He’s so gorgeous.

Ms. May tries to feed him but he refuses. “I already ate your beef roast, Ms. May. I’ll get something to eat there if I’m still hungry,” he says.

Ms. May gives him a disapproving look. “And with what money?”

He tilts his head toward me. "I'm sure Noah has a credit card."

I clear my throat while I fight to get out of the stupor he's put me in with his cheeky grin. "Uh, yeah, I do."

"See? We have money," Ethan tells Ms. May.

Ms. May reaches into her blouse and pulls out a bill. "Here, take this."

"Firstly, ew, Ms. May. We need to get you a purse," Ethan says. "But also, thank you." He kisses her gray bun.

"Oh, you two go on out of here."

Ethan looks at me. "Let's go."

I follow behind, unable to convince myself that this doesn't feel like a date. My excitement has sent me right into the stratosphere, and I don't know how I'll find my way back to this reality.

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CHAPTER 5

Ethan

I knew the moment Ms. May opened her mouth there was going to be trouble. I shouldn't have agreed to this. It's dangerous and will make all our lives infinitely more complicated if I encourage whatever is going on inside Noah's head.

Still, I'm so fuckin' *intrigued*.

Now, he sits shotgun staring straight ahead with no hope that he'll say even one word. So, to make this whole thing less weird, I start.

"You doin' okay, school and everything, choir boy?"

He turns to look at me. "Uh, yeah. Everything's fine."

"You need any help with anything?"

"No. I'm managing okay."

"Math?"

"I still have your old study notes. They help."

"You're smart. You'll be okay."

"And you?" he asks. "What are you up to?"

"Jono and I are trying to build an app. Mass surveillance. We're hoping to raise some money with investors."

"Mass surveillance?"

"Yeah. It's a government favorite, so we might get lucky if we're good enough."

"You're good enough."

I keep my eyes on the road trying not to take him too seriously because those words shouldn't mean so much to me. Since when did I want to be *good enough*? For anyone or anything? But coming from Noah, it's like something coming alive inside of me. I change the subject. "Only a couple weeks till graduation, huh?"

"Yeah. You're coming, right?"

I glance over at him after taking a left on Granger Street, in the direction of the beach. He looks away quickly, like he hadn't meant to ask the question.

"Yeah, I'll be there." I'm not oblivious to the softness creeping into my voice. He didn't have to ask.

We ride in silence for a while until I have to ask another question. “Then what? Bible school?” I can’t keep the accusation out of my question.

He seems to catch it, and I regret the unnecessary harshness, even if it pisses the hell out of me that he could go on to study anything in college—medicine, architecture, whatever, but he’ll choose fuckin’ bible school because that’s what’s been decided for him.

“Yes,” he says.

When I take my eyes off the road to look at him, that look in his eyes is there again. He’s looking at me like he wants to tell me his secrets. Like I might have something he wants. We’re still young and stupid, but some things you just *know*. Noah wants something. And he wants it from *me*. I know this as surely as I know that I want something too. I want *him*.

I focus on the road again, and, thankfully, we arrive at the beach before things get more awkward.

The sun has long since set, but the place is bright with strings of lights hung across food stalls. I get out of the car and Noah follows.

“You ever been to one of these things?” I ask when I round the hood to stand next to him. He shakes his head.

I’m not surprised Noah’s never been to a fireworks display, but, *Jesus*, not even once? What kind of hermit did this boy turn out to be in the time since I left home? He was always quiet and a little timid, but to have zero social life at eighteen is really just a sin our father should pay for ten times over.

“The fireworks display starts in about ten minutes. Let’s head down to the beach.”

“You want, like, an ice cream or something?” he says.

“Ice cream?” The cream I’d like to have from him wouldn’t be ice. I give myself a mental shake. Not smooth, Salvatore. Not smooth at all.

He lifts his hand and moves it in a circle. “Everyone’s eating ice cream, so . . .”

“You’ll pay?” I grin. I’ll save Ms. May’s money for some food when I get home.

Noah nods seriously. “Yes, of course. Let’s go.”

“Why don’t you get a chocolate milkshake?” He declines, insisting he’s full but I don’t know a single time Noah has turned down a chocolate milkshake and I tease him about it. He grins, and I’m a little knocked off my feet by how pretty he is.

We walk side by side and I allow myself only ten seconds to wonder what it would be like to take his hand in mine and pretend we're just two people who met randomly at a fireworks festival and hit it off. Then I give myself another hard mental shake and put away those evil thoughts. He's *family*, I remind myself.

The place is filled with kids (all with ice creams) running wild, their parents looking like they made the biggest mistake of their lives coming here today.

Noah stops at an ice cream stand. "Is this okay?" he asks. I notice how he has to look up when he looks at me. I'd never noticed that before. I'd also never noticed the freckles scampering across his nose and settling on his cheeks. But his mouth . . . his pretty lips . . . I've been noticing that a whole lot.

"Sure."

Noah pays for the ice cream and I lead the way down to the beach. The place gets busier the closer to the beach you get. At some point, when I look back, I've lost Noah. I find him again a few paces behind me, so I grab his hand and pull him through the crowd, letting go when we're down at the beach.

Couples stand around, wrapped up in each other. Under the right circumstances I guess it's a little magical being here like this.

I don't currently have the right circumstances. I'm here standing in the dark, on the beach eating an ice cream, with my brother standing next to me like we're work colleagues who just met. It's awkward and strange and there's nowhere else I'd rather be.

He doesn't talk and I'm all out of conversation starters. So, I stand next to him and watch the crowd.

There's an announcement that the fireworks display is about to start, followed by a whining sound that ends in an explosion high in the sky. Flashing blue and red lights paint the darkness for a few seconds.

I choose that moment, when the whole beach is lit up, to look at Noah. His face is upturned and the look of delight in his face steals my breath. Noah had always been a beautiful child but was he always just this . . . fucking gorgeous?

He turns his head and catches me staring. I should look away but blame it on the whole vibe of this place—dark, with the fireworks lighting the place up intermittently, all these couples holding onto each other and marveling at

all that heavenly confetti, and Noah's suddenly gorgeous face—and I just can't look away.

His eyes cling to mine and something is changing very fast. I'm forgetting far too quickly who this boy really is. And I think he's forgetting who I really am. But nothing is stopping this thing from happening. The shift is subtle, but there is an unmistakable gravitational pull between us. He's being too brave, looking at me like this, telling me things with his eyes he shouldn't be telling me.

"Want a suck?" I ask this question in an attempt to break this craziness between us, but what I've done has, instead, significantly exacerbated the situation.

Noah does one better. He leans forward. His pink tongue comes out and swipes at the ice cream. Then he licks at a tiny spot of ice cream at the corner of his mouth. Someone might think it was this whole cheesy thing with Noah trying to look sexy while licking my ice cream. Far from it. He doesn't even look at me when he does it. He goes back to watching the fireworks like nothing happened. I'm the one staring without blinking, the image of his tongue burning holes into my brain.

"Ethan?"

Time resumes with the sound of a familiar voice behind us. Noah and I turn.

"Declan, Jesus, where'd you come from?" I tell the sweet little twink whose ass I enjoyed every other week all through high school.

"I'm visiting for a couple of days. Came to see my folks." Declan's eyes shift from me to Noah. "Your boyfriend?"

Noah's eyes widen and my cock answers the question: no, but he could be. I kick that thought right out of my fuckin' head.

"This is Noah, my brother. You don't remember him?"

Declan squints and then slaps Noah on the shoulder. "Oh yeah, fuck, you're all grown up. I didn't even recognize you."

Noah dips his head but says nothing.

Declan throws me his world famous smirk. "You wanna find some place to catch up?"

I don't know why I look to Noah. Like I'm asking for his permission.

"Hey, yeah, go ahead. I'll be over here." Is it me or is there a hint of bluntness in Noah's voice? The thought of Noah being *jealous* feels so dangerous I yank it out of my head and hurl it into the bottomless pit of

hell. Then I leave him standing alone on the beach and follow Declan for what will most likely involve me burying my cock in his ass at some point tonight.

Sadly, we can't find a spot private enough so we settle for a few kisses near the rocks, where I can still see Noah watching the fireworks.

"Fuck, it's so good seeing you again, Ethan," Declan moans against my neck while he rubs his body against mine. "We should get out of here."

Noah looks around a few times, and one of those times his eyes find mine over Declan's shoulders. He turns away quickly. None of this is funny anymore. I've got to get a hold of this thing. I don't even know what it is, but I can't let myself get caught up in it anymore and I sure as fuck can't let Noah get himself caught up in it.

"Let the fireworks display finish, then we'll drop Noah off at home and we can do whatever you want afterward. What do you say?"

"Sounds fuckin' awesome. We need to stop for condoms."

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CHAPTER 6

Noah

I raged all week, my usual calm composure shattered, exposing a kind of jealous fury that had me shaking every time I thought about Ethan with Declan.

I imagined all the things Ethan would have done to Declan after they dropped me off; all the things he'd have let Declan do to him, and my struggle for some semblance of sanity turned my head into a warzone. The roar of my jealousy drowned out all logic, and the absurdity had gotten out of control.

Now, hearing that he'll be joining us for dinner, that rage reignites with fresh flames. I understand on an intellectual level how ridiculous these feelings are, but they persist nonetheless. I *hate* that Ethan spent the night with Declan.

Saturdays at our house are usually quiet. It's usually Ms. May's day off so, my father and I make our own food, tend to small chores and spend the day in quiet time with the Lord, unless there's a church meeting to attend. But this Saturday, we have guests so Ms. May is working on dinner, and I just heard Ethan's car pull into the driveway. Despite my disgusting thoughts from this past week, my stomach surges with excitement when I hear his muffled voice talking to Ms. May downstairs, and my heart thunders in my chest when I hear his soft footfalls as he makes his way to his bedroom.

Our father is in his prayer room, waiting on the Lord for this Sunday's sermon. He hopes to get it done before dinner, he told me, because he'll be counseling Mr. and Mrs. Preston afterward. He'll be in his prayer room for a while.

I turn the knob of my bedroom door. It's stupid and reckless, but I'm already guilty of so many sinful thoughts after I watched Ethan put his mouth on another man. One more stupid decision isn't going to make things much worse.

He must have been listening to his music because he doesn't answer when I knock the first three times. But I'm desperate enough to enter uninvited. He's standing by the open window. His head is tilted back with a

cigarette in his left hand. My first inclination is to tell him not to smoke inside the house because that would risk him getting kicked out and I really, really want him to stay.

“You gonna just stand there, choir boy, or you gonna tell me what you need?” he asks without looking at me. His AirPods lie on his bed. He ignored my knocking?

I close the door behind me. “Uhm—”

He turns to face me, holding up his cigarette. “Don’t tell Ms. May.”

I nod.

“You needed something?”

“Uh, yeah. I wanted to ask you something.”

He studies me from across the room with eyes so much like our fathers. But here, there is a softness not found in the pastor’s eyes. This is why I stay away from him. This is why I dream every waking moment of being near him. This softness in his eyes when he looks at me.

“Okay, spill it, choir boy.”

“Well, uhm. Last week . . .”

“Yeah? What about last week?”

“Yeah. When—when you—”

This was such a bad idea. My back presses into the door. I should just go.

He walks over to me. His socks clad feet fall softly on the thick carpet with each step. He comes to stand in front of me. “Are you in some kind of trouble?” he asks.

He’s too close. Looming over me with his 6’3” frame and his scent seeping into my pores.

I sink further into the door frame, my eyes skittering in every direction but his face. I shake my head. “No, no trouble.”

“Then what’s this about last week?”

“I—I saw . . . you.” I have to look at him now.

He’s had a haircut. The sides are shaved close to the scalp. But the tops are longer, some strands falling close to his eyes.

“You . . . saw me?” He frowns.

I’m being unnecessarily cryptic. And stupid. But if I made it this far, I should just finish it. “With that guy. Declan? I saw you.”

He takes a step back, giving me back my space and my breath. Pulling his lips into his mouth, he studies my face. “Yeah, so?”

“Uh, yeah, so . . .”

“So . . .?” His words hang in the air like some kind of warning bell. “What did you want to know?” There’s a drop in his voice and I think he’s as afraid of hearing the question as I am, wanting to ask it.

“What was it like?”

The softness in his eyes disappear, replaced with a kind of discomfoting *knowing*.

“What was what like, Noah?” He asks, like he already knows and there is an ever-so-slight edge in his voice.

And then, before I can clarify, he steps closer to me, bending so his face is level with mine. “Your father is just across the hall.” A warning. *Quit while you’re ahead*, in other words. Because Ethan isn’t stupid.

But I’m helpless against my own morbid curiosity. “He’s waiting on the Lord for tomorrow’s sermon. He’ll be there for a while.”

“He usually gets the Word on Wednesday. The Lord’s cutting it real close this week, huh?” he tells me with mischief in his eyes. And again, before I can answer he says, “Did you fast this week?” He’s trying to avoid this.

“No.” I stopped fasting nearly two years ago. Ethan just hasn’t been around enough to notice. Pastor Evanson hasn’t needed me to fast for two years now. He’s been delivered, he’d said, and because of it I, too, have been set free.

“But you’re still praying, right?”

“Yes.” It’s hard to breathe with him so close.

“Keep it that way, choir boy.”

I don’t understand why he’s acting like church is so good for me when he’s been the heathen of the century since the first moment I met him.

He stares at me for too long. The demons inside my head, masquerading as bravery, give me the courage to remind him of the question I have.

“The kiss. What was it like?” I ask.

“Well, neither of us died, so gay kisses must not be poisonous.”

“That’s not what I meant.”

“Don’t go asking questions you don’t need to be asking, Noah. Go and sing in your little church band. Pray like you always have and live your nice, quiet life. Don’t ruin it.”

But I can’t. I’m losing my mind. My heart drums wildly inside my rib cage. “Just please—”

“Do you want to know what it’s like to be kissed by a boy, Noah?” he asks. His eyes are on my mouth. His head dips.

“Just to be kissed,” I whisper, my breath landing on his lips. It’s not true. I want to know what it is to be kissed *by a boy*—and I want that boy to be *him*—but I have to maintain some semblance of heterosexuality if I don’t want to end up disowned like him.

He pulls back. “Just to be kissed? Have you never—?”

I give my head a small shake. “No.”

“Not a single girl?”

“No.” I’ve used my mouth in different ways. But no, never a kiss and then I fasted with my father until he felt forgiven.

“I hope you find a nice girl to kiss soon,” he says.

“Ethan, please—”

“No,” he snaps, but he doesn’t move away.

If he wasn’t standing so close, maybe my mortification would have given me the strength to flee but that’s not the case. So, I beg him. “You can pretend I’m Declan,” I whisper desperately.

Oh, God. His soft eyes again.

I’m in love with him. I must be. What other explanation could there be for what is happening inside me right now? Nobody has to know. I can admit it to myself just this one time.

“Do you want to see if you’ll die from a homo kiss, choir boy?” he asks softly.

I don’t like the way he’s phrased that question but now is not the time to dispute it. “Yes.”

No one has to know. And Ethan isn’t a snitch. I know that much.

His hand comes up, flattening against the door. He’s so close it would be hard to slide a strand of hair between us. He slips his other hand between the door and the back of my head, gripping my hair and pulling my head back.

“Stop this nonsense, Noah,” he breathes. I think he wants this too. Why is he fighting it?

“Please—” I’ll fast for a week. I’m on the mountaintop with the devil whispering in my ear. *Give in and I’ll show you pleasure like you’ve never even imagined.* Jesus resisted when he was tempted on the mountaintop. I am not Jesus. I’ll ask to be cleansed from this sin later. Later, I’ll beg for mercy.

His lips, a hair’s breadth from mine. I close my eyes. *Please.*

“Noah,” he whispers, his lips brushing against mine, and every lie I ever told myself, every prayer uttered to make these feelings stop, every slice of terror of what this means disintegrates. Burned by the heat of Ethan’s mouth on mine.

Softly, he kisses me. My first kiss. I taste cigarettes and a cherry flavor on his tongue. The wetness of his mouth makes me want to suck inside it. But I do nothing. I simply stand there, my body an inferno for this touching.

Too soon, he pulls away.

“There. Your first kiss. And oh, look at that, you didn’t die,” he murmurs against my lips. I haven’t moved an inch. Not away from him and not toward him.

“Now, get this nonsense out of your head. This isn’t you. And this isn’t good for you.” His stern voice, soft against my mouth, only makes me want more. And, anyway, how can Ethan know what is me and what isn’t me when even I don’t know?

“We are brothers,” he tells me in that same soft voice.

“We are not.” My bravery is fueled by the proximity of his mouth. So, in addition to my counter-argument, I also reach up and press my lips to his.

He doesn’t kiss me back, but I understand the predicament I’ve placed us both in. And still, I don’t care. While our father prays for this coming Sunday’s Word from the Lord a few short feet away, I swipe my tongue across the seam of Ethan’s lips.

He stills for one eternal second. Teetering in that place between before and after. And then his lips come crashing down on mine.

The real Ethan Salvatore roars to the surface. Bold and uncaring for consequences. Arrogant and so damn beautiful, he doesn’t just kiss me. He *assaults* my mouth.

I’m on the top of the mountain, and I have bowed my knee to Lucifer.

Again, he pulls away too quickly. “This is a secret you take to your grave,” he whispers. The words are spoken against my mouth again, like he can’t bear to create the needed distance between us. “Don’t test him. He will destroy you.”

I can hardly hear him over the boom in my ears. My body roars for more kisses; for more *everything* while my conscience tosses me between God and Satan. *Jesus forgive me, and, Ethan, please kiss me again and Holy Spirit, help me, and, oh, God, the taste of Ethan’s mouth.*

“Promise you’ll forget about all of this and do as he says.”

I nod, but after touching him like this, could I ever, ever forget it? And like lowly demons from hell rising to the surface to torment me, Declan's face flashes through my mind. Ethan kissed Declan like this too.

"Did you have sex with Declan?" I blurt out senselessly.

Shock lights up the blues of his eyes for an instant before settling back down into a curious stare. "Yes," he answers.

With our eyes locked and our bodies pressed up against each other, I speak as if some unseen force has taken hold of my tongue. "Was it good?"

Ethan drops his head again and kisses me with the same softness as before. "Yes," he whispers into my mouth.

That surge of rage erupts inside me once again. "What was so good about him?" I spit out, my words laced with an outrageous possessiveness. I am not myself. He's right. This isn't me.

Again, he presses his lips to mine. "He knew how to leave afterwards," he murmurs. "And *he* won't be mad about who I kissed tonight."

My eyes fly up to his, my face inflamed over the way he's called me out on my jealousy.

I turn around, yank the door open and flee.

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CHAPTER 7

Ethan

We are brothers.

We are not.

If that's true, then I'll need to kiss him again. I *want* to kiss him. If he says we're not brothers, then I should be allowed to kiss him. But he's wrong. *We are* brothers. In all the ways that matter, we are brothers. Apart from the fact that he's legally adopted, I care about him the way I imagine a big brother would. I don't talk to him a whole lot, but I care about his well-being. I don't want anything bad to happen to him, and, even if I may not show it, I don't know what I'd do if anything happened to him. Besides Jono and Ms. May and Mr. Tom, Noah is the only other person I worry about in the middle of the night when I think about people I care about dying on me.

Evanson drove my mother to her death. Noah is not much different from her. He's soft and acquiescent, just like she was. If Evanson found out about this, he'd drive Noah to suicide too. He'd destroy Noah the way he destroyed my mother.

I've been sitting here for thirty minutes trying to figure out what just happened. I should skip dinner. Ms. May will have to understand. I can't let whatever this thing is with Noah go any further.

My phone lights up with a text.

Jono: *Blood, gimme till at least nine p.m.*

Me: *Fuck off, bruh. Who's it this time? Angeline? Ronald?*

Jono: *Suck my dick bitch cos it's both*

I really need to get away from here before Noah comes out of his room. I hope he's praying for forgiveness. Some sick part of me hopes he's thinking about how we kissed while he's praying. The thought makes me hard. Thinking about the jealous rage all over his face when he asked about Declan has me about ready to blow.

Which is why I need to get the fuck out of here. Except, Jono's sex life really gets in the way of my dull existence. I could just go and hang around in the park.

Me: *You've got a girl and a guy over at our place, and I'm the bitch?*

Jono: See ya later

I put my phone away and head downstairs. Evanson is in the den when I pass, on my way to the kitchen. The Word of the Lord must have come early.

“Ethan.”

Jesus, fuck. I take a step back into the den. “Yeah?”

“You leave right after dinner. Do you understand me?”

“Yes.” I’ve learned not to engage with this guy. No fights. No explanations. No accusations. He doesn’t even hear them, anyway.

“And if you’re invited to have dinner with us again, make sure you come at dinner time, like any normal guest would.”

“Sure.”

His mouth turns into an upside down smile. “And you could show a little gratitude that I let you come around here. God knows what kind of contagious diseases you must be walking around with, especially after being in and out of jail.”

I shrug. Zero gratitude in sight.

“I don’t want you hanging around here when Noah is home.”

I concede to a little skitter of my heart at the mention of Noah. What would this asshole do to Noah if he found out his golden child had his lips on me just thirty minutes ago? The thought grows and expands and I find myself in unfamiliar territory. The thought of Noah being punished—for any reason and in any form—carries the weight of a thousand mountains. The hatred between my father and I evolves just an inch, taking on a tone of fear. I’m afraid of what would happen to Noah if Evanson found out.

“Hey, why don’t you give me back my mother’s diary?” I ask, to deflect from my dampening palms. My voice is solid but I’m unsettled. I shouldn’t have kissed Noah. I’ve done something that could get him into more trouble than he’ll be able to handle because Evanson’s capacity for cruelty is bottomless.

Evanson narrows his eyes. “Keep your mouth shut through dinner and leave as soon as we are done.”

I return his stare, but I’m not so confident on the inside.

The guests arrive a short while later and I’m glad to have avoided Noah for most of the afternoon. I hung out with Mr. Tom, smoking a cigarette out in the orchard for a while, and then I helped Ms. May gather the crockery.

“It’s the Preston’s. Remember I told you about them?” Ms. May whispers.

“Prestons? No.”

Ms. May bristles and then looks over her shoulder, toward the dining room, where the Prestons are elbow deep in shitty conversation with their pastor. Keeping her voice low, she says, “Did God give you plugs with those ears, Ethan? Remember I told you that Abe Preston’s been runnin’ around like a teenager, and that poor woman looks like she can’t handle it anymore”.

I honestly don’t remember, but I don’t reiterate that fact for her. I let her keep talking.

“It looks like they’re here for more counseling. You know what I say, Ethan? Sometimes divorce is the answer to marriage problems. I don’t know what’s there to counsel when your man has been dipping his rod in every pond he can find.”

“Ms. May,” I gasp, scandalized.

“Oh, hush, like you don’t know more than me about these things. Here, take these plates. I’ll bring the glasses.”

Apart from not being able to avoid Noah at the dinner table, dinner goes relatively well: Noah eats in silence. I eat in silence. Mrs. Preston eats in silence. And guess what? Ms. May eats in silence. The only voices to be heard are those of Mr. Preston and Great Pastor Evanson, who both have a lot in common, it turns out. They talk like they don’t have an audience.

“Those Democrats are gonna run this country into the ground, Abe, I’m telling you. We’ve got to stand strong on the Word of the Lord. Take back this country for Jesus.”

“I know exactly what you mean, Pastor. We’ve got to keep our houses clean until the Lord’s return.” Like he hasn’t been dipping his rod in every pond he ever came across.

“All this nonsense about Trans rights and gay rights and womb rights. Like we don’t have bigger things to worry about than girls pretending to be boys and boys pretending to be girls. Sign of the times, Abe. Sign of the times. The Lord is coming soon.”

And on and on it goes until Ms. May serves apple pie to everyone and Mr. and Mrs. Preston follow Pastor Evanson into his prayer room for some good ol’ Evangelical Christian counseling.

But first, some pictures for ‘The Instagram’ and ‘The Facebook’. Evanson gets Noah to take pictures of everyone—including me, of the food and generally capturing Great Pastor Evanson’s generosity, brotherly love for his congregants and unending tolerance for his delinquent gay son.

“Make sure you send those to our media people, Noah,” he says, but he gives me enough dirty looks to let me know that I’m in the pictures only for the good image of Pastor Evanson and Beth-El Fellowship.

I try to leave immediately after dinner, like my father told me to, but Ms. May tells me to stay and help her with the dishes.

Mr. and Mrs. Preston emerge an hour later with Great Pastor Evanson. Noah is behind them. Mrs. Preston looks like she’s been crying, and Mr. Preston pats his pastor on the back, thanking him for his time and wisdom.

Noah joins me and Ms. May in the kitchen and the Prestons have a final word with their pastor at the front door.

“It’s your duty to support your husband, Nora, because the devil will try anything to cause a divide between a husband and wife,” Pastor Evanson says.

I laugh out loud, and Ms. May swats me with a kitchen towel.

“That’s bullshit and you know it because he’s been dippin’ his rod in every pond,” I tell Ms. May in a whisper shout. She doesn’t fight me.

I glance over at Noah. He’s staring at me as if Ms. May isn’t even here.

I wish he would stop.

I wish he would never stop.

I pull us both out of this terrifying moment by asking, “You believe in that crap?”

He shrugs, his eyes never leaving mine, dragging us back to that moment locked in time where it’s just us.

I need to get out of here.

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CHAPTER 8

Noah

My need to be near Ethan seems to emanate from some place so deep inside me I can't pinpoint its origin. After feeling Ethan's body against mine, kissing me, it's like my world was reset and everything is now *right*. There was a restlessness before that isn't there now.

"Noah?"

"Hmm?" I blink, my mind zooming back to the present, where I'm in attendance at our weekly church elders' meeting. We meet once a week to discuss various pressing issues.

"If you're ready, we can get started," my father says from across the boardroom table. Three associate pastors join us for this week's meeting:

Pastor Shawn, who manages Children's Church. Pastor Enoch, head of Men's Fellowship and Pastor Eric, who oversees the Praise and Worship team. He's an accountant in his day job, so he also manages the church's finances.

I clear my throat. "Yes, I'm ready."

Pastor Evanson puffs out his chest and places his forearms on the table. "Right. Let's go."

"Jessica finished all the admin work last week," I start. "We have sixty indemnified kids coming through this summer. We received five thousand dollars from Senator Perkins—"

My father smiles fatly. "Senator Perkins can never say no to me," he says proudly.

I nod.

"You're welcome," he says with a glint in his eyes, demanding acknowledgement.

I clear my throat. "Thanks, Dad."

"I told him the Lord knows what's in his bank account so he'd better not shortchange the house of God." He laughs boisterously. My skin prickles with second-hand embarrassment, but the other men in the room murmur pious *amens* and *God is good* and *Thank God for you, John*.

My father settles down, and I wait for his go ahead to continue. He gives it to me after sufficiently accepting the praise from his staff.

“Pastor Anthony Michaels will be our opening guest speaker. We’re arranging his travel and accommodation right now and that should be finalized by the end of the week.”

“Where’re you putting him?” my father asks.

“Uh, well. We were thinking of The Towers.”

He frowns. “That’s a four star hotel, Noah. Why would we spend that kind of money?” He glares at Pastor Eric for allowing such an expense.

“Well, he was quite generous when he hosted our Men’s Fellowship last year so we thought we’d return the favor,” I cut in quickly, so Pastor Eric won’t have to sweat and sputter, trying to explain. “He’s also one of our most loved guest speakers so we wanted to go out of our way for him this time.”

My father shakes his head, displeased. “He’s not that much to write home about. He almost cheated on his wife five years ago. I don’t know about this *most loved* business but we’re definitely not spending money on a four star hotel. Shawn, can’t you and Marian host him? It’s only a few days.”

Shawn looks a little stunned. His wife gave birth to their fourth child just three days ago. I doubt having guests over is the best thing for them right now.

“We’ll compensate you for the food,” my father says as if it’s the most generous thing he’s ever offered someone.

“Marian’s still recovering . . .”

“She’s a woman, Shawn. She’s built for those kinds of things. And Pastor Anthony will only need a place to rest his head. He’ll be at camp all day. Okay?”

Pastor Shawn is blindsided and I’m just *dumbstruck*. If God wasn’t watching my thoughts and if God didn’t frequently give my father visions about the people in his church, I’d have plenty of nasty thoughts about his world view.

Shawn tries to push back. He looks at the other two pastors. They lift their shoulders sympathetically. They won’t step in unless they’re called up by their senior pastor.

I feel so sorry for Pastor Shawn. “We could host him,” I offer.

My father laughs. “Look, Pastor Anthony is a good man, and I love him like a brother, and, like brothers, we don’t always get along. I’m only approving his spot in our program because the kids like him. I can deal with him for a couple of hours, but to be under the same roof as him? No, Noah.

That's my boundary, and I expect it to be respected. He'll stay at Pastor Shawn's place."

Frankly, the logic has left me speechless but no one argues with Pastor Evanson. All I can do is cast Pastor Shawn a sympathetic look and move on.

"Okay. That's it from me."

"Great," Pastor Evanson says. "Shawn, you're up."

Pastor Shawn, who's going to have a lot to explain to his wife, provides some updates, followed by Pastor Enoch. I don't hear a single word due to my wayward thoughts about my father's biological son.

"Tithing has dropped twenty percent in the last three months, John," Pastor Eric says.

Pastor Evanson is not pleased. "How is a man of God supposed to take care of the flock when the flock won't even set aside the first fruits of their labor? Is ten percent too much to ask for the house of God?" he demands.

I'm not going to be the one to point out that people barely have money to buy food, so how can we expect them to give to men of God who live on rolling hills with orchards behind ornate gates. Because I'm a beneficiary of those tithes, too.

Pastor Eric nods but provides no solutions.

"Eric, I need you to pray about our finances," my father says. He casts his eyes around the table. "All of us. We all need to pray that we never struggle financially. And the Lord will tell me if you don't pray so don't lie to me about it." Then he goes through his meeting points:

"Dress code. Gentlemen, we're slipping. I've seen too many of our female youth taking liberties with the dress code. I need that to get sorted out immediately. I'll make an announcement next week, but I'll be meeting with parents individually if this trend continues."

He looks at me and I nod, indicating my agreement even though I'm boiling inside.

"Next," he continues, "It's June, and you know what that means."

Pastor Eric shakes his head and turns his mouth downward. "I suggest we have our own street march," he says.

My father laughs. "That is an excellent idea. Why didn't I think of it myself? I'm usually the brains in this outfit."

I provide an obligatory laugh too, but I feel like Judas the Betrayer.

“Yes, this year, let’s take back the rainbow. Sickens me that they’ve taken a symbol of the greatest promise God made to humanity and perverted it like that,” he adds.

I resist a sneer. Promise? Promise to never commit genocide ever again? Promise to never wipe out every single human being, including children, from the face of the earth? How generous of our God. My heart rate begins to pick up with my growing fury, but I tamp it down. Hell hath no fury like the God who created it bent on sending you there.

The three grown, supposedly educated men laugh. Yes, we should counteract Pride Parades with one of our own. It’s brilliant. My insides turn and I swallow my saliva to keep my nausea in check.

“Noah, I want to talk more about a Jesus parade. We need to get the youth involved in that. Let them take a stand for Christ, and we need to remind them that if they are ashamed of the gospel, then Christ will be ashamed of them.”

I swallow my bile and move my head up and down.

“Final points. Eric, we need some more worship songs on Sunday mornings. These kids are getting too accustomed to this trendy music. We need to tone it down a bit. Same for you and the youth band, Noah.”

I nod.

“Enoch, we need bigger numbers for our Mens’ fellowship. No excuses. When the head of the home isn’t led by the Lord, we end up with all these problems with the kids. We need the men to stand up and be real men.”

Enoch agrees.

“Shawn,” Pastor Evanson continues, “your Children’s Food Program—I need those kids at the group home fed every single day. No excuses. We can’t let children go hungry. Last week, those kids had to wait until eight o’ clock to eat dinner. How could we let that happen? I need your commitment that something like that never happens again.”

“You have my word, Pastor.”

This is the most confusing part about living the Christian life. That we can give so much love and care with one hand while causing so much destruction with the other. Sometimes, religion is so good. Who can argue when Christians take such good care of the hungry and the homeless?

The meeting is adjourned, and I gather my files.

“You’ve been quiet lately. Is everything okay?” my father asks when it’s just the two of us.

“Yes. Everything’s fine.”

“Come over here and give me a hug.”

I hate this part. I rise and walk the few steps needed. He stands too, towering over me, and envelopes me in his arms. “I’ve been good, haven’t I?” he says against my hair.

“Yes.”

He chuckles. It scares me how much he sounds like Ethan. I was fascinated in the beginning that Ethan not only looked strikingly like his father but also *sounded* so much like him. “Just yes?”

“Yes, Dad,” I correct.

“You’re glad I came and got you that day, aren’t you?” he asks, still trapping me against him. Same old story. The constant reaffirming is exhausting.

“Yes, Dad.” I *am* glad if you make the assumption that hopping from home to home in the foster care system is worse than being adopted by—

“Imagine what your life would have been like with a mother like that. You’d have been on the streets selling drugs for sure, am I right?”

“You’re right.” He’s right. I don’t know how to feel about it.

He finally lets me go but keeps his hands on the sides of my arms. His smile is soft and kind, the wrinkles around his eyes making him look like a gentle soul. But the outward appeal only runs skin deep. “I tell you every day, Noah, you are the very best thing to have ever happened to me. You are the son I dreamed of having one day, and I’m so proud of you.”

Despite everything, my heart still swells at his approval.

“You are the strongest person I know. A warrior in the Lord’s army. Do you understand how strong you are, Noah?” His eyes—Ethan’s eyes—regard me fondly.

I don’t want to be strong, I want to tell him. “I know, Dad,” I say, instead.

“Not many people would have done what you did for me. The Lord will reward you richly for it.”

“I know.” I was forced to do what I did for my father, but, then again, maybe I wasn’t forced.

“A mansion is prepared in heaven for you. Because you are the very best of The Lord’s soldiers.”

I nod emphatically, hoping this will be the last of it. His hands are still on my shoulders. The lack of space is making me sick. I maintain eye contact with a smile on my face. “I’ll keep working,” I say. *Please step back*.

“I’m concerned about Ethan’s frequent visits,” he says. “I don’t want him contaminating all the good work I’ve put into you so, I’m going to have a long talk with him. He can’t come around the house anymore, even for family dinners.”

No. My heart drops, falling to my feet with phenomenal speed.

“He’s an adult. He made his bed, so he must now sleep in it. You don’t have to worry about him coming around anymore and flaunting his lifestyle all over our house.”

But it’s *his* house. His *mother’s* house. I know from the many documents I found in the study that the house I live in was given to Ethan’s mother as a wedding present by her elderly parents. They died shortly before she did. Rightfully, that house is more Ethan’s than it would ever be mine. And he should be allowed into his own house whenever he wants.

But I remain silent, like a coward.

“You must have checked his room when he was here, am I right?”

“Yes. I didn’t find anything.”

“He’s sneaky like that, but one day, the truth will come out about every vile thing that boy has ever done.”

What about the things you’ve—

No. I can’t change anything. I am bound by God to remain silent. What’s the use in thinking about any of it?

“All right. Let’s get going. We’ll have a quiet meal together, just me and you. I’ll bring the car around. Grab my bible, won’t you, Noah?”

He steps back and I breathe easily again.

As soon as he’s gone, I reach for my phone. I have an inexplicable need to hear Ethan’s voice. I have maybe two minutes. I hit dial without giving myself a chance to think about it.

He answers on the first ring but no words come out of my mouth. I can’t even muster a greeting.

“Noah? Are you okay?”

My heart bangs against my ribcage. I terminate the call. Two seconds later my phone lights up with his return call. I answer.

“Noah, you called?” he says. Ethan’s voice washes away the filth. Better than the blood of Jesus washes away sins. Ethan’s voice is the Healing Balm of Gilead. I don’t care how blasphemous that sounds. Ethan is everything that is good in this world and he makes me happy. I’ve never felt that kind of happiness anywhere else in this world, not even in God.

Still, I terminate the call again, and instead, send him a text. I don't know what I was thinking, calling him. What if our father found me talking to Ethan on the phone?

I send him a text. *Sorry. Butt dial.*

He sends me a thumbs up emoji. I stare at his response as if it might make him magically appear in front of me.

If Ethan can't visit the house anymore, and if my movements are tracked as meticulously as they are, I'll need to find another way to see him because I don't know how to live with just one kiss from Ethan.

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CHAPTER 9

Ethan

We have a plaque hanging on the wall by the kitchen in our apartment. It says, *Home Is Where the Heart Is*. Jono's mom gave it to us when we got this place. She came around about Jono's sexuality after a few years.

Maybe my home is with Noah because that's where my heart seems to be these days. I hate sounding so whipped for this guy but I'm not in the habit of lying to myself. That kind of delusion is dangerous so I usually accept and make peace with things as soon as possible. And I've made peace with the fact that I am, in fact, whipped for my stepbrother.

I take a look around my and Jono's apartment. The other thing to make peace with is the fact that there is no *Noah and me*. Nor can there ever be. Even if we didn't have all these complications it would still be less than ideal for us to be together. I'm a Class A loser with nothing to offer Noah. If anything, I might end up fucking up his life with my *fuck heaven, let's get high in hell* life motto. What could I possibly offer Noah besides a place next to me in a lumpy bed I've been sleeping on for five years, sharing a room with my best friend?

Yet, the thought of never kissing him again guts me like a fish in the hands of a skilled fisherman.

"Hey, thanks for helping yo' boy out again." Jono walks into our apartment with a smile on his face, like he, just last night, had another fuck sandwich. Oh, wait. He did. That's twice in two weeks.

"Yeah, shut up. You keep this up and I'll be sleeping at the park."

He laughs. "Look at what I got for us." He points to the six pack.

He throws me a beer and takes a gulp of his. "Man, I miss Ms. May's chicken. When are you gonna go back and get some more for us?"

Honestly? If I don't have to go back there ever again, it would probably be best for everyone. I considered telling Jono about what happened with Noah a dozen times, but it's not right. It's just not something you tell other people about. I'm feeling a little protective of Noah's secret. Of *our* secret.

"I'll see," I reply.

The door rattles with a sudden banging. My eyes swing to Jon. "We paid the rent, right?" I ask.

He eyes the door nervously. “Dude, I swear to God, we were only one day late.”

“Well then, open the door.”

“No, you open it.”

“What the fuck, Jono?”

The banging continues.

“Listen, Blood, I’m a black man and someone is banging on the front door. If it’s the police, you think they’re gonna stop to ask questions? They’re just gonna shoot me, man. Get yo’ white ass up and get the door.”

Well. He has a point. And it’s not a funny point. I get up and swing the door open.

Great Pastor Evanson fills the doorway. His face is red, probably from having to walk up sixteen flights of stairs. Buildings in this lovely part of town have no elevators.

“We need to talk,” he says. He must have good lungs. He doesn’t sound out of breath at all. And wow, so much glaring.

Jono knows how it works so he takes a walk.

“Man, I’ll see you later,” he says. Great Pastor Evanson shifts to the side to let Jono pass but he does it like Jono has some contagious disease. Maybe the same disease he thinks I have.

I step back inside the apartment to let him in and that’s when it hits me. He knows. Oh my fucking Jesus Christ, he *knows*. My palms dampen and panic sets in.

“We need to get a few things straightened out,” he says calmly.

That’s way too calm. My father is not the calm type. In fact he’s quite . . . explosive. My mother would tell you that if she were here. One time, they had a fight. I don’t know what it was about. I just remember how he screamed at her over and over and when she wouldn’t answer his question—*Where’s my belt, Priscilla? Where’s my damn belt?*—He threw a cup at her from across the room. I must have been four years old and, well, I was a bit of a crybaby back then. “Look at what you’ve done,” he yelled after that. “Look at how scared Ethan is because of you.”

“I’ve been praying about it and I’m here to tell you that you are forbidden from visiting the house from now on,” he says.

I feign boredom. If there’s one thing I learned in juvie, it’s that you keep your mouth shut. He who talks gets the shittiest room. So, I keep the hole in

my face nice and closed. All that matters is that he doesn't know about Noah. He's here on some other mission.

"Noah is growing up. It doesn't take much sense to know that he's grown into a very attractive young man, so I can't have you around him."

Wow. Don't you just love these self-righteous fucking cunts? Except, he's right. Noah *has* grown up to be a very attractive young man, and I *shouldn't* be around him. And this cunt is just trying to prevent what he doesn't know has already happened.

"Okay." I lift my shoulder in that way he hates.

"And I don't want to see you at his graduation. You contributed nothing to his life. Unlike me—I've given him everything he has. So, there's no need for you to be there."

Another shrug. "Okay." But fuck this cunt. I promised Noah I'd be there. I'll make Noah's graduation and no fuckin' hypocritical asshole is going to stop me.

Evanson's face twists. It's my favorite look on him. This is the real Great Pastor Evanson. A nasty, self-righteous fucking devil. I love it when people are authentic.

"You should have just drank that juice," he says. The words come out all choppy through his curled up lips. He looks like a man who would slaughter me if he knew he would get away with it. "You should have *just* drank that juice."

"My bad," I drawl.

"You're just like your mother. All you ever wanted was to destroy me."

All I ever wanted was for my mother to have never been abused in the most inhumane sexual way so she wouldn't have had to fucking literally die of the shame, but whatever.

"Noah will start bible school soon. He has his life planned out—"

"You mean *you* have his life all planned out."

The glare intensifies. Well, fuck. Bad move. I turn away from him just in case God gives him a vision of me kissing Noah.

"Noah is my most prized possession," he says to my back. "Unlike you, he's perfect in every way. You don't know him the way I do. He's my *son*. I won't accept any less than the best for him, and if I have to help him make important decisions, you'd better believe I will."

"Okay."

“So, you’re not allowed at the house again. If I find that you’ve been visiting or getting anywhere near Noah, I’ll have you thrown in jail for trespassing. It’s where you belong, anyway. Do you understand me?”

“Sure.”

My disinterest, although unbeknownst to him, feigned, seems to grate the fuck out of him. “Noah is mine. Do you understand?”

I turn to face him. He has his hands on his hips, and he’s basically frothing at the mouth.

“Noah is a person, not a thing to own. You know that, right?” I ask indifferently.

“Well, I made him who he is today. I pay for his education, feed him and clothe him.” He laughs nastily. “I was the one who picked him up with my own hands from the gutter. Can you say that?”

I always thought there was something wrong with this fucking asshole, but now I know for sure he has a few screws loose. “You agreed to be his caregiver. You’re kind of legally obligated to take care of him,” I say dryly.

His smile disappears. “What would you know about taking care of anyone? The only person you care about is yourself.”

Well, and my mother. And Jono. Ms. May and Mr. Tom. And . . . Noah, too. I stare this man down and lift my shoulder. “Okay.”

“If I hear that you’ve gone near Noah, not only will you pay for it, he will too.”

Okay, that gets my attention because it’s exactly the reason I warned Noah to keep his shit to himself and make sure no one ever found out about what we did.

Evanson smiles triumphantly, like he’s got me. I don’t know how worried to be that he seems to sense how much it would affect me if something were to happen to Noah.

“What would you do?” I ask with as much nonchalance as I can gather into my voice.

“I’ll send him right back to the gutter where I picked him up from. Don’t think I won’t do whatever it takes to keep Noah on the straight and narrow path.”

“Even send him back to the gutter?”

“I sent you back to the gutter, didn’t I? What makes you think I won’t discipline Noah in whatever way is necessary to keep him from turning out like you. Look at the filth you live in.” He waves his hand around the

apartment. I consider telling him that I walked to the gutter all by myself and I prefer it here, anyway. But he spins on his heels and leaves with a solid slam of our already shaky front door.

Only when I'm left with the resounding silence do I give myself a chance to breathe normally. Where did that come from? Did this guy think that the primary goal of gay men was to corrupt straight church boys? Straight church boys wanting to fuck dudes in private wasn't any of our fault. Well, it was fun but wasn't even on the list of goals. What *was* on the list of goals was the desire to just fucking *exist* in this disgusting world for a while before we die.

But his threat about Noah makes me uneasy. I don't usually take anything Evanson says seriously, but this thing about cutting Noah off from the life he's enjoyed makes me pause. Noah would never survive that kind of rejection.

My phone lights up.

Noah: *Hi*

Fuck me, but I can't resist. I'm desperate, despite the little shit show from moments ago.

Me: *Hey*

And because I need to get a fucking grip and sort this shit out, I add: *Look, Noah, your father was just here. What happened was a bad idea. I'll make your graduation but after that I can't see you. It's for your sake.*

It's a full five minutes before his response comes through even though the dots at the top jump the whole time.

Noah: *I know about him coming to see you. You remember the steel door that leads out from the orchard?*

What the fuck is this kid doing?

Me: *Yeah.*

Noah: *Can you come around that side?*

Yes. I'll come around that side. I'll scale the Great Wall of China to see him but—

Me: *No, Noah. Stop this bullshit. I'm not going to tell you again. I know you think you want this but you don't. Your life is in the church. That's where you belong.*

Noah: *Please Ethan. Just this once. I'm begging.*

I can't allow this. It's not worth it. *I'm* not worth the trouble it would cause Noah if Evanson found out. And if Noah won't stop it then I have to.

My phone lights up again.

Noah: *Just this once, Ethan. Please.*

I let out a deep sigh. What else can I do? I answer: *Just this once.*

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CHAPTER 10

Noah

I race through my room setting everything up. Bible study on the left side of my desk. Friday night's youth sermon on the right side of the desk. He'll check the notes when he comes in. Extra scriptures for home meditation.

I send my father a text. *Hi dad, do you want me to stay up so we can discuss my sermon notes? Love, Noah.*

I don't care about the sermon notes. I just need a way to get him to tell me what time he'll be home and if he'll be in my room tonight to talk about the notes.

He responds immediately. *No, son. I'm stopping by the church and I'll be late, probably past nine p.m. I'm stopping by the Prestons' place, and I'll probably stay for a late night coffee. So go on to bed and we can look over the notes tomorrow afternoon.*

I check the time. Eight-thirty. I don't know where Ethan is coming from. I don't know how long it will take him to get here. I rush down to the orchard. Maybe he's already there waiting for me to let him in. My body trembles with excitement and terror. Things have changed between me and Ethan. And 'we have to change with the times' as Pastor Evanson frequently told the congregation from the pulpit. Not in this context, I know, but I'll take any kind of justification right now.

The orchard is well kept. Mr. Tom does a great job, but there is a steel door leading out into the street right at the very bottom, where no fruit can grow. I slip the key out of my pocket and open the door.

He's here. His car is parked a little down the street, not right in front of the steel door. I text him: *I'm sorry you had to wait. I'm here.*

I peek out into the well-lit street. He's wearing sweatpants again and a hoodie. He has a baseball cap on his head, turned backward. My dick hardens at the sight of him.

He reaches me, and I step back inside, locking the door behind us.

When I turn to him, he backs me into the steel door, his hands on either side of my head, pressing me into it. I gasp, my body responding to him so violently it shocks me. But his face . . .

He's furious.

“What the fuck do you think you’re doing, Noah?” he asks close to my face. I’ve never seen Ethan look so angry. He’s so hot when he’s mad.

“I—I—” I don’t know how to answer. Why is he so angry?

“You can’t do this,” he whispers harshly. “I told you we can’t do this. Tell me right fucking now what you think you’re doing.”

This isn’t going the way I’d planned. I was convinced he’d kiss me again the first moment he saw me. I’m such an idiot. What will I do when he tells everyone what an idiot I am? No. Ethan is no snitch. He’d never rat me out.

“I—I—I don’t know,” I whisper back. But he’s too close. His face is right in mine, like this is some kind of standoff.

“I’m sorry about kissing you. It was stupid,” he bites out. “It was just a stupid joke, okay? It didn’t mean anything. Now you need to tell me what the fuck you think you’re doing begging me to come over—”

I can’t stand his scolding. I reach up and press my lips to his. He presses back and I moan at his response. Then he wrenches his lips away.

“*Stop this,*” he hisses. Yet, his hands remain as firm bars, caging me in. I don’t ever want him to remove his hands. I want to stay trapped inside him like this.

But he’s so *angry*. “I—I—I’m sorry. I—I don’t know what’s happening,” I whisper, the notes in my voice broken. This is not how I imagined it would go when I texted him. “I’m sorry, Ethan.”

His eyes soften and I blow out a breath, relieved he’s not glaring at me so much. “I’m sorry about kissing you, okay?” He says. “It didn’t mean anything.”

I hate hearing that. “I’m not sorry about it. And it meant something to *me.*”

He shifts away from me, but I bring my hands up to his forearms, curling my fingers around his thick wrists, keeping him close to me. His eyes drop to where I’m holding him and then back to fuse with mine.

“You’re a straight, Evangelical Christian Republican with John Evanson for a father,” he says softly. “You don’t get to do this.”

“He’s your father, too. How do you get to ‘do this’?” I argue senselessly.

He doesn’t answer my question. “When did this start, Noah?” he asks, instead.

It’s such a loaded question but I finally get to *talk* to this guy. I’m not going to waste it. “I’ve known since middle school. Even before that.”

“And you still let yourself get wrapped up in all that shit he makes you do?”

My face explodes with shame. He sees it. “I’m sorry. That wasn’t fair,” he says, his voice still soaked in that softness I’m never going to be able to live without if he walks away from me now.

“What do you want, Noah?” he asks gently.

“I don’t know, Ethan, I’m so confused. Please help me.”

He brings his forehead to mine. “You are the most forbidden of all forbidden fruit.”

His voice. Oh, God, his voice could send me to my knees.

“I’m sorry. I don’t know what I’m doing but I can’t stop thinking about you, Ethan.”

“You’re not allowed to do that, Noah,” he says, and I recognize the desperation in his voice. It’s in mine, too. This *wanting* and knowing it can never, ever be.

But it *can* be. It already *has* been. I’ve been kissed by a boy. My *brother*. That *happened* and it was *right*.

I scramble for something to say. If we stop talking, he might leave. “I know I can’t have this, Ethan. But I don’t know what to do. What should I do? Tell me what to do.”

“Forget any of this ever happened and stick to the plans you have for your life,” he says. It sounds so final and it makes me sick.

“I’m not allowed to see you again. He thinks I’ll ruin your life,” he says.

“I can’t bear not being able to see you.” And then with Satan’s courage, I carry on. “Do you feel something for me? If there weren’t all these things to deal with. If I were like Declan, out and free, would you—would you . . . want me?”

My throat closes up with what I see on his face. He looks at me like there’s hope for the question I’ve asked. “You’re not the lying type, Ethan. Tell me.”

“You’re my brother.” Defeat burdens his voice.

“I am, but I’m also not.”

“If nothing stood in our way, I would fuck you against this steel door right now until you’re screaming my name, Noah,” he whispers.

My ears burn and my dick strains against the front of my pants. “Ethan . . .” I whisper.

He's losing the battle. "If nothing stood between us, you'd be on your knees with my dick in your mouth."

I reach up again and bite his lower lip. This time he doesn't pull away. Instead, he yanks his wrists out of my grasp and closes his fingers around my neck. He kisses me so hard and deep all I can do is cling to the front of his shirt. I try to kiss him back, but he's too skilled. His tongue licks into my mouth and my moans reach my ears, a foreign sound I welcome like an unbelieving sinner. Ethan eats at my mouth.

I protest when he releases me but he keeps me close. He drops his forehead against mine again. "Noah. This is a mistake. You'll regret this."

"I won't," I plead desperately.

"You need to get your head out of your ass and think this through."

"I've already thought about it."

"Is this really what you want, Noah?"

"If I said yes, would it be something you would want too?"

His thumb moves softly over my cheek. "Do you think if I'd met you in the street somewhere I'd have looked away? Now answer me. Is this really what you want?"

"This is what I want." I reach up and kiss him quickly. He lets me. It's so beautiful being with him like this.

He sighs, bringing his lips to mine. "Then choose, Noah. Lover or brother. You can't have both."

I don't even blink. "Lover," I whisper. My body trembles with happiness. "Lover," I repeat with more conviction, just in case he doesn't believe me. "I choose lover," I say with desperate joy.

He doesn't look so joyful. "This is wrong, Noah." My face is trapped between his palms. His hands are warm, like the blues of his eyes. His words don't match his voice or that look in his eyes. Still, I'm scared he'll change his mind already. "But you said—"

"It's wrong *for you*," he says.

"I choose *lover*," I repeat fiercely.

"I heard you the first time, Noah." There is a deepness to his soft voice now. "No one will ever find out about this. Do you understand?" he says, serious once again.

"No one will ever find out."

"You'll satisfy your curiosity, and then you'll move on with your life."

"What?" I'm confused. He's talking like we're making a deal.

“I’ll give you what you want. But this remains our secret from start to end.”

“*End?*” There’s already an end? My world begins to deflate all over again.

“Yes, *end*. You’re acting like a loose cannon. I’m not going to let you go looking for hookups online and getting involved in some dangerous underground life while you explore whatever it is you think you need to explore to get this shit out of your system.”

“Get it out of my system? What are you talking about, Ethan? You of all people should know that’s not how it works. I don’t need to tell you that.”

His eyes harden again. “No, you don’t. But I don’t think you understand the lengths people like your self-righteous hypocrite of a father would go to in order to make people like us invisible. He will destroy you, and you won’t survive.”

Ethan’s truth is impossible to swallow. He’s right. The thought of coming out terrifies me for that exact reason.

“So, if you want this, you make sure you stay off the internet and most importantly, you don’t breathe a word of it to anyone. I’m the only one who’ll touch you and no one will ever find out.”

Touch me. Oh, God. “It’ll be our secret. I won’t tell anyone. I promise.” As long as I can be with him, I’ll agree to anything.

“Okay. He checks your phone, right?”

“Yes, once or twice a month. And he’ll take it away next week because of graduation and stuff.”

“What an asshole. Okay. Then I won’t text you, ever. I’ll always wait for you to text me first so I know it’s safe to talk to you.”

“Okay. Where will I see you? Here? I can give you the days and times I’ll be here and when I’ll have to be at church.”

He grins. “You think you’re the first church boy I’ll be messing around with? I know how to work around a church schedule, Noah. We’ll see each other; don’t worry.”

My blood heats with that same ferocious anger from that night he drove off with Declan. A thundering sensation seeping into my bones. There are other church boys? I have the urge to scream with rage into the still night.

“There’ll be other boys while . . .?” I don’t know how to finish the sentence without wanting to throw up.

His grin widens. “So jealous, Noah.”

I open my mouth and then close it again.

“You chose *lover*,” he says. “I’m the monogamous type. It’ll be just you and me until you’re done.”

I won’t be done, is what I want to tell him. Instead, I say, “Kiss me. Please.”

“How the fuck did this happen?” he whispers, before taking my lips with his.

I don’t know, I want to say, but my words are swallowed up by my desire for Ethan.

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CHAPTER 11

Ethan

He's as soft as I imagined. But there's a surprising sureness about the way he responds to me. He shouldn't be this confident. He shouldn't press his palms to my chest like this, feeling his way to my neck. Never, in a hundred million years, would I ever have imagined that Noah would be wrapping his arms around my neck, pressing his body into mine like this and kissing me back like our souls had been joined together over many previous lifetimes.

Does he realize how much of his hard cock I can feel against me right now? I tilt my hips forward, making sure he can feel me, too. He gives me a sweet moan, right inside my mouth, and pushes back. *Fuck*. I'm worried I'll fuck him right this fucking minute if I don't leave immediately. I lick inside his mouth. Just one more taste of him, and then I'll leave.

But this Noah is not anything like the Noah I know. When I try to pull away he pulls me back. "I've never—"

We are nose to nose. I, too, can't bring myself to be further away from him than this. "You've never what?" I ask but I have my suspicions about where he's going with this.

"We're not allowed to . . . it's . . ."

"You've never had an orgasm?" I ask

He shakes his head. "It's a . . . sin," he breathes against my lips.

"Do you want to come, Noah?" I ask softly.

It's dark but I'll bet everything he's blushing. "I—uh . . . it's not wrong?"

"It's exquisitely wrong." My hand drops, moving to his waist. His gasp and his widened eyes while he watches my face in the dark makes my heart dance.

This isn't like it was with the other church boys. Noah's switch from confident to absolutely terrified of his body's response to this insane curiosity is the biggest turn on I've ever encountered. We agreed that this will be our secret, so I take him a little further. "You'll be thinking about it in church, while you're praying. You'll love it, Noah."

His breathing escalates as my hand travels further down and when my palm flits over his concealed erection, he loses it. It's beautiful.

He buries his face in the crook of my neck, his arms wrapped tightly around my neck. His parted lips ghost over my skin and I'm losing it too.

"Ethan . . ." My name on his lips sends me straight to hell. I'm going to give this beautiful boy his first orgasm. He thrusts his hips against mine, telling me unequivocally that he wants it.

With my mouth on his and his arms keeping me trapped tightly against his body, I slip my hand into his sweats. Brush my fingers over his cock.

Fuck me to fucking hell. Noah is fucking *clean*. Smooth and hairless. "Hmm," I murmur. And fuck, he's so hard. So thick and veined. I grip him hard, tracing my thumb over those veins, and he whimpers into my mouth. *Fuck, Noah. When did you get so fucking hot?* He's so impatient. I don't have time to appreciate his smooth skin.

"I got you, Noah. It's good, isn't it?"

He moans again, moving his hips. I don't know if he knows that he's fucking my fist. I let him move like that for a while, and, with my lips still sealed to his, I take over. Swiping my thumb over the hot, slick head of his cock, I begin to jerk him off. He can't keep up with our kiss. With his mouth open and against mine, he sends his breath into mine with every gasp. I, too, can't kiss him and fist fuck him at the same time. So, with our mouths pressed together, open and gasping for air, I fist Noah harder. It's seconds only, and he is eating at my mouth, biting, clawing at my hair and gasping, and then his warm cum spills over the back of my hand.

His body shudders against mine and he pants against my neck.

Noah lifts his head, his eyes widening as he watches me bring my hand to my mouth. I swipe my tongue across the back of my hand. His sweet outrage is intoxicating. So, I touch my cum-covered fingers to his parted lip, slipping them into his mouth. "Suck, Noah," I whisper. He hesitates, so I stroke his wet tongue. He pulls my fingers into his mouth and sucks. And with my fingers still in his mouth, I kiss the corner of his lips.

I don't know how any of this happened, but I can't make myself regret it.

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CHAPTER 12

Noah

Ethan tried to clean me up after my . . . but I didn't want to clean up. He seemed to like that. "You're a whole bundle of surprises, choir boy," he said before he pulled up my sweats and with a soft kiss, he left.

I drop to the ground, looking up at the stars. It finally happened and it was better than anything I could have imagined. It'll be our secret. For how long, I don't know. I force myself not to think about it.

Safe inside my bedroom once again, I try to make sense of how I'll conduct this new part of my life, but my bible grabs my attention every so often. Finally, with my head in turmoil, I turn to the book that has governed my entire life. The scripture I have had imprinted in my head since I heard Ethan was gay jumps up at me: *do not have sexual relations with a man as one does with a woman.*

It's clear as day. How can I argue against that? There's no way around such crystal clear clarity. But what about how natural it feels to *me*? What about how I could never bring myself to 'lie with a woman'. What about how the thought of 'lying with a woman' brings me no joy? No sense of connectedness? Yet, with Ethan it feels so right and so safe.

And why do I feel so empty after I've heard every single teaching about same-sex love? Isn't the Word of God supposed to enrich my life? Bring me comfort and the joy of conviction? Yet, all I've ever felt when I read the bible, is judgment.

So I prayed and fasted and fasted and prayed and searched the hidden places for unconfessed sins so I could be delivered from this terrible, terrible sin of wanting to love and be loved by someone who belonged to the same gender as me.

With a deep sigh, I put away my bible and settle in my bed and then I pray. "Father forgive me for all that I've done wrong. Forgive me for all my sins, known and unknown."

The feel of Ethan's fingers wrapped around my dick is as present as if it were happening right now. I shake my head, trying to get the thought out. "Heavenly Father, create in me a clean heart and cleanse my soul from all

unrighteousness. In the name Of Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior who gave his life for me so I may live a life that is pleasing to you. Amen.”

Then, with my hand inside my sweats and like a dog going back to its vomit, I text Ethan.

Me: *When will I see you again?*

He responds immediately: *maybe next week.*

Me: *Can I come see where you live?*

Ethan: *Fuck no. Delete your texts*

Me: *Okay.*

There’s nothing for some time. Maybe he’s thinking about what happened in the orchard too. He was right anyway. It’s all I can think about, even when I’m praying. Then—

Ethan: *You’re okay, Noah. Everything’s okay.*

Tears gather, blurring my vision. Why do these few words from an unbeliever bring me so much comfort when the entire bible does not?

I try to give Ethan my best response: *You’re the best person I’ve ever met. I wanted to tell you that the first time I met you.*

Ethan: *You’re just sappy because I made you come.*

That makes me smile, even if it does feel a little scary to be *this* happy.

Me: *Promise I’ll see you next week*

Ethan: *I promise. Get some sleep.*

Me: *Goodnight, Ethan.*

Ethan: *Goodnight, choir boy.*

I delete the texts and hope my dreams are about Ethan. Until then, I replay our time in the orchard together over and over in my mind.

It’s just before eleven p.m., maybe, when I hear the clicking sound of the entrance gate opening. I settle deeper in my bed, making sure I’m facing away from the door, and the blanket is pulled up to my chin.

Moments later, my door creaks a little as it opens, and then my bed dips with my father’s weight. His hand settles on my hair, patting gently.

“Noah?” he says softly. His gentle voice. His *godly* voice.

I keep my breathing long and even, like I’m asleep.

“You must be tired,” he says. He pats the blanket over my thighs and sighs audibly. “You’re the most perfect child, Noah. I thank The Lord every day for you.” He sits there for some time. I worry I’ll mess up my breathing, and he’ll know I’m awake.

He gets up, reaches over to kiss the back of my head and then moves around my room. There's a rattle of the curtain rail as he closes the small gap in the middle. Then around to the side I'm facing. He reaches underneath my pillow and takes my phone. My heart thunders even though I know he won't find anything. He looks through my phone for a few minutes and then slides it back under my pillow. "Such a well-raised boy," he murmurs. "I did a good job. Yes. I did a good job. Thank you, Jesus, for the strength to raise Noah right."

He leaves the room, giving me a chance to breathe, and then returns a minute later. A glass of water is placed on the bedside table and with one more kiss to my forehead, he murmurs, "Good night, Noah, honey."

Sleep eludes me, but tonight I have something to keep me warm and safe in my bed: thoughts of Ethan. I stole his place in his own family. I stole his life. The brand new car I got should have been his. The goodnight kisses. The kind, gentle words. All the love and affection . . . should have all been Ethan's. I stole everything from him, yet, he never once treated me with contempt.

But as I drop off into sleep, my unfiltered thoughts guide me into my dreams:

Ethan isn't missing much.

He's better off without his father. His mother should have lived instead of his father.

When I find my mother again, I'll ask her to be Ethan's mother, too. She'll be a good mother this time. Like Ethan's mother was.

I'll love my mother again when she gets out of prison.

He made me choose—lover or brother— so I chose, but he'll still always be my big brother.

I have always loved Ethan. At first, it had been just because he was the coolest boy I'd ever met. Then, in my early teens, it had been because he was so damn gorgeous. Now, looking back, I know I loved Ethan because he was the truest person I'd ever met. He kept his distance, but it felt safe when he was around.

Maybe, one day, he'll love me the way I love him. And, maybe one day, I won't care who knows about it. I'll love him proudly, openly; no one will keep us apart.

I'll find the courage to come out one day.

I'll leave the church.

Yes. For Ethan, I'll leave the church. I'll leave my father. His father.
And we'll live happily ever after.

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CHAPTER 13

Ethan

I leave Noah at the bottom of the orchard with a hard on that would break even the most gifted lover. I return to an empty apartment, and, thank the gods because I need a minute to take care of this boner. It's quick and desperate, my mind focused on earlier, but it's the knowledge that I own Noah's first orgasm that sends me shooting my cum all over my stomach and fist.

I won't deny it. I feel like a sick fuck when I think about how much I want him. How much I know I shouldn't want him. And how I'm just *dying* to take this further with him despite the mile long warnings issued to me by Evanson.

Jono gets back around midnight. "What'd you do to piss your dad off?" he asks. "You need a cigarette?"

"Yeah."

"So? What'd he want?"

I light up the cigarette, blowing out a ring of smoke. "Just his usual 'you're an adult, you can't come by the house anymore'."

"How convenient that he forgot that house belonged to your mom, and, in actual fact, it's *your* house. You should tell him *he's* not welcome there anymore."

"Yeah, well. Noah lives there too." And that's about all I'm going to say about Noah in this conversation. "And, besides that, the house belonged to my mother, but what's that worth? She's not there."

"Seventeen years coming up, huh?" Jono says from the couch across from me. A cigarette dangles from his thumb and index finger. He gets up and gets us a couple of beers from the fridge.

"Seventeen years, Blood," I say.

Jono tips his can to me. "To Cilla Salvatore."

I raise my beer. "To Cilla Salvatore."

"And fuck them preachers."

I laugh. "Fuck them preachers."

We split the six pack and drink our troubles away, but it doesn't help much. We need more than three cans of beer each to get as drunk as we

need to before we start making fun of our useless lives.

“You want me to come with you to the cemetery?” Jono says after we’ve contemplated the trajectory of our lives for some time.

“You’re working, remember?”

“Yeah, I can meet you thereafter.”

“Nah, don’t worry about it. I won’t be long anyway.” I also want to see Noah after visiting my mother’s grave and, since we’re on a covert operation, me and Noah, I need to start being careful.

“Okay, but text me if you need me there.”

“Thanks, Blood.”

I go through the week on autopilot, working at the restaurant. The manager, Gus, gives me extra shifts so I’m distracted enough that I don’t think about my mother too much, but time waits for no man. The end of the week comes and I lie in bed on Saturday night, unable to sleep.

Seventeen years tomorrow.

If everything had gone according to my mother’s plan, there’d be a small box buried right next to her. If it all had gone right, tomorrow would have been the seventeenth anniversary of my death too.

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CHAPTER 14

Noah

It's Sunday, June 21st. My father stands at the pulpit preaching to his congregation. Many patted him on the shoulder on our way in this morning. And for some reason, as they do every year, they tap me on the shoulder too. I'm not the one whose mother died. They should be sympathizing with Ethan. But no one even asks about him on this day.

My father, somber in his face, accepts the condolences as if it happened just today, his wife's death.

And now, as he preaches about standing firm on the Word of God in these wicked days and never wavering, all I can think about is Ethan. Some words catch my attention:

"It's June, folks. Let's not get caught up in these 'woke' terms like *progressive Christianity* and pretend that everything we see around us is acceptable to God. I urge you, my brothers and sisters in Christ, to remove yourself from these so-called celebrations."

The feel of Ethan's lips on mine barges through my mind, his hands on my body. My face heats up, and I glance around quickly. Surely somebody must have guessed my thoughts right here in the house of God.

"The rainbow is a sign of God's ultimate promise to humanity to always be merciful to his creation," Pastor Evanson continues. "The rainbow is being used this month to blatantly show off all manner of sexual immorality and debauchery that Paul, the dear servant of Christ, warned us about."

The congregation murmurs their 'amens' and 'praise Gods'. All agreeing with ostracizing a whole community of people for simply existing and hurting no one.

"My dear brothers in Christ, take a stand for your fellow brothers. Teach your sons the true meaning of manhood and what it is to represent Christ as a man. My dear sisters, teach your young daughters to reverently seek the Lord in all things and live a life according to his commands. This is how we are meant to love our children. By guiding them. This is the love God commanded us to have."

My stomach churns. I'm 'one of them'. One of those people my father is spewing so much hate at from the pulpit and calling it *love*.

I suffer through more of my father's homophobic sermon until my ears burn from the ripples of agreement coming from my fellow brothers and sisters in Christ.

My father and I drove to church separately today. I told him I had to be in early. That was a lie. I wanted to drive in my own car so I could leave alone after church. For the first time in the ten years I've lived with Ethan, I want to be where he always is on this day. Our father never visits Priscilla Evanson's grave.

I'd wished to go with Ethan more and more as each year passed, but I'd never had the courage to ask. This year, even without courage, I want to go.

Finally, church is done.

"Dad, I'll head on home," I tell my father when we're both outside wishing the departing congregants a good week ahead.

"Yes, Noah, honey. Go on home. I have a few things to do with Pastor Eric. I'll see you later."

My heart jumps for joy. That was easy enough.

I slip into my Mercedes and carefully back out of the parking space, coasting down the ramp toward the highway. I'll have to go in the direction of home just in case anyone from church is watching me, before circling around and driving in the direction of the cemetery. I drive carefully because driving terrifies me. Maybe it was all the driving lessons I got from my father, if they can be called 'lessons'. Lessons were supposed to be something you learned from. All I got was crippling anxiety and a ridiculous fear of driving.

Ethan usually goes to the cemetery around noon, according to Ms. May.

I hope I get to see Ethan, but, even if I don't, I still want to visit his mother's grave. Maybe I'll tell her *thank you* for bringing the best human being into the world.

His car is in the parking lot. My heart lifts.

It doesn't take long to find him. He's standing at the end of a headstone with a bunch of flowers in his hand resting against his thigh. His head is bowed. Anyone else would think he was praying. I know I won't be disturbing any such thing. I step closer to him. He turns just as I reach for his hand. The cemetery is empty, so it's safe.

He looks at me, unable to hide his surprise. His eyes aren't red and puffy with fresh tears as one might expect. There isn't any kind of melancholy hanging over him like some dark cloud. He's just Ethan, visiting his mother's grave.

But the sadness in his voice is unmistakable. "Noah? What are you doing here? How did you know . . .?"

"I wanted to come every single time, Ethan, but I was scared to ask. Ms. May told me where to come."

"You didn't have to, Noah." He sighs but a small smile touches his lips. I know what those lips feel like. What they taste like. I want to just reach up and kiss him. Not the kind of kiss that gets too wild after the first taste. Instead, the kind of kiss that tells him how sorry I am that his mother died. How sad I am for him that his father hates him and he might as well have grown up an orphan for how alone he's had to be all these years. Also how sorry I am that I got everything that should have been his.

I want to kiss away all his troubles.

And so I do.

Shifting to stand in front of him, I reach up and press my lips to his. "I'm sorry this happened to you, Ethan," I whisper against his lips. He doesn't kiss me back but he doesn't pull away either.

"I was going to come and see you tonight," he says.

"Still come," I tell him. "I'll have to be home soon but I'll wait for you at the orchard."

I remain close to him, my palms flat against his chest, and I gaze up at him. "You'll still come, right?"

He nods. "No one can find out about this; you remember that, don't you?"

"Yes. I know, Ethan." And then I kiss him softly. He lets me touch him like this like it's the most natural thing in the world, and I touch him with liberties I never imagined I'd be able to take with him. We're like a natural flowing river, the path already carved out for us and all we have to do is let it flow. It's so easy. So effortless.

Ethan moves out of my embrace and places the flowers at the bottom of the headstone. I wish I could say I considered taking a step back to give him privacy, but maybe I'm more selfish than I realized. I step closer to him and slip my hand in his while he stares at the headstone.

PRICILLA SALVATORE EVANSON
Beloved mother and wife
Gone too soon

“I called her *Cilla*”, he says, tightening his fingers around mine. “I heard people at church call her *Pricilla* one time, and it was the first time I realized mothers have names.” He glances at me with a smile. His smile reaches his eyes but when it gets there, his eyes become sad. “I was so fascinated by the fact that she had a name, I started calling her by her name, but I couldn’t say it properly.”

I smile up at him, urging him to continue.

“I started with ‘*Pssssilla*’, and then after a while, it just became *Cilla*. Sometimes I wish I’d called her *mama* more often.”

I’ve never seen Ethan so sad. There is a kind of defeat in his voice that makes me want to cry. I make myself a silent promise: one day, after my mother is released from prison and I’ve gathered enough courage, I’ll go and find her. I’ll fix her, then she can be Ethan’s mother too.

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CHAPTER 15

Ethan

I always visit my mother's grave alone. I'd never considered bringing anyone with me or sharing this day with anyone. Jono offered every year, but this was just something I always wanted to do alone. But now, as I watch Noah drive off, it strikes me that if there was anyone I'd have wanted to have with me today, it would have been him.

Because he's not much different. Maybe he gets it more than most others would. His mother is still alive, but, for all it's worth, he doesn't have a mother any more than I do. Or maybe it's worse for him. If my mother was breathing on this earth today, there isn't a wall high enough I wouldn't climb to get to her. Nothing would keep me away from *Cilla*, the woman who tried to take me with her and failed.

I know other people come here to talk to their dead. I've never done that because, well, she's *dead*, but today, maybe I have a few words.

"Hey, mama." The words come out broken and hardly audible. I clear my throat. "I'll call you mama today, but you're still *Cilla*, okay? I know you liked hearing me call you Cilla."

The words I want to tell her about Noah are scrambled in my head. I try to make them make sense.

"Mama, I don't know what happened. I don't know *how* it happened. I stayed away from him because Evanson told me to in the early days. But something changed recently and I didn't know how to stop it. He—he just looked at me one day and I just . . . I think, maybe, I fell in love with him."

The words get stuck in my throat again, but I push on. "It was the way he looked at me, mama. I don't know how it's possible that just one moment could change everything, but it did." Braver now, I confess all my sins to my mother's dry bones.

"I wanted him immediately, mama. I felt like I was looking at him for the very first time, and it's like I just fell in love with him without meaning to."

The words pour out. "But he started it, mama. I know I kissed him first, but he was already looking at me with those stars in his eyes long before I kissed him. And then, he kissed me back, and now we can't stop. We're

moving too fast, but it feels like we're on a time limit. Because we know it's not going to last. And he's so *jealous*, mama. I think he hates Declan."

I don't know if I would have shared the details quite like this if she was living and breathing. But maybe that's the wonder of talking to dead people. You can tell them anything.

A bird with a red head and a yellow tail perches on the tombstone. Maybe it's a sign she's listening so I carry on, talking to the bird now.

"I made him promise not to tell anyone because I'm worried about how Evanson will treat him if he finds out the truth. And Noah has no one. Even if that man hates me, he takes good care of Noah, and I won't ruin that for him. And I won't let Noah ruin it for himself either."

I sigh, unable to separate my happiness over being with Noah from my fear for what would happen to Noah if Evanson found out about us.

"Anyway, mama, I've got to go. Maybe I'll come back again soon. Maybe I won't wait another whole year to come visit you. I miss you, mama. I wish I'd gone with you, but maybe I had to stay. For Noah, maybe. I'll go now but I'll see you soon, mama. I love you."

When I look back, the bird is still on the tombstone. I don't believe in anything, but maybe I'll believe this one thing: that she heard me and she understands.

Gus works me to the bone during Sunday late lunch rush, which is usually filled with church people, and no one is more glad than me. More hours means more money. Also, it's distracting work—a great way to not think about Noah showing up at my mother's grave or the fact that the first conversation I had with my mother since she was alive was today, and it was about Noah.

"You still lurking 'round these parts? I thought you'da been long gone by now." Pastor Bobby Jenkins regards me with a sneer on his face the size of an iceberg. His shiny bald head is sweating.

Associate Pastor Bobby Jenkins is also known as *Breasty Bobby* to us heathen kids who used to go to his holiday bible camp back in the day. We gave him that name because all he ever did at holiday camp was stare at the newly developing breasts of the innocent twelve and thirteen year old girls entrusted to his care.

I wonder what his lovely wife sitting next to him now would think about that. Or the three pre-teen children sitting across from their parents (two older boys and one little girl), who were currently squabbling over who gets

the iPad first when they get home. “Dad said it’s my turn,” the little girl says with her lower lip half way down to the floor.

“Now, children, Daddy will decide who gets the iPad when we get home, okay?” Mrs. Jenkins says kindly. It always amazes me how these sweet, gentle women end up married to these monsters.

“We haven’t seen you ‘round church in a lotta years. It’s your father’s dream, you know, for you to return to the fold,” Breasty Bobby tells me.

I don’t even look at the guy. “That’s one Sunday Funday lunch special with extra onion rings and an extra side of fried potatoes. One Slimmers Delight Extra Special Chicken salad and three Incy Wincy Spidery Mac and Cheese.”

“Is it really spider’s webs, Dad?” the daughter asks.

Breasty Bobby laughs, prompting a smile from his wife and uncontrollable snickers from his two elder children. “No, honey, it’s loaded with so much cheese that the strings running across the pasta look like spiders’ webs.”

I make space on the table for the drinks orders.

“So, spiders won’t grow in my belly?”

“Oh no, sweetheart. Why would you think such a thing?”

The little girl turns to her brothers and scrunches her face up at them. They can hardly contain their laughter.

“Now, Matthew and Daniel. Be nice to your baby sister,” Breasty Bobby admonishes playfully. “You gotta treat girls gently.”

I resist rolling my eyes. What a wonderful father.

He seems bent on making small talk with me. “Your brother’s doin’ so well, Ethan boy. You could take some lessons from him.”

Mrs. Jenkins gives me a small smile. *I’m sorry*, she seems to be saying. I’ll bet she’d leave this fucking idiot the first chance she got.

“You all let me know if you need anything else,” I tell her, and, luckily I’m saved by Gus’s voice booming across the crowded restaurant. “Order number twenty-eight.” That’s my other table.

“I’ll be praying for you, Ethan,” Breasty Bobby calls after me.

Fuck you, Breasty Bobby is what I want to call back, but, you know, customer service and all that. Fuck me; what an asshole.

CHAPTER 16

Noah

“You’re awfully quiet this evening.”

I glance up from my pasta Alfredo, startled—because I absolutely did forget that I was sitting at the table with my father eating dinner.

“Oh, I’m sorry,” I reply.

“What’s on your mind, son?”

I take a forkful of pasta into my mouth to buy me more time to think about my response. “Nothing much,” I say after I’ve swallowed.

“You’re nearly at the end of a phenomenal academic career, Noah. I’m very proud of you. Graduation, summer camp, then college. It can only get better and better from here.”

“Thank you, Dad.”

“This is a very crucial time for you as a young man, too.”

I nod thoughtfully but the truth is that I want to get done with this dinner so I can get out of this house and down to the orchard as soon as possible.

“I understand the, ah, urges . . .”

Oh, my God. If ever there was a time I wanted to swear, even inside my own mind, this would be the perfect moment. Please, God. Not *this* conversation.

“Dad, really, it’s not necess—”

“I found it, Noah.”

I frown. “Found it?”

He sighs. “You know as your father I have to keep an eye on you so I had a little look around your room and I found something in the pocket of your hoodie.”

Oh, God. What did he find? “My hoodie?” The squeak in my voice isn’t helping me. My palms tingle.

“Your black hoodie.”

Ethans’s hoodie. I don’t know whether to be relieved or even more anxious that he’s talking about Ethan’s hoodie.

“And you know I don’t like you wearing hoodies, and looking like a homeless person, Noah. If you insist on buying clothes like that, I’ll have to stop letting you buy your own clothes. Your unfit mother raised you on the

streets, but I didn't take you out of the streets just so you can look like a hobo with a fancy clothing label." He reaches down into his pocket and then places a condom packet on the table.

His remarks about my unfit mother are quickly forgotten in favor of a much bigger problem lying on the table between us.

"The Lord will never abandon you, Noah," he says. He waves his hand over the place where the condom lies. "The urges will come and sometimes it will feel like you're being swept up in a powerful current, but you must remember that God will not allow you to face more temptation than what you can bear. But with the temptation, he'll always . . . ?"

He lifts his hand, indicating that I should finish the scripture.

". . . Provide a way out for me so I can bear the weight of such temptation."

Of course, I'm paraphrasing because I always feel stupid quoting the King James version with all the old-speak. I can't get my eyes off the condom. How long has it been in that hoodie? It's perfectly normal for Ethan to be carrying condoms, but my skin prickles with thoughts of who the intended recipient of this protection had been. I'm beginning to make friends with my insane jealousy.

"Yes, son. Suffering is part of the Christian journey. How will we know the strength of our faith unless we face suffering? There is great joy in suffering for the children of God."

I know the drill. I respond mechanically, quoting the scripture. "Count it all joy when you face trials of many kinds because the testing of your faith produces perseverance."

He smiles proudly. "And through perseverance you are made perfect, lacking nothing."

"Amen," I say, forcing a smile. I still don't know where he's going with this but I don't think I'm in as much trouble as I'd initially thought. He doesn't know it's Ethan's hoodie. He'd have ripped into me if he did

"This tells me that we need to start taking things seriously with you and Jessica. We should make it official between you two."

I almost choke on my pasta. My eyes water with the effort of trying to keep my food down.

"You're eighteen, Noah. It's better to get married than to burn with lust. The Apostle Paul knew a thing or two about young love when he gave us

that command. I'll talk to Harold about the two of you. I know he likes you and would be happy to have you for a son-in-law."

I smile as best as I can. The most non-committal response I can give.

"It's very natural, Noah. You're a young man after all. Harold and I have had a few conversations about it already. We both think the two of you should get engaged right after graduation so you're both not tempted to experiment—" he makes air quotes on the word *experiment* — "and then you can get married after you're both done with bible school."

My food sticks to my palate. I might die from the chokehold my father's words have on me, but to disagree or to resist even in the most tactful way would end in an all-night interrogation or sermon or both. All I want to do is get down to the orchard.

I try to catch a glimpse of the time on my father's phone, but the screen is black. It must be just past seven p.m. He usually retires to his bedroom around eight p.m. on a Sunday to rest after a long day at church, but there have been times when we've spent three hours at this table after dinner, talking about the scriptures. If we got started on Paul's letters to the Corinthians and how he should have been harsher about the sexual perversion of his time, we'll be here till midnight. I don't know if Ethan will wait for me that long.

"Anyway, we'll talk more about it some other time." He picks up his phone. "Do you remember those twin boys I always tell you about? The ones I met around the time I heard about your mother and came looking for you?" Austin and Winston Wallace."

I'm glad for the change of topic. "Yes, when you were involved in the prison ministry."

He slides his phone across the table. "Look at how well they're doing."

On the screen, two men—they must be around twenty-five now, if I remember the story correctly—smile up at the camera. They're holding a *Welcome to Wallys' Waffle Wonderland* sign.

"From aggravated assault and robbery as juveniles to successful businessmen," my father says. "You see, Noah, everyone can turn their life around if they really want to. These boys could have refused the rehabilitation programs we offered them. God knows, they were so deep in their life of crime. But they listened to us, took our counsel, served their time, and they can now have the kind of life they deserve. Look at how happy they are."

“I’m so happy for them,” I say genuinely. I remember how worried my father used to be about them. The church paid for a portion of their college education and he paid the rest from his own pocket.

My eyes are drawn to the text below the picture: *Pastor Evanson. Thank you for everything you did for us. Without you we would have been so lost. May God bless you and your family. We opened our first business this past week. Come by sometime for some waffles on the house.*

“Its people like you and them that make me believe I’m a good father. That the work I do in the Lord’s name isn’t in vain.”

It’s a nod to Ethan’s heathenism. I don’t take the bait. But it’s hard to ignore the fact that my father really can be a good Christian. It’s hard to discredit an entire religion over a few bad things when you see this kind of goodness.

I slide the phone back across the table. He lets out yawn. “Well, that was a good meal and a good talk, Noah.” He grins and looks down at the condom packet. “You thought you were going to be in trouble, didn’t you?”

I nod carefully.

“Cheer up, Noah. We’re men. We’re made for sex. I won’t hold that against you.” He plucks the condom up from the table. “But I’ll hold on to this for now so you’re not tempted unnecessarily, okay?” He chuckles.

“Yes, Dad.” I can’t say I’m not relieved even if this was the most messed up few minutes of my life.

“Maybe we’ll go and get some waffles one of these days, okay? We’ll take Ms. May.”

“Sure, Dad.”

He gets up. “I’ll get a few things done, then I’ll head for bed. What are you doing for the rest of the night?”

“Uh, just a little bit of reading in the den. So, you might not find me upstairs if you come to say goodnight later.”

“Well, in that case I’ll say goodnight now because my knees aren’t so good today. I won’t be coming down these stairs again until morning.”

I swallow a sigh of relief.

When he’s disappeared upstairs, I gather up the dishes quickly, load them in the dishwasher and do a quick inspection of the kitchen to make sure it’s clean enough for when Ms. May returns in the morning.

Then, I race upstairs and—

“Hey, where are you rushing off to?”

I stare up at my father, stunned into a stupor because I am absolutely behaving like a sneaky teenager. My heart almost bolts out of my chest. *Think fast.* “Oh, uh, bathroom,” I say hastily.

He chuckles and holds up a book. “I was just leaving this new study guide on The Four Gospels. You can add it to your leisure reading. Oh, and you get your phone back today. I almost forgot.”

“Oh, right.”

He holds out my phone but when I reach for it he pulls it back. “Go and use the bathroom. I’ll leave it on your bed.”

I remain there for about five minutes, and, when I get back, the hall is clear, soft worship music comes through from my father’s bedroom. In my bedroom, my new study guide and my phone are on my bed. I grab them, drop the study guide on the couch in the den, and creep out of the house. Soon, I’m flying across the property and then sliding down the embankment that leads to the steel door. With shaking fingers, I unlock the door.

I don’t even have time to lock it again.

Ethan spins me around, slamming me into the door, his lips descending on mine. I drop the keys and sink into his kiss.

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CHAPTER 17

Ethan

Fuck. This boy tastes like an angel that fell from heaven. Noah's mouth opens, letting my tongue dive inside that delicious warmth. I kiss him like he's mine and he doesn't object. He kisses me back as best as he can, pushing his tongue into my mouth. I suck on that tongue and his fingers curl into my shirt. He tilts his head, resting the side of his head against my shoulder while we kiss.

I've never felt anything like this. I need to get closer to him. Pressed up against him like this isn't fucking enough. Maybe something changed at the cemetery earlier. Maybe my talk with my dead mother has given me some kind of energetic permission to want this with Noah.

Maybe I'm just so fucking desperate for him.

Our breaths clash. Short, impatient gasps as we fight to get closer than we already are. My hands lock around his back, pressing his body to mine and he keeps me caged in his arms with his fingers clutching at the strands of my hair at the back.

Wild is what we are. Our kiss is *wild*, exposing its inadequacy in providing us with the kind of touch we're both *really* searching for. I need more than this. *He* needs more than this too.

"Did you get all your studying done?" I ask against his lips.

He nods, biting down hard on my bottom lip and sealing us in another kiss.

"And your bible studies? You done with that?" I ask between brutal bites of kisses. Noah is an angel, and his wings are beginning to take on a shade of darkness. The thought of Noah being bad is such a goddam fucking turn on.

"Yes, Ethan," he moans into my mouth.

But I need to get this shit out of the way first. "And your father? He's gone to bed?"

Noah pulls away a fraction. His hands slide down from around my neck and he settles his palms against my chest. "Yes. He said he was tired. I told him I'll be reading downstairs until late, and he said he won't come to check on me because his knee was acting up. Now, *please*, Ethan." He

presses his lips to mine once more. “We can talk later,” he whispers against my lips.

“Noah,” I whisper back. “I’m dying to touch you.”

“Touch me. Please. *Now*, Ethan.”

I slip my hand into his shirt, my palm gliding over the soft skin on his sides. So smooth and warm and soft. “Fuck Noah. I can’t believe I get to touch you like this. You’re so perfect.” My palms glide up, my thumbs grazing over his flat nipples. “No one’s ever sucked your cock, isn’t that right, Noah?” I ask against his ear. His answer is a gasped *no* against my neck.

“I bet you’d feel so good in my mouth.”

“*Ethan*”.

“Promise you’ll say my name like that when I blow you.”

He’s hardly able to stand up. I drop my hands to his hips, holding him tightly against me while he hangs on to me, so hot and turned on. Those angel wings darken just a little bit more, and my dick suffers the consequences of imagining every filthy thing I want to do to this boy.

“I promise,” he utters desperately.

“You’re so fucking hot, Noah. Do you know that? Do you know how fucking hot you are?”

He gives me nothing but desperate moans, and I swallow them all up in a kiss that blows my mind. He locks himself right inside my body, his lean frame disappearing into mine. He kisses me back like we would both die without tasting each other like this.

But I need to taste more than just his mouth.

“I wanna suck this fuckin’ cock, Noah,” I groan into his mouth, pressing my palm into his concealed erection.

He kisses me harder.

“Say yes,” I tell him. Because there can be no ambiguity when it comes to his consent.

“Yes. Please, Ethan. *Yes*,” he whispers without hesitation.

I drop to the ground. Kneeling in front of this angel. This innocent boy who makes my blood sing. My brother, begging for me to touch him. My palms move up the front of his thighs, and I lean forward rubbing my cheek over the material of one thigh.

Further up, I move my face, the soft material of Noah’s sweatpants leaving little to the imagination of what is going on with his beautiful body.

He trembles, and his loud, harsh breathing is everything to me. I bring my face to the place between his thighs.

I bury my face into the material covering his cock. He lets out a loud moan and so I do it again, rubbing my lips over the material and pressing against his thick erection, inhaling deeply.

His fingers clutch at my hair. His grip is tight. So tight. It's exhilarating to have him so desperate and losing his mind like this.

Those angel wings darken a little more.

My fingers close around his erection. I'm rewarded with another uninhibited groan and my favorite thing—"Ethan"—so I bite over the material, taking his concealed cock between my teeth.

"It's gonna be so fucking good, Noah. I promise," I murmur.

"Yes. *Please*," he gasps. His fingers sink further into my hair, tugging impatiently.

I chuckle against his penis, dragging my tongue over his sweats. When his moans become little pleas for something he can't yet articulate, I pull his sweats down over his ass and—

It's not the first time I've touched Noah's naked dick, but, when it's standing up so proud and thick and beautiful right in front of my face, I lose my fucking mind. The street lamps provide enough light for me to admire this dick and the smooth, hairless skin around his cock.

His body tenses. I rise immediately, pressing my body to his. He lifts his face to mine. "I—I—I don't know how I . . ." He struggles for a second and then, ". . . compare," he finishes softly. He drops his gaze but I lift his chin so I can satisfy my eyes with his gorgeous face. "Compare?" I reach down and close my fingers around his cock.

He tries to look away again but I don't let him. "There is no one who can compare to you, Noah."

And then, to bring him back to me from wherever he's gone to in his head, I release his cock to press my palm into the lowest part of his stomach, at the base of his cock. Then, I move my palm upward over the smooth skin there. "This is so fucking sexy," I whisper against his ear. "I'm gonna give you a hickey right here."

And then, I wrap my fingers around his dick, pulling his foreskin up as I fist him leisurely. "I like this too," I tell him, gathering his foreskin up to his tip.

His eyes filled with so much fucking need, and his lips parted like this . . . there is no doubt: when we fuck, it'll be glorious.

“You’re perfect, Noah,” I tell him. “So fucking perfect. Now let me taste you.”

I drop to the ground again and take him into my mouth.

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CHAPTER 18

Noah

I could die right now, and I wouldn't care. I could be given the keys to hell, and I'd take it gladly. I don't care.

Ethan wraps his lips around my dick. My knees buckle, and I grab onto his hair so I have something to hold on to. I'm inside his mouth. His fingers are wrapped around the base of my dick, moving at the same pace as his mouth. Then he removes his hand and takes me all the way into his throat. His hand moves down, and, when he takes my balls into his palm, squeezing ever so slightly, I cry out, unable to stop the freefall. Still, I try to pull him back, even though it's too late, but Ethan reaches up to lock his fingers with mine and keeps me inside his mouth while I spill my semen down his throat.

This can't be real. Nothing in this fallen world should ever feel this good. I can't breathe and I can't keep my body up. Violent shudders race through my body, and Ethan licks his way up my dick, swiping at the top with a gentle stroke of his tongue.

But he doesn't pull my sweats back up and rise like I expect him to. Instead, he holds my softening dick in his hands. I'm a little embarrassed that I might not measure up in size but every thought flies out of my mind when Ethan rubs his nose up and down my dick. Slow movements that make me forget who I am. Then, holding my dick to the side, he presses his lips to the part of my stomach at the base of my dick. He likes me smooth like this. I've never been more grateful for this habit I formed when I entered my teens. Ethan begins to suck at a spot right there at the base of my dick. Ah, God. A hickey. Like he promised. I want it. With air in short supply, I don't know how long I'll live with the kind of ecstasy Ethan is providing right now.

"Ethan," I grit out, the sound of my own voice, foreign to my ears.

I feel his smile against my skin.

He rises, pulling my sweats up as he does so. He presses his lips to mine. "Next time, I'll spit all that hot cum into your mouth," he whispers.

My face is on fire. I don't know where to hide, but Ethan makes everything so easy. "It's gonna be so good between us, Noah," he says.

He pulls me into his chest, wrapping his arms tightly around me. I rest my forehead against his chest, and he cradles the back of my head against him.

“Beautiful things don’t have to last forever,” Ethan whispers, but it’s so soft, I wonder if he’s talking half to himself.

I pull away from him. “What does that mean?”

He touches his thumb to the corner of my bottom lip and smiles. “It means this thing between us can’t last forever, but that doesn’t mean it won’t be beautiful. And when it ends, it’ll be okay.”

My chest aches with the thought because he’s right.

“We could just run away and be together forever,” I say weakly.

He grins. “I don’t believe in running away, Noah. I don’t live my life in half measures and you shouldn’t either. That’s why what we’re doing now . . . we won’t do it in half measures. We’ll live these moments to the fullest. Then, when it’s time for it to be over, it will be truly over and we won’t have regrets that we did this. This doesn’t have to last forever for it to be beautiful.”

“But I don’t want it to ever be over,” I tell him, knowing with sickening clarity that the only way for that to happen is for me to renounce the church and abandon my father. But I could do that, couldn’t I? Why couldn’t I just do it? I could simply walk away from it all. Isn’t Ethan worth that much? Isn’t Ethan the only family I need? And doesn’t Ethan feel more like home than church or my physical home ever did?

But *how* do I take that step?

Ethan puts his mouth on mine. “Don’t be afraid of the reality of life, Noah. Don’t be afraid to accept how things must be sometimes. You may never be able to walk away from the life waiting for you. So, accept that this—what is between us now—is something we’ll have for a time, and it’s okay if it doesn’t last forever.”

I don’t like what he’s saying even if I have no counter argument.

“Beautiful things don’t have to last forever,” he tells me again.

The lump in my throat grows in size. I can’t make sense of this. Why should we let these beautiful moments become secret memories to look back on? Why can’t we take these beautiful moments and multiply them until every moment of our lives are filled with all the things that make us happy. *Happy*, dammit. Not scared. Or feeling like the biggest sinner to ever exist for just wanting to be loved.

“Don’t overthink it, Noah. Just live in the moment. With me. Stay in this moment with me, and don’t worry about the future.”

“But *you’re* worrying about the future. You’ve already planned for it. You’re saying this is going to be over, but you don’t know that.”

“Were you always argumentative like this?” he asks lightly.

When I don’t answer, he continues. “Whatever path you choose for your life, I’ll always find a way to support you and protect you. I’ll protect you at all costs.”

I nod. Because what can I say? I can hardly wrap my head around what Ethan is saying. It feels like he has insight into something I can’t even begin to understand. Some old wisdom you get when you’ve had to live your whole life all alone. Ethan has no attachment to anything . . . or anyone. It’s easy for him to do this and walk away with *beautiful memories*. How would I ever be able to do that even when I know *I’m* the one holding the power to change everything?

But I trust him. More than I trust myself, I trust him. I trusted him even when he kept me at a distance. So I should trust him now while he holds me, hidden inside his chest like this, and promises me that what we have will always be beautiful.

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CHAPTER 19

Ethan

Today is Noah's graduation. I haven't heard from him since our last time at the orchard. His last text made my blood boil all over again: *Phone's getting taken away again. Text you as soon as I get it back.*

The control is astounding.

I turn into Apple Street, in the direction of Noah's school. Cars are lined up outside the church, backed up all the way down the street so I drive back down and pull my car into a spot under a tree around the curb and walk all the way up.

"Uh, hey. Excuse me." I turn as a parking attendant comes running up behind me.

"Hey." He's about my age. The name tag on his Beth-El Fellowship t-shirt says *Brian Walsh. Parking attendant. IN SERVICE OF THE LORD.*

"Ethan, long time no see, huh?"

"Uh, yeah." I have no idea who this guy is.

"Uh, look. I'm sorry. I hate to do this but Pastor Evanson gave me strict instructions. I'm supposed to look out for you and make sure you don't get inside."

I wasn't expecting this, but I'm also not surprised. What I am, is livid that that fucking cunt would try to make me break a promise to Noah.

"Oh, and why's that?" I ask as calmly as possible.

Brian Walsh, in service of the Lord, scratches his head. "Look, I don't want any trouble. I was just told that you've been trying to defame the church again with those religious slurs, so he said you're not allowed on the property again."

"I'm not going to be on the church's property. I'm going into the school hall."

"Yeah, I think it's the same thing."

"Look, Brian. You know Noah, right?"

He laughs. "Of course, our fearless leader."

"So you know that Noah is my *brother.*"

"Of course, Ethan. We all remember when he came to live with you guys."

“So, there’s no way I can miss my brothers’ graduation.”

Brian’s smile drops right off the face of the earth. Is this punk scared suddenly? I sure as hell fucking hope so because I need for him to get out of my fucking way before I punch him.

“Ethan, I can’t let you in. I’m sorry.”

I take a step in his direction, and he takes a step back. Good sign. “Brian, for what it’s worth, I do regret what I’m about to do because I understand that you’re just the messenger.” I tap the name tag on his shirt.

Brian’s face loses most of its color.

“You’re just in service to the Lord, but, Brian, if you try to stop me from attending my own brother’s graduation, I will shove my hand right up your ass and pull out your intestines. And then I’ll go to prison for whatever the penalty is for shoving my hand up someone’s ass. Do you understand me, Brian?”

“I—I’ll get into trouble if I let you in. I—it’s not my rule, Ethan.”

“I know. So you can tell them that I threatened to play with your ass and your intestines.”

“Why don’t you just go, Ethan? We can avoid all the trouble if you just go.”

This Brian Walsh doesn’t understand a thing about not keeping promises. So, I grab hold of his wrist and yank him through the gates. He’s at least thirty pounds heavier than me, but my resolve to watch Noah graduate has me dragging him onto the school grounds and into the hall like he’s my little ragdoll.

The proceedings are about to begin. A few people turn to stare. Brian looks like he’s pissed himself, and my father turns at just the right moment.

He gets up, stalking towards me with the self-restraint of a saint, but his eyes shoot multiple daggers. At the moment, I don’t give a fuck.

Brian swallows thickly next to me. Maybe they’ll strip him of his Parking Attendant IN SERVICE OF THE LORD badge, and that’s why he’s busy trembling beside me.

Evanson doesn’t even look at me when he reaches us. “Brian, you had one job,” he says under his breath, just barely enough for us to hear him.

“He tried very hard. You should give him a promotion,” I interject.

Evanson gives me a hard look and then tells Brian that they’ll talk later and sends him back to his post.

“I thought I made myself clear,” Evanson grinds out.

He did, and I am a little worried about it, now that I'm inside the building. But it was a choice between letting Noah down and banking on Evanson not sending Noah back to the gutter for this stunt of mine. Both were guaranteed to fuck something up so I went with never, ever wanting to let Noah down. I'll go and live with him in the gutter, for what it's worth.

"He won't even know I'm here," I reply softly, hating the acquiescence in my voice. But it's for Noah, so it must be done.

"You get the hell out of here immediately after the formalities. Do you understand me?" he hisses. Some guests turn to look our way. Evanson softens his face for their viewing pleasure.

I nod.

He stalks back to his seat, turning every so often to look at me. Obviously making sure I don't leap up and start screaming Noah's name or something.

I find a seat at the back, catching a glimpse of Ms. May and Mr. Tom, seated in the third row. Ms. May finds me and waves erratically. Mr. Tom calms her down and pulls her back into her seat when she tries to get up. They make me smile. Some people in this world are good.

As casually as I can manage, my eyes search the front for Noah. I find him in the first row in his high school regalia. He hasn't spotted me, but I watch him pick his head up every so often and look out at the entrance.

Seventeen awards are handed out.

Noah is called out three times for the Service to Mankind awards: his contribution to various youth upliftment programs, his spearheading of the redesign of the summer camp curriculum, and his nationally recognized contribution to Christian philosophy.

He's called up seven times for Academic Achievements: Math, Science, English, Spanish, Music, Biblical Studies, and Ancient Linguistic Studies. I didn't know that last one was a thing.

Each time he goes up to the stage he scans the crowd but fails to locate me. My chest tightens every time he looks down the rows of seats. *I'll always show up, Noah.* I'll remind him later. Even if he can't see me, even if he thinks I'm not there, I'll tell him to always trust that I won't let him down.

Finally, when he takes the stage again for his diploma, he finds me. His eyes light up like a fireworks display, and I can't help the smile that escapes my lips.

Well done. Noah. I'm so proud of you.

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CHAPTER 20

Noah

Graduation celebrations are suffocating. The four walls of the dining hall where we have all congregated ‘to break bread with our brothers and sisters in Christ’ are starting to cave in. The food sticks to my palate, and the excited murmur rippling across the room makes my head pound. Ms. May and Mr. Tom are the only two people in the room making the whole experience bearable.

“Ethan was here; did you see?” Ms. May whispers when we stop for croissants.

My face lights up involuntarily at the mention of Ethan’s name. “Yes, I saw him.”

“He never misses your important days,” she says proudly.

I beam. “I know.”

Mr. Tom joins us at the table. “Congratulations, Noah boy. Finally done with high school, huh?”

“Finally done, Mr. Tom.” I offer him a croissant.

“Well, I’ll need to be going. You have a good day, Noah. You comin’, Mabel?”

“Yes, you can drop me off at the farmer’s market, Thomas.” Ms. May gives me a tight squeeze and tells me how proud of me she is and she hopes she gets to see Ethan outside. Me too, but, of course, I keep that to myself.

“Well done, Noah.” Pastor Bobby Jenkins walks over with my father and hands me a glass of non-alcoholic champagne.

“Thank you,” I say, accepting the champagne and the pat on my back.

“Off to Bible school soon, then?” Pastor Jenkins says.

“Yes.” I need to get out of here. Ethan and I couldn’t make plans because I don’t have my phone back, but I just know he’ll be at the orchard tonight. He’ll celebrate with me, and it’ll be the celebration I *want*.

More than anything, I wish I could have ran up to him and buried myself inside him while he congratulated me, but we are not privileged in that way.

“First summer camp,” my father says. “But yes, we’ve chosen a good one close to us.”

“Keeping him close, huh?”

“We are living in the last days, Bobby. You know that. We have to keep an eye out for our children. You’ve seen all those pride parades. I came up with an idea that we can use as a counter attack. We’ll have a few marches of our own. That rainbow is ours.”

I barely survive choking on my croissant because, firstly, it wasn’t even his idea.

Pastor Jenkins nods his big head enthusiastically. “I heard Noah is handling everything.”

If I don’t get out of here, I’ll throw up right on top of these men.

“Yes, Noah will take care of it for us with the Youth group before the month is up.” My father nods at me.

“Yes,” I answer. Betrayal sinks deep in my bones, settling inside my cells like accusing devils. I wish I could turn to those devils and beg for their help. Beg for courage. For anything, to make all of this go away. All this hatred right here in ‘God’s house’. The disregard for just . . . *humanity*.

I shut off my conscience—the voice telling me through the goosebumps traveling up and down my body, through the sinking of my heart and the sourness in my belly how wrong it all is—and agree to do exactly the thing that is making me physically ill.

“I saw Ethan over at the back of the hall,” Pastor Jenkins says.

My father shakes his head. “That boy has slept with the swine, Bob. And those who have given themselves over to their evil deeds, what can we do? When the time comes, each one must give an account for his or her life. That boy will need to face hell one day, and there’s not a single thing we can do about it but continue to pray for people like him.”

People like him . . .

People like *me*.

“Uh, Dad. Do you think I’d be able to leave a little early? I want to catch up on some reading.”

He smiles proudly. “Already preparing for the Lord’s work?”

I nod, but no. I’m preparing for Ethan.

My father pulls me in for a side hug and a kiss to the top of my head. “I’m so proud of you, Noah. So proud. Go home and get your reading done. I’ll see you later tonight. Some of the parents have invited me to their graduation lunches and dinners so I’ll make a few stops and that should keep me busy until late tonight.”

I don't know which god is answering my prayers but I don't ask any questions.

Jessica squeezes me a little too tight when we hug, promising to 'make time' for us during summer youth camp. I say 'yes, sure' when what I want to say is 'no, thank you.' I have no internal loyalty system. I receive a dozen more *well done*s and pats on my back from parents and students alike before I finally make it to the outside where I can finally breathe.

I slip into my car and carefully make my way out and down the street. Some cars are parked half on the road, so I have to maneuver carefully. The last thing I need is to scrape someone's vehicle.

My heart jumps right out of my body when I come down the street and find a Toyota Camry parked under a tree. I slow down. Ethan flicks his headlights and starts to move into the street.

I drive past him slowly and when I check the rear view mirror, he's eased into the street behind me.

My body shakes with excitement. The thrill of having Ethan follow behind me kills me. I die willingly.

I can hardly concentrate on the road, but I manage to make it to our street. I drive past the main entrance, all the way down to where the orchard ends and where the steel door is, checking that Ethan is still following behind me. I turn the car around again, heading back up to the main entrance. He coasts down and parks a few yards away from the orchard entrance. If I'd had my phone like any normal teenager, I'd have easily texted him.

Inside the house, I change out of my stuffy uniform and into a pair of sweats. Then I make a sandwich, grab a soda from the fridge, and race down to the orchard.

Ethan is waiting for me at the steel door.

I shove the food into his hand. "You must be hungry," I tell him.

"Yes. For this," he says, pulling my face up to his. He kisses me sweetly at first but soon his tongue is deep inside my mouth, and I'm sucking on it like my whole life depends on it. I wrap my hands around his waist, soda and sandwich still in my hands.

"I'm so proud of you, Noah. You got all those awards. You're so smart."

"Thank you. But I'm not as smart as you."

He kisses me sweetly again. "I want you to have a good life, Noah."

I don't like the worry in his eyes, so I kiss him and then repeat his words back to him. "I want you to have a good life, Ethan."

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CHAPTER 21

Ethan

He's better than he thinks he is. He's not like them. Not deep inside. But, if he stays in it, he'll never know who he really is. Who he could be. How much goodness there is inside of him. He'll live his whole life thinking he's a wretched sinner in need of saving.

I don't know if this religion will kill him the way it killed my mother, but I'd rather have him alive and not with me than risk having him with me and our father drives him to suicide too. I don't know what he would do to Noah but I know what he did to my mother, and she killed herself. I can't take that chance with Noah.

So, I'm okay with this one beautiful thing we have, even if I know it can't last. I'll carry these memories with me like I carry my mother's memories, and it will be enough. This thing between me and Noah will have to end soon. For now, we are here, and I'm so desperate for him.

I admire his upturned face. "Congratulations, little brother."

He smiles. "Thank you. And thank you for coming. I hope you don't get into trouble for it."

I shrug, but the weight of our secret is becoming difficult to bear.

He takes a step back, holding out the sandwich. "I wasn't sure if you ate today."

I take the sandwich and soda from him. "Thank you. Is this chicken?"

He nods. "Ms. May's chicken."

Jesus. I haven't eaten my favorite sandwich in fuckin' ages. I bite into it, and the hole in my stomach immediately begins to contract.

"We've never made it past this door," Noah says with a laugh.

I laugh too. "You're right." I pull him to the grassy area behind us. I drop to the ground, and Noah follows. "I wish I could have gone to your graduation," he says.

I chew, then swallow and gulp down a mouthful of my soda. "I wasn't anything special. Not like you."

"You graduated top of your class, Ethan. I'm pretty sure you were something special. You should have gone to an Ivy League school."

"So, I'm just a dumb genius, then?"

His face colors. He's so pretty. "No, no. I was just trying to say you're so smart . . . I'm sorry. I'm making it sound like . . ."

"Like I'm going nowhere slowly even if I'm some kind of genius?" I grin, loving how flustered he is over offending me.

"I'm sorry, Ethan. That's not what I meant."

I touch my index finger to his cheek, trailing down slowly. "I know what you meant, Noah. Don't apologize. I got good grades because high school was easy, but I never bothered with a fancy college because I never saw the point. In the fourth grade, I had this teacher. Her name was Ms. Victor. She told me that I would end up in a cell in a maximum security prison one day."

I laugh at the horror in his face.

"That's a terrible thing to say to a child," he says. And then, "You believed her."

I acknowledge that he hasn't presented it as a question, but I answer him anyway. And I tell him the truth. "Maybe a little."

"She was wrong," he says softly.

He plays with the blades of grass. A congenial silence envelopes us. A thing I hadn't expected between us. The silence is comforting.

"I'm no longer a high schooler," he says after a while, and there's a touch of shyness in his voice that grabs my attention. I like the sound of his voice when he wants to say something but doesn't quite know how to.

"Mmhm."

"That and the fact that I'm eighteen mean I'm an official adult."

"Maybe."

"I can do adult things."

I walk into his trap, but he doesn't know I saw it from a mile away. "You can't."

He looks at me, and I smirk at his disappointment.

"Just because you're eighteen and you've graduated doesn't mean you can do anything you want. Underage drinking is a Class One misdemeanor—"

"And the age of consent in the state of North Carolina is sixteen," he blurts out.

Even the birds settle down.

He tries to backtrack but it's too late. "Oh, God. I didn't mean—"

"Come here, Noah," I say quietly.

“I didn’t mean it like that,” he says but he shifts closer. I turn fully to him and bring my lips to his, kissing him softly. “Do you think I haven’t imagined over and over again what it would be like to sink my cock into your ass, Noah?” My words fall on his parted lips.

He groans into my mouth.

“I think about fucking you every single day.”

“You do?” he asks, drugging lust overshadowing his innocent words.

“Every single fucking day. I think about putting my mouth on your hole ___”

He clutches the front of my shirt and hides his face in the crook of my neck. At first I think I’ve scared him, but then he whispers, “What else?”

Fuck, this angel is falling fast.

“I think about stuffing my cock inside that hot mouth of yours. I imagine how you’ll suck me. How you’ll choke on my cum.”

“Ethan,” he moans loudly.

“Soon, Noah.”

“Why not now?” he moans against my neck.

“Right now? Out here in the orchard?”

He lifts his head and kisses me. “Why not?” he whispers.

“I don’t want your first time to be a literal roll in the hay. I’ll take you somewhere special.”

“How soon?”

I laugh. Look at this horny motherfucker. “How soon can you get away with disappearing for a few hours?”

“When summer camp starts. I can slip out after lights out. You can pick me up.”

“Okay, just tell me where to pick you up and I’ll be there.” And then I kiss him again.

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CHAPTER 22

Noah

The days fly by in a post-graduation blur. So much churching to do. Preparing for summer youth camp takes up almost all of my time. The camp, named *Evanson and The Lord's Army*, stands on two acres of pristine Raleigh land, about a mile from our church. It contains twenty mini cabins, equipped to handle three kids per cabin. Staff quarters are separate.

After aggressively pursuing special offerings and tithes from our church members, the Lord provided us with the funds to add a basketball court, a dining hall, and enough electric fencing to keep the raccoons out.

We have the most elite, fully-functional, Christian camp for kids in all of North Carolina, a title my father has defended vehemently over the last fifteen years, since its opening.

We're a few days away from opening up youth camp for the summer holidays. Kids between ages fourteen and seventeen will spend most of their summer out here in the sweltering heat learning about the Lord, how to keep themselves pure, how to lead their non-believing friends to the Lord, and various other skills to keep them stuck in a perpetual cycle of guilt, shame and hope of eternal life one day when they die.

I used to think youth camp was exactly the kind of thing I was meant for. Helping young children find God, the way my father helped me find God. Helping them understand the great love God has for them. But the recent thoughts that crept into my head when I couldn't sleep in the lonely hours just after midnight have been plaguing me more and more each day.

If our God is so amazing why are there so many suffering children? Why do the bad guys always win? Why do men like my father still exist in the world while people like Ethan's mother no longer do? And why would God care about what gender you fell in love with and shared your body with. If I remember correctly, anyway, 'in Christ there is no male nor female'. And it's not like God himself has a gender even if we referred to him as *Him*. But the first time our father told me about Ethan's sexuality, the line had been drawn very firmly in the sand:

"You stay away from him, Noah," he said.

He sat me down on the couch in the living room one day, when I was about nine, wiping his forehead with his handkerchief every now and then because the blistering sun had somehow exploded right there in the living room. “He’s got the devil in him, that child, and I’m ashamed to call him my son. But I cannot stop all the wickedness in the world, can I, Noah?”

I nodded to agree with him and then shook my head because I didn’t know exactly how to answer that question. “God knows, I would if I could,” he carried on. And then he looked at me with earnest eyes and made me promise I would stay far, far away from Ethan. I promised with all the earnestness I could gather up so he would believe me.

I was lying when I made that promise because the only truth there was, was that I’d wanted to be as close to Ethan as I could possibly get. I hadn’t wanted to stay away from him. He was the coolest person I’d ever met. The way he didn’t care about what anyone said or thought about him. How he just did his own thing. I thought he was cool and brave, and he was my brother. We shared the same last name. Our birthdays were almost at the same time. That made us brothers, and I wanted to be just like him.

But I wasn’t cool. Or brave. I was scared, so I made that promise to our father.

Anyway, the millions of questions I have about our all-loving God are quickly shut down by reminders of eternal damnation in the fiery pits of hell if you step out of line.

Eternal damnation is, however, not nearly enough to keep me away from Ethan. My nights with him down at the orchard are nothing short of dreams coming true. We talk about life and love and everything in between. We differ on so many things like church and our individual futures, but those disagreements always end in sweet kisses.

I’m ashamed to say that, although I want to every single time, I never have the courage to touch Ethan the way he touches me. I hate it, but, every time I try, I chicken out. I’m scared I’ll go to hell if I touch him. And that makes no sense because he does the most unholy things to me, and surely I’m already going to hell for that.

“Noah, honey. Jessica is trying to talk to you.”

I spin around at the sound of my father’s voice, my face hot with worry because it’s not the first time in recent weeks he’s had to call my attention back to a task at hand. He’s been around the camp every day while we set up. I hope he won’t be around so much when camp starts.

To my left, Jessica gives me a mini wave.

“Oh, uh, sorry, Jessica,” I call out from the porch of the cabin I’d been working from, sorting out t-shirt sizes.

My father shakes his head and smiles, his head swinging from me to Jessica and back again. He walks off with Devin Sweeney, one of the newer kids. Devin’s parents moved to town about three months ago, and Devin is an awkward thirteen-year-old, having a hard time getting used to the people and his new home so Christian summer camp was the obvious place for him to find some friends.

As they walk off, my father places his hand on the small of Devin’s back, leaning into him and laughing at something. The muscles in my stomach tighten.

“You’re gone again.” Jessica laughs from the bottom of the wooden steps.

I pull my eyes away and smile at Jessica. “Sorry, Jessica. Just trying to get these t-shirts sorted out. What were you saying?”

She laughs again and blocks the sun with her hand, squinting up at me. “I was saying you work too hard.”

She skips up the wooden steps and when she reaches me she giggles and bumps my shoulder with hers. “You don’t have to be so serious all the time, you know.”

I offer her a smile, or at least, enough of one to hopefully keep the conversation light. It doesn’t work.

“You don’t have a girlfriend, do you, Noah?”

“Uh, no.”

“You don’t . . . want a girlfriend?” The inflection in her voice rises just so slightly on the last word and is accompanied by a telling smile.

“I don’t have time,” I say kindly but the awkwardness can’t be helped.

“You’d make a great boyfriend.”

I squint down at her. I don’t know how she could make that assessment. She laughs. “You don’t even know how sweet you are. Any girl would be lucky.”

What about any *boy*? The thought forms, ugly and angry, and she doesn’t deserve it, so I laugh lightly. “I’d be lucky too, if I found someone to love one day.”

Her smile falters for a second but then she smiles brightly again. “What about me? Do you think I could be that person?” Her eyes are wide and

questioning and there is a confidence in her question that just bowls me over. I've never been in a position to let someone down before. I squirm, unsure of what to say next.

"Uh, I—"

"We could start slow, you know. Date for a few years first."

My conversation with my father at the dinner table when he presented me with Ethan's condom packet comes to mind. I remember his speech about it being better to get married than to burn with lust and honestly, I'm not burning with lust. Not for Jessica anyway, and the kind of lust I've been burning with could never, ever end in a marriage. It's so firmly lodged in the realm of impossibility that the thought makes me want to laugh and cry at the same time.

"Uh, well, I think I just want to recover from high school for a while," I say lamely.

"Yeah, gosh, me too." She laughs.

She gently removes the t-shirt from my hand. "These t-shirts can wait until after lunch," she says firmly. Then she links her arm with mine and pulls me down the steps. "We're adults now, Noah," she says. "Our parents expect this sort of thing. They've been talking about it, did you know that?"

I clear my throat. "Uh, yeah . . ."

"They know better than us, Noah. I trust our parents, but we should take some initiative too, right?"

I must have looked confused because she laughs brightly again and bumps her shoulder against mine. "You're going to make the sweetest, most gentle senior pastor one day, Noah", she says. And when I remain silent, she stops and turns fully to me. "Okay, Noah, if you really want me to spell it out, I will. I can be brave about it."

My heart begins to thump in my chest. Please, God. I don't need this complication. I'm just trying to get to the start of camp.

"We're too young," I tell her stupidly. Anything to make her not say the words I think she's going to say and ruin everything.

"I really like you, Noah. And we're both eighteen. We're hardly children." She reaches for my hand, but I not-so-subtly shove them into the pockets of my jeans. She's not Ethan, and it feels wrong. I belong to Ethan.

My father passes us on his way into the eating area. His eyes shift from Jessica to me, and he winks at me. I register the silent message but only just.

I belong to Ethan.

The words echo in my head, having entered my mind so effortlessly. And the rightness of it overwhelms me.

I belong to Ethan. Not Jessica. Not anyone else.

I'm *his*, and what we have is pure. And even if I can't have him forever, I'm still his.

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CHAPTER 23

Ethan

It's the first day of summer camp.

I'm down the street waiting for Noah's text. Condoms and lube sit in the glove compartment. A clear test for STDs is on my phone if he needs proof.

My phone lights up at ten-fifteen, after I lost my mind over the possibility that Noah wasn't able to get out. I coast down to the curb where he asked me to meet him, and, within seconds, we're flying down the highway toward downtown.

Noah leans over. He's going for my cheek, but I turn at the last second and get him on the lips.

He laughs. "You cheated, but I don't mind."

I stop at a red light, turning to capture his chin between my thumb and index finger, kissing him deeply.

"How was your first day of summer camp?" I ask when the light turns green again, taking his hand in mine and placing it on my thigh. He turns his palm up so his fingers link with mine.

"It was fine, I guess, but I couldn't wait to get out of there. Where are we going, by the way?"

"You should have asked that question when we made this plan. What if I'm some kind of serial killer?"

Noah grins. "Well, maybe a *mood* killer with that morbid idea."

He makes me laugh. "I'm poor as fuck, you know that, right?"

"I have money, Ethan." He looks worried. *About me.* Maybe I'll fall in love with him for a little bit longer.

"Yeah, let's not make Evanson suspicious about where you're spending your money. I managed to get us a nice, neat little hotel just downtown. I wanted to go to the Oakwood Inn Express but maybe next time."

His eyes dance and his face shines with mischief. A rare thing to find with Noah. None of the stiff lipped Christian boy exists in this car right now. "Next time?" he asks. He tries to keep his smile under control by pulling his top lip between his teeth but he can't. I swear to God, this kid is making me too happy for my own good.

"I like you like this," I tell him.

He tilts his head to one side, questioning. I move my eyes to the road for a second and then back to him. “You look so . . . free.”

His smile disappears but not in a worrying way. He looks contemplative. “I feel free,” he says after some time.

We pull up to the parking lot of the hotel. It's not a bad place. I checked it out. It's also close enough to Noah's youth camp for us to get back there quickly if someone goes looking for him.

I get out of the car and meet Noah on the other side. He looks up at me, his eyes glittering under the street lights. I take his hand in mine and bend to kiss his mouth. “Do you still want this, Noah? You can stop this any time you want.”

He slips his hands around my waist and kisses me back. “I want this more than anything in the world, Ethan.”

“I heard the night staff here are pretty relaxed. We'll just grab our key and get to our room. No one will see us.”

“Okay.” He keeps his arms locked around my waist.

“I got you something,” I tell him, slipping a small gift box from the pocket of my sweatpants.

“Oh, why?”

His happiness pulls at something inside me. I want to make him happy forever. I hand the box over to him, and he opens it carefully.

“Late birthday present. Or a First Time gift, if you prefer. I'm poor, don't forget,” I say, feeling inadequate. Noah deserves expensive gifts, not five dollar wristbands.

He holds it up. “It's beautiful, Ethan. I love it.”

I point to the words stitched around the outside. It says: *I Am Who I Am*. “I know Christians will think this is referring to the bible verse, but it's not. It's for you, so you can be reminded that you are who you are.”

He looks up at me with tears in his eyes. “Thank you, Ethan. Thank you for being so thoughtful.”

I kiss his eyelids, then I show him the inside of the wristband, where a tiny imprint of the pride colors has been pressed into the material. “And this is to remind you that even though you have to hide parts of yourself right now, you are still who you are.”

Noah throws his arms around me. “I'm so happy, Ethan,” he sniffs.

“I'm happy that you're happy, Noah.” And then, “Should we go inside?”

He's nervous. I'll give him plenty of opportunities to back out. He drops his head, pressing his forehead against my chest. I reach up to cup the back of his head, speaking into his hair. "Whenever you're ready."

"I'm ready." He reaches up and kisses the side of my neck.

As expected, the front desk is empty. I grab our key and Noah and I head to the second floor.

Inside, Noah takes a look around. I take a look at him. He's small. I've noticed before, but I take the time to admire his slight frame now, knowing he'll be naked underneath me not too long from now. His dark brown hair grazes the collar of his shirt. When he turns to me, his eyes shine, and he wraps his arms around himself. "You don't know how happy I am to be here," he tells me.

Before I can answer him, he looks past me and his face falls. I follow his eyes to see what has caused his distress. Sitting on the dresser behind me is a bible.

I take the bible, feeling its weight in my hand, wondering what kind of internal war Noah must be facing right now. "What do you want to do with it?" I ask with as much non-judgment as I can gather into my voice.

His eyes flick from the bible to me and then back to the bible. "Maybe put it in the drawer," he says in a small voice.

I turn back to the dresser and place the bible inside the drawer and out of sight.

Noah stays rooted to the spot. I walk over to him, pulling him into me. He buries his face into the side of my neck, and it's becoming my most favorite thing, this hiding inside my neck thing. That and the way he rests his forehead against my chest sometimes.

"Let me kiss you," I whisper against his hair.

He lifts his head, bringing his lips to mine, and I kiss him slow and deep, licking into his mouth and drawing soft moans out of his throat. "You are the most beautiful thing I have ever known, Noah," I whisper into his mouth.

He kisses me back in the same way, soft and slow, then he whispers against my lips, "I want to touch you, Ethan."

CHAPTER 24

Noah

This is the point of no return. After this, no matter what happens in the future, this night will always *be*. I'll always have this.

My body shakes. I can't stop *shaking*. Ethan keeps me close, his mouth now tracking the column of my neck. He doesn't help or encourage me. Instead, he lets his fingers rest against my throat, stroking my Adam's apple while he sucks gently on the side of my neck.

My hands tremble at his chest. Then, my courage comes when I reach up to kiss his jaw, and he groans. I don't know if there will ever come a time in my life when I'll hear anything more devastatingly beautiful. With my hand moving down, over his abs toward the waistband of his sweats, I kiss him again the same way. Again, he responds . . . to *me*. I've touched Ethan before, but in all our time together, I've never touched him this intimately.

He lifts his face, and I don't know what this is. The blues of his eyes have deepened in a way I've never seen before, hooded, and he looks at me like he would give me the universe if I asked for it.

Bringing his forehead to mine, he cages my face between his palms. "You are so sweet, Noah," he murmurs. He takes my bottom lip between his teeth, biting and pulling. It stings, and I'm stunned by how good it feels. A groan leaves my throat, aching for more of this.

My hand brushes over the front of Ethan's sweats.

"Hmm, do that again," he groans into my mouth.

The rapid beat of my heart makes it hard to breathe while we kiss. I press my hand over the material of his clothing again, this time, feeling him up and down and—

I think I lose my mind. I bite into Ethan's mouth, kissing him so hard our teeth collide. He's so hard.

Ethan kisses me back harder, and his hand moves to my pants. He yanks my belt out of its buckle, and, in seconds, I'm throbbing in his hand. "You're so hard for me, Noah, baby. So fuckin' hard. You're driving me fuckin' crazy."

Noah, baby. He's given me a pet name.

He presses up into my palm, leaving me for an instant to remove his shirt.

With my heart racing and my body moving of its own volition, I slip my hand into his pants, and, with trembling fingers, I touch Ethan.

He hisses. “Fuck, baby.”

I close my fingers around his girth. Ethan is circumcised. He feels so good; I never thought it would feel this good. I want to feel him in my mouth.

“I want to taste you, Ethan,” I whisper. I kiss my way down his body, flicking my tongue over each of his nipples. Down the valley between his pecs. His abs. I’m so in love with Ethan’s body. Finally, I sink to my knees, desperate for what I’m about to do. Slowly, I pull his sweatpants down, exposing his dick. Ethan fists my hair, tugging hard. I’m in awe of his response to my touch.

My fingers trail down from the head of his dick, down his length. He hisses, increasing the pressure of his hold on my hair. I bring my face to Ethan’s cock. My lips part and—

He feels like an awakening. Like all my senses have been busted open and I am face to face with *God*. This is worth going to hell for.

I take him in as deep as I can. I try to suck him the way he sucks me, and maybe it’s good because Ethan groans out my name. His dick slides against my tongue, along the inside of my cheeks and probes the back of my throat. I’m dying with this pleasure.

Suddenly, I’m yanked up. “You’re too hot, Noah, baby. I need this to last.”

He takes my mouth with his. “Do you need the lights off?” he asks as he kisses my cheekbone.

“Yes, please,” I utter regretfully, but I can’t bring myself to be naked in front of Ethan like this. I can deal with the semi-darkness of the room where he can still see me, but the harsh fluorescent light scares me. He lets me go and switches off the light. When he returns, his hands reach for the buttons on my shirt. He unfastens each one, pausing every now and then to kiss the part of my skin he has just exposed. When he slips the shirt off my shoulders, and his lips press into my collarbone, I can’t stop the moan falling from my lips.

Ethan hooks his thumbs over the waistband of my pants, and, together with my underwear he pulls them down.

He pulls his lips away from mine and takes a small step back. His eyes travel the length of my naked body. Ethan has touched me intimately plenty of times before, but he has never studied me like this. I fight the urge to wrap my arms around myself. Instead, I drop my eyes and wait for him. He lifts my chin. "Don't hide from me, Noah."

He sinks to his knees in front of me. Bowing his head, he rests his forehead against my stomach. His hands move slowly up the back of my legs. I'm ashamed of how hard I am. Of how my dick lies against his shoulder, leaking for how turned on I am.

But there is something about the way Ethan touches me that makes the shame retreat before it can overwhelm me.

His hands move further up the back of my thighs, and, when his palms glide over my ass, my fingers fly to his hair, sinking into his strands.

"So beautiful," he whispers into my hip bone, kissing me there softly.

He brings his lips to my dick but doesn't take me into his mouth. Instead, he kisses along the side. Kisses so light and soft, his hands squeezing my ass cheeks over and over again. Then, he takes me into his mouth, sucking me gently.

He rises, but keeps his hands on my ass. Then, he lifts me up and on instinct, my legs come around his waist.

Ethan walks us to the bed and lowers me onto it. "You doing okay?" he breathes.

I nod. My nerves are beginning to eat at me, but I keep reminding myself that this is Ethan. This is my deepest dream and fantasy coming to life.

Ethan shifts; grabs the lube and lifts my knee. Then, with his lubed finger, he presses into my hole. I gasp, lifting my hips, simultaneously trying to get closer and further away.

"I got you, Noah, baby," he murmurs.

He doesn't enter my body with his finger. He massages my hole. It feels so good, but still, I can't get myself to relax.

Ethan comes up and settles at my side, pulling me to him. We lie face to face and he kisses me. He brings my leg around his waist and then moves his hand back to my ass.

"You're so tense, Noah, baby. You'll be okay, I promise."

He pulls me even closer and my dick digs into his sweats. His fingers return to my ass.

I lift my face to his. We're nose to nose, our breaths mingling.

“I’m going to help you relax.”

I nod because I’m just too high strung.

Ethan slides his tongue into my mouth, licking inside, then, he whispers, “Tell me to fuck you.”

My mind explodes, and I only just manage to stave off an orgasm.

I grip his shoulder and somehow push back into his fingers where he’s massaging my hole. My eyes fly up to his. He grins and licks against my lips again. “I’ll bet you’ve never said a swear word even once in your life.”

I pant against his mouth, shocked at the impact of his words.

“Hmm, that’s it,” he says with a smile. My face is on fire. Ethan’s finger is inside me.

“Let me hear you say it, Noah, baby.”

I . . . can’t. I want to. I want to so badly but I just *can’t*.

He’s moving his finger in and out of me slowly now, but I want more. “Ethan . . ., please,” I pant. And then, with my face buried in his neck, I whisper, “Ethan, *fuck . . . me. Please.*”

He gives me more of his finger.

A shout leaves my mouth for this incredible fullness, and, with a voice not my own, I whisper. “More, Ethan.”

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CHAPTER 25

Ethan

His first time. If he knew what this means to me, I wonder how he'd feel about it. If Noah knew what it meant to me that he would let me touch him like this, it might frighten him. Because it frightens me. Never before has anyone crept into my *soul* like this. I want to hang the stars for him. Fight the devils he believes are real so he would be free from them. I would slay every dragon that ever tried to burn him and destroy any person who ever tried to harm him.

This is the extent of my feelings for Noah. I'm afraid of my growing attachment to him. I'm afraid of how much I want this with him knowing that it will end in nothing but heartbreak. Even so, I don't want it to end. I don't want to give up this one beautiful thing, even if I'm the one who told Noah that it can only last a little while. Even if I know that it can go nowhere, even if I know that nothing good can come from us being together, I can't give him up.

But this is his first time. I have to give him everything I can for his first time, and, even if it's for just this short moment, I have to forget how we can never have forever. It's okay for beautiful things to come to an end. I reassured myself of this so many times before bringing him here. That just these stolen moments are enough. But now, I love his body as if *forever* belongs to us.

Noah is wrapped so tightly around my body, his leg curled over my hip, his fingers clutching at the back of my head and pulling at my hair, and his face buried in my neck. His naked body presses into the length of mine, our chests stuck together and his cock leaking onto my stomach.

I kiss him wildly. This won't last forever, so I must kiss him hard like this. Drink in his need for me as I try my best to show him how much I want him, too.

I pull his leg further up my hip so I'll have better access to his ass. Noah moans into our kisses, and his response to my question is the most beautiful thing I've ever heard.

Ethan, fuck me. His obedience despite the turmoil that must surely have taken place in his mind in the moments before he repeated those words

humble me. I know what it must have taken for him to cross that line. And his body's response makes me so happy it hurts. He might obsess over his 'sins' later, but I don't believe in half measures. It's all or nothing. And I will give Noah everything he wants, his *morals* be damned. And right now, Noah wants to fuck.

My pinkie slides in and out of him easily now, and he moves his hips back and forth, seeking more. I take him one more step further away from his God. "Say it again, Noah. Tell me you need me to *fuck* you."

This time, his hesitation is less prolonged. He bites my top lip and opens his eyes. Noah's *fuck me* eyes are better than his fuck me voice. "Ethan," he breathes, backing his hole into my pinkie. "I need you to *fuck* me."

His body responds to his own words, and he opens a little more for me. Soon, I'm finger fucking his ass while eating at his mouth, and, if I ever thought that sex between me and Noah was going to be sweet and decent, I was wrong.

I whisper swear words into his ear, driving him so fucking wild I have to ease us out of our kisses every now and then, so brutal they are becoming. The lube dripping from Noah's ass causes filthy, squelching, pornographic sounds as my fingers move in and out of his ass fast and hard, and Noah's breathless moans catapult from sweet and lovely to raw and just fucking *hot*. "Look at how I'm fucking this hole with my fingers, Noah. Tell me you love it."

"I love it," he whispers back.

"Tell me you *fucking* love it." I'm taking this boy right to fucking hell with me.

He groans. "I *fucking* love it."

I leave his body for one second to strip off the rest of my clothing.

And *Jesus* fuck. When I lower myself, sliding my nakedness over his, I nearly come undone. The only thing that keeps me up on the cliff are thoughts about everything I want to do to him tonight.

He lifts off the bed, pressing our bodies together. Our dicks slide against each other and fuck—

Nothing is better than this.

Sliding his arms up above his head, I hold his wrists in one hand and close the fingers of my other hand around his throat. His eyes half open, and his bottom lip caught between his teeth, Noah arches his neck into my grip.

I roll my hips, pressing into his groin. He reciprocates, rolling his hips against mine, and, soon, we're pseudo fucking; kissing like someone was going to rip us apart any minute, and my hand wrapped firmly around his neck. The sex sounds filling the air testify to the ungodliness of what we're doing.

I let go of Noah's neck and his mouth to trail kisses down his neck, sucking at his Adam's apple on the way. Licking across the place where his collar bones meet and further down to suck on each of his nipples. He grabs onto my hair and lifts his hips, looking for my cock. I tilt my hips forward, giving it to him and chuckle at his loud moan.

When my mouth moves further down to kiss his stomach and the bare skin leading to the base of his cock, Noah goes wild. Clutching and begging and thrashing underneath me, he pants out incoherencies. I take him in my mouth, and he lets go of my hair. I look up from between his legs, and, fuck me to Hades, Noah is completely gone. My brother arches his back, his chest pushed out and his stomach sucked in; his arms flung up above him and clutching at the pillow, and the back of his head digging into the mattress. He looks so beautiful like this. So wild and so fucking free.

I lick the underside of his cock and then swallow him whole, fucking him with my mouth so I can hear him moan over and over again.

But my mouth is needed in other places, too. So, I suck my way down to his balls, pulling one of his nuts into my mouth. Hmm, to have Noah's balls in my mouth is a wish I never knew I could make and have come true. But here we are, and fuck if Noah's cock isn't the best thing God ever made.

"Ethan," he chants over and over.

"I'm getting there, Noah, baby. You're doing so good."

My tongue slides down his taint, and I push his thighs up so I can look at him. His body tenses. I reach up, kissing him hard on his lips. "You're okay," I tell him in a whisper. "Let me look at you, Noah."

He nods, and I kiss him again.

I lower myself once more, kissing my way down his body. Even with the light turned off, I'm able to admire Noah's body. I bring his legs up, pressing his knees into his chest and lower my mouth to his ass. I kiss him everywhere, biting, knowing it will leave marks. And then, after he has squirmed and begged me for things he can't say out loud, I cover his asshole with my mouth. Flattening my tongue, I lick Noah's hole. But that's not enough, so I rub the tip of my chin over that sweet, little pucker to give

him some friction with my scruff. Then, I kiss him there again. Ah, fuck, Noah flexes his hole, so I kiss him again. I could kiss this ass forever, and it wouldn't be enough.

But Noah is getting impatient. So I grab a condom from the side of the bed and rock back on my knees. His eyes, drugged with lust for what's to come, watch me roll on the condom.

I bend to kiss him. "It'll hurt, but we'll go slow. I promise to take care of you, okay?"

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CHAPTER 26

Noah

Even if I'd dreamt up the most erotic images of what this moment might have felt like, nothing would have come close to what it is to be with Ethan like this. He is nothing like the careless, unbothered, arrogant man people might take him for if they saw him. When he looks at me, all my insecurities disappear. The tenderness in his touch, the softness in his eyes are enough to chase away my demons for a little while. Or maybe Ethan helps me become friends with those devils that have caused me to crave, to hunger after his touch like this.

The head of his penis touches my hole. Ethan brings his face to mine, kissing me tenderly. Then he lifts his face and gazes down at me. "I'll take care of you. I promise," he whispers. "Trust me, Noah."

I do. I trust him more than anyone else in this world. "Yes," I breathe. "Always."

Ethan starts to push inside me. The lube makes it easier, but it's almost impossible for me to open up to him without the stinging pain of being penetrated. He kisses the corner of my lips. "You are so fucking beautiful, Noah," he says, scraping his teeth over my chin.

I groan, still unable to stop my stomach from somersaulting when he curses like this.

"Who's fucking you, Noah?"

My head explodes with this question because—

No. It can't be. I can't be turned on by the thoughts exploding inside my head, so I answer, "You are."

Ethan groans, and I realize I've let him inside my body.

Brother, I want to shout. My *brother* is fucking me, and the more these words form and explode inside my head, the better everything feels. I chose *lover*, but the thought of my *brother* fucking me sends a hurricane ripping through my senses.

Saliva gathers at the back of my mouth, my stomach dips and contracts with arousal, and my body opens more and more for Ethan until his grunts tell me that he's fully inside me now.

He stills, resting his forehead against mine. “Now you’re mine,” he whispers over my face. I want to tell him I was already his a long time ago. It’s just that neither of us knew it.

Ethan’s fullness inside of me is so foreign and uncomfortable, but this is a pain I’m dying for. The burn concentrated in the place where we’re connected, engulfing me in flames.

I adore him. I do. *I adore you, Ethan.* “Move, Ethan,” I say, because with primal instinct, I need to feel him rub against me in the most intimate way.

“You ready?” he murmurs.

“”Yes,” I whisper, pressing my lips to his.

He moves, and there is a kind of pressure that feels like I’m being stretched. The fullness of Ethan’s penis inside me, when he withdraws with painful slowness, feels like I’m being massaged in this most private part of my body, and I breathe through his gentle movements until, with the help of the lube, he’s sliding thickly in and out of me.

If I imagine what it would feel like to be drunk on alcohol, I would imagine this feeling. It’s *intoxicating*. As Ethan moves, I find that it’s becoming easier to move with him. But when his lips graze my ear and he whispers, “Look at how we’re fucking, Noah, baby. You’re fuckin’ taking my cock so well,” my body’s response to Ethan’s words destroy every pain sensor in my body, and I lift my ass, devouring his penis, resisting his withdrawals and pulling him back in with every collision of our hips. The hot, slapping sound of skin against skin reaches my ears, and it makes me so hard I won’t last long. My dick receives an overload of friction with every slide of Ethan’s toned stomach against mine. Pressed between our stomachs, it’s the same as being double stimulated.

“I’m so fuckin’ close, Noah, baby,” Ethan whispers, his voice strained, and I don’t know if there is any sound more beautiful than that, Ethan’s arousal. “I’m sorry, baby. I won’t last long.”

I don’t know how to tell him to orgasm. I don’t know how to say the word *come* without feeling like an ungodly fool, but then he says, “Fuck, you feel so good, sweetheart,” and courage seeps into my bones. “Come, Ethan,” I whisper against his neck.

He blows out a hot breath and increases the speed and impact of his thrusts, our hips smashing together, his mouth finding mine, my arms are bars of steel wrapped around his back, and—

I surrender to him.

My orgasm explodes between us, and Ethan jerks inside me.

Now and forever, I am his in every way possible. Finally, I truly belong to Ethan.

The aftermath should have been uncomfortable, embarrassing, even, but Ethan turns everything into something amazing. Still inside me, he slides his stomach against mine, causing a squelching sound that feels more erotic than shameful.

“You good?” he rasps against my ear. My legs slide down from around his back, and this is the only time that I realize I’d gripped him like this at some point.

“I’m good,” I whisper.

He pulls out of me slowly, resting on his knees while he removes the condom. I don’t have too much courage left, so I avoid watching him.

Ethan discards the condom into the trashcan by the bedside and settles next to me, pulling me right into his arms. “You’re a little sore,” he says. It’s not a question, I notice.

“Yes, but it feels . . . good.”

He plants a kiss on my forehead. “Promise me, Noah. This stays between us, okay?” The softness in his voice would make anyone promise him anything. So, here in the dark, in a motel ten minutes away from my church camp, while I lie naked and wrapped in my stepbrother’s arms, I promise him. “This stays between us.”

Ethan pulls the bedcovers over us. He brings my leg over his waist, bending his knee so it’s wedged between my legs. Our naked bodies are pressed together from forehead to thighs and our limbs entangled. We couldn’t get closer if we tried.

“You feel guilty?” he asks softly.

I nod. “I’m trying to keep it at bay,” I tell him honestly.

“I wish I could make it go away, Noah.” His sadness over my internal conflict slips from his eyes and into my heart. I don’t know if anyone has cared for my feelings the way Ethan does.

“I know. I’ll try to be strong, Ethan.”

He pulls me further into his arms and locks me against his chest. I know he’s trying to keep us together for as long as possible, but we need to go

soon. If someone at the camp went looking for me, there would be no explanation plausible enough to explain my absence.

Reluctantly, like I'm leaving my own heart behind, I try to disentangle myself from Ethan so we can prepare to leave. I sense his discontent. "I'll see you again as soon as possible," I tell him.

"It's not easy letting you go, Noah."

"Maybe I can come out," I tell him, suddenly desperate.

"I wish it were that easy, but it's not safe for you. Maybe in ten years, when you're stronger, more independent."

I wish I could argue with him, but he's right. I could never take on our father. Not now, anyway.

He tries to set my mind at ease. "I want you, Noah, but not at the expense of your safety or your future. When we're together, it's hard to let you go back into that world, but I know it has to be done."

He lets me go, and we dress in silence. Not a hostile silence. It's the kind of quiet you have when preparing for a funeral. It's heartbreaking but you know you can't let yourself fall apart because there are things that need to be done.

We drive back in silence too. Ethan keeps my hand in his the whole time, bringing our clasped hands to his lips every so often to kiss the back of my hand. I settle close to him in my seat, resting my head on his shoulder as he drives us back to my life at the camp.

Saying goodbye after being with him the way we were just thirty minutes earlier is harder than I thought it would be. Parked next to the back entrance of the camp, Ethan kills the engine and turns to me. His lips find mine, and he kisses me deeply. So deep and heart-wrenching it is, it brings tears to my eyes, and, again I think, what would be the worst thing to happen if I just came out? So what if I get kicked out of the church?

Eventually, I have to leave him. So, I press my lips to his and kiss him again quickly. Then, I go back for another one. And another. Until Ethan gives out a low laugh and says, "Go on. I'll wait ten minutes, just in case, and then I'll leave. Good night, Noah, baby."

I give him one last kiss and jump out of the car, making my way through the bramble as quickly as possible. The iron gate creaks with startling accusations but I manage to get in quickly and race up the path to my cabin.

I'm at the foot of the wooden steps when—

“Where’re you coming from, runnin’ like a pack of wolves are chasing you?”

My blood freezes in my veins. I’m nothing but dead weight holding onto the bannister. But I can’t stay like this forever. I turn slowly, pasting a smile on my face.

“Dad, what are you still doing here?” Deflection question. He was supposed to have left hours ago.

“Had some nice heart-to-hearts with some of the kids and ended up around the campfire with Pastor Jenkins till late. I was on my way to my car and saw you zippin’ ‘cross the property.”

His face is curious, his smile telling me to answer the damn question, daring me to lie.

I lie.

“I’m on night patrol. I thought I saw a raccoon out there so I went to check.”

“And then you raced back because it was chasing you?”

I almost say yes but that’s too convenient. “Well, no. It got way too dark down there.”

His smile relaxes. I’m safe. “Yes, yes. You were always such a scaredy cat for the dark. Anyway, you don’t need to be worrying about the raccoons. It’s common for them to be out at night. Don’t do that again.”

“Yes, Dad.”

“Go on inside now, and get to bed. You’ve had a long day. We all have.”

He doesn’t need to tell me twice.

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CHAPTER 27

Ethan

I think I've underestimated Noah and overestimated my assumption that we would do a little exploration together and then walk away when he's satisfied his curiosity. The more he occupies my thoughts the harder it becomes to let this be a simple moment in time, as was the original plan. An exceptional, beautiful moment, but still nothing more than a moment. I'm beginning to realize I might not want to give him up so easily, and he might struggle walking away as easily as I'd imagined at the beginning.

My phone lights up.

Noah: I'm fine.

Me: Sleep well, Noah, baby.

I start the engine, coast down the road, and take the left that will get me on the highway. A pair of headlights flash in my rear view mirror, blinding me temporarily. Some asshole is sitting on my ass. I increase speed to create some distance and contemplate this escalating situation between me and Noah. What if neither of us can walk away at the end? Would Noah really come out and be all *fuck everything*? Even his God? My mother never could. She stayed and stayed and stayed and when she left, she left for good. There hadn't been any middle ground, no gray area. It was solidly black or blindingly white. You lived with it, or you died. You remained silent or you shouted it from the heavens. I don't know yet where Noah is in the spectrum of authenticity. And I don't know that it would necessarily benefit him to abandon the only life he knows, the only family he has for . . . for what? For *me*? That hardly seems like a fair or beneficial thing to Noah.

Which is why I need to step up and take charge of what we're doing. I can't let us fall off the rails and get lost in some rabbit hole of lust and passion.

I don't live all that far away from Noah's summer camp, but the disparity as I enter my side of town is relatively sickening. There's some traffic brightening the road, but the occasional flash in my eyes tells me that some people are being real assholes tonight, driving on my ass and flashing their lights right into my rearview mirror.

I switch lanes, pedal to the metal, and I take the next left into Fifth Street and then Seventh. Our street is quiet. All the drug runners must be working down on Eighth Street since a new bar opened up two weeks ago. Nothing like mixing your alcohol with a little bit of cocaine. I pull into the curb and kill the engine. Noah's scent lingers in the car, and I inhale deeply, trying to catch it in my lungs. I can't wait to see him again.

A car squeals past me, and I don't pay much attention at first until I see the flash of a Mercedes sign at the back of the car. Lightning fast, my eyes move to the license plate. I can't see the last part of the plate, but the first part matches my father's license plate.

My blood runs cold.

Is it him? If it is, what the fuck is my father doing in my neighborhood? My heart thumps in my chest, and I reach for my phone. My fingers hover over the keypad. Then, with my fist in my mouth, I dial Noah's number, making sure to hide my number so my name doesn't come up on his screen.

He picks up on the first ring. "Are you okay?" I snap, without meaning to.

"Yes, why?"

My eyes catch the back of the Mercedes.

"Ethan? Is everything okay?"

"Uh, yeah. Everything's fine. I was just checking on you."

"You sound like something's wrong."

"Do I? No. It's nothing, Noah, baby. Did I wake you?"

"No, I was still awake."

"Okay, try to get some sleep, and I'll see you soon."

I end the call, but goosebumps race up my arms. I shake my head, putting it out of my mind. I only saw the first part of the plate. I can't be sure it was him. I'm just being paranoid. And besides, if Evanson suspected anything, I'd be the first to know. He'd never let me get away with it.

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CHAPTER 28

Noah

My heart was already broken when I fell in love with Ethan, because I knew right from the first moment that the thing I wanted most in the world, I could never, ever have. Still, I'd rather have this broken heart than to never have known what it would be like to be touched by him. And if he's right and this beautiful thing we have can't last forever, then maybe these secret memories will be enough to hold the pieces of my heart together.

And despite waking up with these melancholic thoughts, it's also like waking up to a new life. Like nothing in this world could ever take this joy away from me. Ethan is in every breath I breathe. The air around me is filled with him, and, for the first time, I can breathe easily.

I shower quickly, with my mind occupied by thoughts of Ethan and what we did last night. No matter what happens, I'll never regret being with him. But, as I'd predicted, I now want him in this way again and again.

After my shower, I text him with ideas of how I can see him again. We usually have fresh bread and rolls delivered to the camp every evening for the next day. I'm going to offer to get them myself for the remainder of the camp. It's an alarmingly shaky plan, but desperation is a fascinating thing.

My father isn't expected to visit the camp every day, maybe only once or twice a week to see how things are going. Pastor Eric will be easy enough to convince.

Ethan thinks it's a terrible idea because no one will believe me, but I manage to convince him to trust me. He agrees, but I can tell he's not happy about it.

I navigate through the church activities on autopilot—morning prayer time, breakfast, praise and worship, bible study, lunch.

By dinner time, it's safe to say ninety-five percent of my day was dedicated to replaying the events of the previous night in my mind. Jessica sidles up to me numerous times, but I manage to escape her nine times out of ten. I feel so guilty treating her like that, but telling her the truth isn't an option.

At seven p.m., I drive out to the bakery in town to collect our just-out-of-the-oven breads and rolls—their last order for the day.

I thank the staff, receive pats on my back for everything I do for those kids and for the Lord, and rush out to the car. I'm meeting Ethan at the top of some cliff I've never heard of, but apparently it used to be the hangout spot when he was in high school. We have less than thirty minutes because I won't be able to explain a longer absence than that.

I park and exit my car. Ethan rounds the hood of his car and meets me halfway between our vehicles. "Isn't this better than the motel?" he asks.

I'll take a look at the scenery in a minute. I fling my arms around his neck, and pull him down to me. He chuckles into my mouth, and we kiss like old lovers. Like the world is ours, and we own our happiness.

His mouth is soft and warm, his tongue tangling with mine. "Let's sit in your car," he says into our kiss. "We can put the top down and try to catch the stars."

It's magical. We sit in the backseat with the top down. I'm almost on top of him, trying to get as close as possible. We hardly look for the stars in the sky because all the stars appear to be shining right out of Ethan's eyes. I think he feels the same because he breaks our kiss for a moment to tell me that my eyes shine like the stars. "Yours do, too," I tell him.

"How private is this place?" I ask, squirming against Ethan.

"As private as we need it to be," he says, already reaching for the buttons on my shirt. It's not the easiest thing, getting out of my clothes and Ethan's large frame is a challenge neither of us were prepared for.

I'm up on the mountain. The devil has tempted me, and I choose again. I choose *Ethan* again.

Ethan pulls out a condom and lube from his back pocket. This is my second time, and none of the discomfort and anxiety from the first time exists.

"Tell me you love this, Noah, baby. Tell me you love what we're doing."

"I love it, Ethan," I gasp.

"Tell me you *fucking* love it."

Not a moment of hesitation. "I *fucking* love it."

"Hmm, you're so hot when you curse, Noah, baby."

"No, *you're* hot when you curse," I tell him while I rut against his thigh.

"You like it when I curse?" His chuckle is swallowed up by our kiss.

"Yes." Our clothes are only half off. One side of the shirt, one leg of the pants, and one part of our boxers. I'm underneath him and his fingers dig into my ass cheeks. My hips buck, urging him toward my hole.

“You wanna hear something else?” he murmurs.

“Yes.” My stomach flips with anticipation.

“This tight little hole is going to take my cock so well in just a minute.”

Oh. *God*. Ethan’s finger sinks inside me.

“You’ll like that, won’t you, Noah, baby?”

“Hmm, yeahhh.”

His finger stills in my ass, and I mewl at that.

“When you answer I want you to say, *fuck yeah*, do you understand me? Let me hear you curse, Noah, baby.”

On instinct, my hand goes to my dick. Ethan’s fingers leave my ass to close over mine and, together, we work my dick.

“You like this, don’t you?” he repeats.

This time I hesitate. There is a lewdness here that I love, but something I’m also terrified of. I fight through the shame, and whisper, “Fuck, yeah.”

His hand moves back to my ass. “Hmm, tell me you love it when I finger fuck you.”

“I fucking love it when you finger fuck me.” Fuck, the words feel so fucking good dripping from my tongue.

“You don’t know how sexy you sound, sweetheart.”

I groan into his neck.

Ethan gets up into a seated position, pulling me with him until I’m straddling him. He plays with my foreskin. “This is fucking hot too,” he murmurs. “Lean back, let me show you something.”

Ethan brings our dicks together, head to head. When the tips touch, I give out a loud gasp. Ethan grins up at me, so relaxed and calm while I can hardly keep my eyes open, and I’m losing half my mind. He rubs the heads of our dicks together, sharing pre-cum.

“Oh, *ffuuuccckk*,” I gasp.

He leans forward and swipes his tongue across my parted lips, smiling playfully. “So vulgar, Noah.”

I don’t even have the mind for shame.

“Keep your eyes open. Watch us, baby,” Ethan whispers.

I watch as he fists me, pulling my foreskin up. Keeping the heads of our dicks together, he pulls until my foreskin encases the head of his dick. There’s a slight suctioning feel, but the sight of my dick connected to Ethan’s like this blows my whole damn mind.

“Ethan,” I gasp.

“Make yourself come on my cock, Noah,” he says.

My eyes widen. “I d-don’t want to come yet,” I manage to tell him through the thick fog settling in my brain. The other thing fighting its way into my rational mind is the shame of touching myself . . . and doing it in front of Ethan.

He laughs softly. “You’ll come again, don’t worry, Noah. You’ll come again before we leave. Trust me. Now, touch yourself. Let me watch you fucking come on my cock.”

I bring my hand between us. He senses my hesitation.

“You have every right to touch your own body, Noah.” I catch the subtle sharpness in his tone, and even in this drugged state, I appreciate his anger on my behalf for the shame caused by my faith.

Ethan floods my soul with courage. I slowly pull my foreskin back. The sensation rocks me to my core. This permission to enjoy my own fist causes my stomach to clench and dip in anticipation. The absolute rebellion against my beliefs makes my mouth water for more. My mind feels captured. Enslaved by every possible carnality. I give in to it all.

I fist my dick. Ethan’s dick flexes, and *fuck* if that’s not the sexiest thing I’ve seen so far.

He holds up the bottle of lube, dripping some onto our dicks. Then he closes his fingers around his cock and fists himself. It’s lazy, the way he’s doing it. I can’t keep my eyes off what he’s doing to himself.

“You can do it,” he says. The softness in his voice draws my eyes to his. Ethan is the air I breathe. His eyes, the ocean I must drown in if I am to live another moment. I lean forward to kiss his lips. How will I ever live without him? I won’t. Without Ethan, I’m lost. My demons—the ones I inherited from my church—are quiet in his presence.

So, I move my hand. Fisting my cock, right there for him to watch, and, with each stroke of my dick, my bravery builds. Within seconds, I’m pumping my dick so hard my head spins. Watching myself do this, while also watching Ethan fist his dick unhurriedly turns me into a savage. I pump faster and faster, and drawing my hips upward, I get ready to blow. Ethan lets go of his cock, and I come all over his dick, cum flying over his abs and nipples.

I gasp for air, spent, but still half hard as I watch my semen drip from his erect penis and slide down.

“Look at all this fucking god juice,” he murmurs, flicking his thumb across the head of his dick, where my semen has landed.

My eyes widen, and he chuckles. “You don’t like that term?”

I don’t even know what to say.

Ethan laughs again, low and sexy. “Okay, we’ll call it something else. “Demon semen.”

I laugh.

“How about Jesus jizz?”

I drop my head to his shoulder, trying not to let it be funny because it also sounds like blasphemy.

“Too far?” He laughs lightly.

I chuckle. “Too far.”

Ethan drags his fingers up the back of my neck and into my hair, pulling my head away from his shoulder. I groan with how good it feels to have him pull my hair like this. He catches my chin between his thumb and index finger with his other hand. “Tell me how much you still want my fucking cock after coming so hard,” he says, his eyes hooded, his recently blasphemous mouth already forgotten.

My stomach somersaults. “I still want your fucking cock so bad, Ethan,” I pant.

He groans, turning so I’m flipped onto my back. Ethan drops his body onto mine. My leg finds the headrest of the driver’s seat so he would have better access. He reaches for a condom.

“No condom, please, Ethan,” I whisper.

He gazes down at me. “You want to take me raw, Noah?”

I return his gaze. I’m sure we’re in love.

“Yes, *please*,” I whisper. “I want you to fuck me raw.”

“Fuck, Noah,” he groans, easing into me, his cock slick with lube and my semen. The slide of Ethan’s dick inside me is just *fucking* heaven.

“Nice and slow until you’re ready again, okay?” he murmurs into my neck.

I nod, letting my body relax underneath his while he moves inside me with agonizing slowness. His phone lights up next to us on the seat. We ignore it at first, but it won’t stop. There’s no name flashing on the screen, just a number, so I don’t know who it is. Ethan doesn’t seem to care either way.

“Maybe you should just get it,” I tell him, while I kiss his shoulder.

“Whoever it is can wait,” he says, pushing into me. Finally, after a few more missed calls, I reach over, slide my finger across the screen and hold the phone up to his ear.

Declan’s voice thunders through the fog inside the car. “Hey, Ethan. How’s it going? I’m around. Wanna hook up?”

Ethan grins down at me. “Yeah? When?”

I reach up and bite his shoulder. He grunts, but I think he liked it.

“I’m ready when you are, big guy,” Declan says.

I pull Ethan’s face down to mine, locking my arms around his neck with the phone still in my hand, while he pulls out of me and then pushes back in gently. I lick his face from chin to cheekbone, groaning.

“I’m a little busy right now, Dec.”

I bite his cheek. “*Dec?*” I whisper.

Ethan simply laughs. Declan seems to get it. “Sounds like someone beat me to it. Come down to the beach when you’re done.”

“Don’t hold out, *Dec.*”

Declan laughs and ends the call.

I bite down on Ethan’s lower lip. “*Dec?*” I growl.

He bites me back. “So jealous, Noah, baby. You’re so hot when you’re jealous. Now, hold on while I fuck this ass.”

Despite the thunderous wave I just rode, I love this sensation of being stretched. This pressure that builds as Ethan goes deeper and deeper until his dick is grazing my prostate and turning me into a whole other person.

Soon, with Ethan’s voice in my ear, we’re fucking like it’ll be the last time we’ll touch each other. It’s brutal. Ethan bangs into me, his hips grinding into mine and his abs massaging my balls with every smash of his lower body against mine.

I come, not just on the brutality with which he is fucking me, but also on the words spilling out of Ethan’s mouth.

“Take that fucking cock, Noah, baby.”

“I fuckin’ love how greedy your ass is for my dick.”

“Look at how fucking greedy you are, coming again like a dirty little church boy.”

“Open this fuckin’ ass, and let me fuck this hole. Yeah, that’s it. Open for me, Noah, baby.”

“This hole is fuckin’ mine; this fuckin’ ass is mine.”

And with the stars watching us and his hips moving in staccato to his words—“You. Are. Fucking. Mine.” —Ethan fills my body with his cum.

He collapses on me and our bodies slide against each other with the ease created by our sweat and my cum from earlier. He kisses the side of my neck and then he gathers me into his arms, holding me close. “You are so amazing, Noah,” he whispers.

I settle deeper in his arms. The demons begin to roar inside my head again, the ones from my church. I try to squash them down, but they manage to create tiny cracks in the fragile afterglow of my time with Ethan.

“I’m cheating on God,” I tell him lightly. I’m half joking, but his eyes are serious as he studies me. “Well, I stole you away from God, and now you are mine,” he says.

“Sometimes I think if I leave the church the Devil will get a hold of me, and I’ll turn into some kind of monster.”

“Trust me, Noah, your moral compass isn’t determined by how much church you have in you. You would be as beautiful as you are now without it. Maybe more.”

I kiss the valley between his pecs, move my hand to the place where his heart beats, and kiss him there. Then, I place the side of my ear to his heartbeat and listen to the strong *thud thud thud* of his beating heart. The sound and the gentle movement of Ethan’s chest—his breathing and his heartbeat—give me a kind of comfort that quietens my soul. *This* is rest. This is the resting of the soul. Ethan’s heartbeat is the place where my soul finds peace.

“We should go,” he whispers into my hair.

I know, but I hate it. I dress quietly. I’m done first. He has to get out of the car to straighten himself out. I get out too and reach up to kiss him. “I’ll text you,” I tell him.

He kisses me back. “I’ll wait for you.”

It’s too noticeable. My happiness. It’s too obvious. Jessica asked me about it as soon as I walked into the hall for breakfast. “Your face, Noah. It’s so . . . *radiant*. You look like Moses must have looked when he came down from Mount Sinai with the Ten Commandments,” she’d teased.

It was a vile thing to think, but I couldn't help thinking, I *did* kind of go up the mountain last night.

"There's that smile I've been missing the last little while," Pastor Bobby Jenkins says, when I walk out onto the field at around ten o' clock. He's visiting the camp today.

I hadn't realized I'd been smiling.

"I've been a little worried about you, but I figured it was all the stress of finals and all," he continues.

It's a great excuse to go with. "Yeah, I'm glad it's over."

Pastor Jenkins looks like he wants to ask me something. Finally, he seems to settle something inside himself. I'm still flying too high on cloud nine to keep my guard all the way up.

"Noah, there's something I need to ask you."

The seriousness in his voice makes me turn fully to him.

He looks around, seeming to make sure we're out of earshot of any of the kids or other staff on the field. Then, with his face taking on the same stern tone from a second ago, he says, "Are you sleeping with Jessica?"

At first, I'm rocketed right into the stratosphere with shock. The inappropriateness of the question just blows my mind. I must look like a fish, opening and closing my mouth, with nothing coming out.

Then he makes it so much worse. "Tell me, Noah. And be honest. Is she *pregnant?*"

Oh, my fucking God. I laugh. I can't help it. Now I know why Ethan swears so much. Human beings are *dumb*.

"No. She's not pregnant." Okay, I'll admit to contributing to the stupidity of society with that answer.

"So you *are* sleeping with her?"

"No. No. That's not what I meant. I'm not sleeping with her. And I don't know anything about her being pregnant. It wouldn't be any of my business if she is."

Pastor Jenkins narrows his eyes at me. "Everything is your business when you're a pastor, Noah. It's your job to keep them on the narrow path. And why do you have condoms if you're not sleeping together?"

My face must have looked like it fell right off my skull. Pastor Jenkins has the audacity to *grin* up at me. I wish I could punch that smile right out of his face. "Us pastors know everything, Noah. Just keep it in your pants until you're at least engaged," he says.

I sputter, trying to come up with a scathing enough response but he moves on swiftly, and I stand there like a raging fool.

He jerks his head to Alison, who's wearing a pair of shorts and a tank, getting ready to swing the bat. "I thought we said no short shorts," he says.

"I don't know what you're talking about," I bite out. Because this guy is disgusting.

He turns to me with a smile. "Maybe she's just mature for her age."

Vomit sits in my throat. He mistakes my silent stare for an invitation to continue. He holds out his hands in front of his chest, like he's holding two large invisible balls in his hands. "Come on, Noah. You know what I mean." He grins, and moves on like he didn't just sexualize a child playing sports at a damn Christian summer camp.

"I saw Ethan at Gus's the other day," he says. "Can't believe he let your dad down like that."

I rage inside. "He's not a bad person, Pastor Jenkins, and there's nothing wrong with Alison's clothing," I say.

My words go right over his head. He doesn't even acknowledge them. "You know, you can just call me Bobby. You're part of the church council. No need to be all formal."

"I have to go," I tell him and I walk away. I wish he would just leave. He's not even part of the camp staff. I'm going to report *Bobby's* inappropriate comments to my father.

As for that whole condom thing, even though I'm not surprised my father told Pastor Jenkins and probably the whole board, and god-knows-who-else about the condoms, I'm still *furios*. I wish I could just ask him why he'd do such a thing.

Arthur Dallas, one of our campers, runs up next to me. "You're not playing?" I ask, grateful for the distraction from the boundary-less life of the Christian.

Arthur holds up his finger. "Bent it yesterday, so I'm sitting out today."

"I'm sorry, Arthur." I ruffle his hair.

He squints up at me.

"Something on your mind, buddy?"

"Uh, well. Yeah, *kinda*." It comes out like *kiiiiiiiinda*?

"You wanna talk about it?"

"Yeah?" *Yeeaaahh*.

“Okay, shoot. You want to talk here? Or we can go to the hall if you want.”

Arthur looks around, and then says, “No, here’s fine.” We drop to the ground under a tree. He takes a few deep breaths and then, glancing up at me and away again, he seems to rethink his request.

“You tell me when you’re ready, buddy. I’m right here.”

“Do you think we can have a pride flag at the church, Pastor Noah?” he blurts out finally.

My blood turns to ice. I’m stunned into silence, and I’m ashamed that he catches it immediately.

“No, no. Of course not. Sorry, Pastor Noah . . .” He gets up to leave but I grab his arm. “No, wait, Arthur. Sit, let’s talk. Why do you ask?”

He looks hesitant again, and if I were to dig a little deeper, I’d think he was even a little afraid. As if he hadn’t realized how serious his question was until after he’d asked it. “It’s not me . . . I mean . . . I’m not asking for me . . .”

I want to tell him it would be okay if he were asking for him, but who am I to dish out advice about this kind of thing.

“It’s for my friend. He—he’s my best friend and he’s uh . . .” He pauses again and looks around. “Gay,” he finishes in a half whisper. “He came out to me when school got out for the summer.”

There’s a lump in my throat. Besides Ethan and recently, Declan, I had never met an openly gay person, and knowing that there is a thirteen-year-old-boy who just told his best friend he’s gay gives me a strange sense of happiness.

“So, you want a pride flag to . . . support him?”

“Well, I already have one in my room. It’s just a tiny one, and I keep it inside one of my books. My friend knows about it, I told him. So he knows I’m still his best friend, and I’ll always support him. I have a pride band too. It says *I am an ally*, but I told him I’m scared to wear it, and he told me it was okay.” He looks up at me guiltily, and I wish I could tell him that the only person that I’ve met who is braver than him is Ethan and I wish I had half the amount of courage he had.

“I’m not telling you his name because I don’t want to out him, you understand, don’t you, Pastor Noah?”

“I understand.”

“Anyway, it’s not just that.”

“Go on.”

“Well, he and his family go to that church with the red roof. *House of Malachai*. You know *House of Malachi*, right?”

“I do.” *House of Malachi* is a church one town over.

“Well, he told his mom, and his mom started crying and told his dad, and then —”

Arthur smacks his forehead and his voice pitches a little higher “—and *then*, they went and told the pastor at church, and he got called into the pastor’s office, and they all started praying for him and anointing him with olive oil; that’s what he said and I asked him what the olive oil was going to do and he said he had no idea.”

I could have easily explained it to him—that the oil was to mark him as ‘set apart’ for the Lord, which meant he can’t be gay—but the lump in my throat is beginning to clog up my airways.

“Anyway, they told him that being gay is a sin and he needs to fast and pray, and he can’t have holy communion with the youth group for now, and they’ll monitor him for something like three months. I can’t remember if they said three months or six months. And he can’t participate in any church activities until he’s fixed.” He looks up at me quickly. “I—I mean, I’m not saying he needs to be fixed. I’m saying that’s what they said.”

I don’t know what to say. And even if I did know, I can’t speak. The anguish in my soul roars to the surface, bringing with it the feel of Ethan’s heartbeat against my palm. The sound of his heartbeat when I pressed my ear to his chest. *How can it be wrong?*

“Anyway, Pastor Noah, I was just thinking, since he can’t go to his own church, and he—my friend—he really loves church, I thought if we could put up a flag in the front of our building, then he would know we won’t mind that he’s gay, and maybe he can come to our church for a while. Until the three or six months are over. But I don’t think he’s gonna get back in. It’s not like being gay is some disease or something, so I thought he could just move to our church. But I didn’t want him to just take my word for it. So, I thought if he saw the pride flag he’ll know that we—we, you know, we don’t mind.”

The innocence of this child’s request breaks me.

“Arthur, I’m going to answer your question, but I need to do something real quick. Will you give me five minutes? I’ll be back. Don’t leave, okay?”

He gives me a puzzled look but nods.

I hurry to the restrooms, struggling with the lump in my throat and desperately holding back tears.

Only when I'm safely inside the stall do I release it all. But even then, it's controlled. Clenching my fist against my mouth, I wail silently.

Is this my life? To hide because of people like every single pastor within a thirty mile radius? People who will try to pray the gay out of a thirteen-year-old-boy and then threaten to kick him out of the church and refuse him holy communion if he doesn't change in three or six months? People like my father who would vote and advocate against the rights of his own son? *Both* his sons?

I can't stand it. I can't live like this.

With my forehead pressed to the wall, I let my tears fall for people like Arthur's best friend. For Ethan . . . for *me*.

My phone pings with a text. Carefully wiping my tears away, I read it.

Dad: *Hi Noah. I'm passing by the camp in a few. I'll come in to say hi.*

I'm a coward. I don't even deserve to cry. I answer: *Sure. See you soon*, making sure to add an emoji to make it personal.

I am no less a villain than any of them. My silence makes me complicit. Whichever way you look at it, I'm not excused from the role of perpetrator. I am responsible for these atrocities, too, if I do nothing.

I take a few deep breaths and exit the stall. I hope Arthur is still there so I can talk to him before my father arrives.

He is. "Arthur, I'm sorry. I had to take care of something. Let's finish our talk."

"Okay. So you think we can put up a flag? Then my friend will feel okay coming here?"

"I'm going to talk to the leaders and see if we can do that." I am a failure. I have already failed this child because I know our church will never, ever agree.

"Do you think they'll say no?"

"Arthur, our church has rules," I tell him gently around the newly forming lump in my throat.

He nods but I don't think he fully understands the subtext I'm offering him. "But they might still say yes?" he asks.

"They might," I say with more conviction than I feel.

"But if it were up to you, you'd say yes, right? You wouldn't have to think about it, right?"

This time, I can't stop the tears from coming to the surface. They don't fall, but they're there and Arthur sees them. I nod emphatically. He smiles. "I knew you would," he says, before running off.

I don't deserve his confidence but I have to at least try.

My phone lights up. An incoming text letting me know my father is here. I watch as he approaches me, stopping every few yards to talk to a child or a volunteer parent or staff member. Many of the younger teens rush up to him for high fives, and the older ones settle for fist bumps. From here, he looks like an incredibly powerful, influential man with a heart of gold. And I guess he is—to some people. He really does feed the hungry and clothe the poor and give shelter to the homeless. I'm Exhibit A. Surely all the good outweighs the bad?

He hugs me warmly when he gets to me. "Look at how happy they are, Noah." He smiles broadly. Ethan's smile. He looks so much like Ethan. My heart pounds with the thought of my father's son. I'm sleeping with my father's son.

"You're doing an amazing job with the camp, Noah. It wasn't easy for me to let it go, but I trust you. You're the only one I trust."

I slide across the scale from despising him to basking in his praise. This need to please him never goes away no matter how much I wish it.

He's in a good mood, so I forgive him for telling people about the condom, and broach the subject of the pride flag.

"Dad, I've been thinking about something."

"Go ahead, son." He pulls me into a side hug. I make an effort not to stiffen my body. I don't want to have to explain why I'm so tense.

"Well, I was thinking about how we can be inclusive without getting caught up in all this *woke* stuff." As the words spill from my mouth, my stomach churns sickeningly.

"Hmm. Tell me. I want to keep up with the times. So, how can we do that without all this other nonsense?"

"Well . . ." My fingers moved to the wristband Ethan gave me, looking for courage.

My father's eyes follow my fingers. "That's a nice band," he says, lifting my hand to inspect it. I hold my breath while he admires the band his son gave me. The pride symbol is too inconspicuous for him to guess that it's anything more than a wristband with a biblical reference. I let him look,

afraid but also satisfied that I can flaunt who I really am in front of him and he's none the wiser. "Oh, yeah. One of the kids gave it to me," I say.

"Hmm. *I Am Who I Am*. That's right, son. The Lord is who He is. He is the great *I AM*." He drops my hand. "Now tell me about your idea."

"Well, the rainbow . . ."

"We're not letting them take the rainbow. That is a hard no."

My heart drops, even though I'm not surprised. "So, what about a sign outside," I say, "that says LGBTQIA+ inside a red heart. Then people will know we love all people—"

"—even though we hate the sin," he finishes. Then, with a proud smile, he nods. "I love the idea, Noah. I'll announce it this coming Sunday. People will love me."

I don't think he realizes he's said 'love *me*' and not 'love *it*'.

"Yes, go ahead, and do that. We can be progressive without blaspheming the word of God at every turn."

I nod. "Also, there's something else."

"Go on."

"It's about Pastor Jenkins."

"Oh? What about Bobby?"

"You said to always come to you about personal things."

"If someone confides in you during prayer counseling, yes."

"Well, it's not from a prayer counseling session or anything, but today Pastor Jenkins made an inappropriate comment about one of the kids."

"What did he say?"

"Well, he didn't exactly say anything." Why is it so hard to explain this? "Uhm, well. He said she was mature for her age, and he held out his hands and made a sign like he was referring to her, uh, well, her breasts."

My father raises his eyebrows. "Really?" What did he say about her breasts?"

"Well, nothing. But he made a sign as if . . ."

I don't know how to go on. Maybe I misread it. Maybe I'm wrong. Maybe I'm overthinking it. Being too sensitive and looking for things that aren't there. "It's just the way he said she's mature, and then it was like he was referring to her body."

He sighs. I detect impatience. "Did he make a comment about her breasts, Noah? What words did he use? You have to be clear about these things."

These are not the kind of accusations you just throw around when it comes to a man of God.”

“He didn’t say anything directly, but I know what he meant.”

“Who’s the kid?”

“Alison.”

My father runs his hand down his face and then searches the field. “Okay, Noah. Here’s a test for you. Look at Alison.” He points across the field. “And I’m going to be very frank with you. A young girl with breasts that size. Should she be wearing a top that small?”

The correct answer is she can wear whatever the hell she wants. “I don’t think she’s trying to hurt anyone with her clothing,” I say, instead.

He clicks his tongue disapprovingly. “We’re starting some refresher sessions for the leadership team about biblical rules and boundaries. Make sure you attend. You might feel differently afterward. And make sure you get the whole LGBT-whatever heart set up. I love the idea.”

He walks off like he’d just settled a case with Solomon’s wisdom.

After all that, I’m just glad I have something to take back to Arthur.

Arthur can’t stop the disappointment from seeping into his face when I tell him we can’t use the pride colors, but he’s happy enough that we’ll have a sign outside for his friend to see.

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CHAPTER 29

Ethan

Noah and I fuck all through the summer using his food bank excuse. He's no prude and that delights my little heathen heart.

I quit smoking. I wanted to try and do something good for once and when I'm with Noah I want to be good. So, I quit.

He started college, but he still lives at home and commutes every day. The other day he told me about Jessica Crompton and how people automatically think they'll end up together. She's attending the same college. I told him he's better off with her, even though what I really want to do is drape Noah in a pride flag and put a ring on his finger to tell everyone that he's fucking *mine*.

By the time we get to fall we're using every excuse in the book to get him away from bible study nights and church meetings. Noah isn't allowed to celebrate Halloween, so, instead of taking part in all that devil stuff, I feed Noah my demon semen up on the cliff. And then I lick up all his god juice.

Now, I'm down the street, waiting for Noah's text. Evanson is away on a conference, and Ms. May must have gone to bed. I've already disabled the security system remotely. When the text comes, I grab the chocolate milkshake I'd gotten for him and walk up the street. Noah's addiction to chocolate milkshakes is insane, and I make sure to feed that addiction as often as my finances allow.

He's waiting for me in his bedroom with his bible notes spread across his bed. The rest of the house is dark. The only light is coming from his nightstand lamp. He leaps off the bed, and I only just manage to set the milkshake down before he's climbing me like an oak tree.

Noah likes to bite. His teeth graze my chin, my cheeks, and my neck. Since I don't have to worry about sporting love bites, he's gotten into the habit of decorating my neck and chest and stomach with them. I give him hickeys all over his ass and thighs, and also on the smooth skin around his cock. He loves them.

"I missed you," he murmurs against my neck.

I laugh. “After only three days?” I love him like this. He’s a fallen angel, and I’m the devil that caused his fall. He’s gotten bolder and bolder these last few months.

“My dick missed you too,” he says.

“I need to suck this fuckin’ dick,” I whisper, brushing my hand over the front of his sweats. He moans into my mouth.

I back him up and drop him onto his bed, pressing him into the mattress. I’m going to fuck this boy so good tonight.

He lifts his hips, pushing into my palm. I press harder, feeling his length. I’ll never get over how hard Noah gets for me.

I slip my hand inside his sweats. Already he’s squirming, lifting his hips for my mouth.

He wants to go fast, but I keep my movements slow. We have all night. I take him into my mouth, losing myself in his unguarded gasps and moans. He sinks his fingers into my hair, pressing; asking for more, rocking forward and upward, his cock deep inside my throat.

I ease back, and when he whimpers, I swallow him again. He’s not having any of my slow vibes. He yanks at my clothes. “Fuck me, Ethan,” he grunts.

I push his study notes to the side, but his bible is underneath his thigh.

“Let’s get all these books out of the way,” I say, lifting myself off him.

“Fuck it, and fuck me, Ethan.”

Fuck, he is so far gone.

So I rock back on my heels with my knees pressing into the mattress. Pulling him up with me, I instruct him to turn around, facing away from me. I slap my hand under his ass, preparing him with lube. Then, I pull him onto my lap, easing my cock into his ass.

With my hand banded around his abdomen, I push upward. Noah gasps, lifting his ass slightly, and then easing back down. We find a rhythm, fucking in short, deep jerks. I run my palm down his chest to stroke his cock. He covers my hand with his, and together we jerk him off while I pump him from behind.

When Noah comes, it’s full and hard and so fucking beautiful. I follow him, pressing up into his ass, loving the way his hole clenches around my cock.

He’s panting. I press soft kisses to his nape.

It’s only then that I notice that Noah’s bible is covered in his semen.

He turns his head back to look at me. He's seen it too, and he's retreating fast. So I do the only thing I can: I take responsibility for this terrible sin Noah can't face. I pick up the bible, swipe my tongue across the cover. Then, I turn Noah's face to mine and kiss him.

The incident with the bible has shaken Noah, but I think his guilt has more to do with how little he cared than how awful it was that he orgasmed on his bible.

He spends even more time praying and studying and preparing his sermons for his youth church, so, I decide to help him with his preparations. It's been a week since the bible incident. We're up on the cliff, and he's making sermon notes while I look up scriptures for him.

"How do you know where to look for each book of the bible?" he asks me, after I find a scripture for him. It's cold outside, with it being mid-November, so we keep the roof of his Mercedes up. We're both crammed at the back.

"My mom taught it to me in a song when I was little." And then I sing it to him. "Gen-UH-sis, Ex-UH-dus, Lev-UH-tic-IS, Nummm-berrrs, Doo-TUH-ron-UH-meee."

It's more than that, actually, but I don't want to taint Noah's world view any more than I already have. I know the bible back to front because I wanted to find this God that allowed her to die.

Noah laughs and pushes my arm. Then, more seriously, he says, "Tell me the truth, Ethan." I stare at him, understanding that he's come to live inside my skin these last few months, and having him sense that there's more to tell isn't anything new anymore. Still, I don't want to tell him.

He sets his notes aside and slides closer to me. Then, he kisses me. "Share with me, Ethan," he whispers against my mouth.

I kiss him back. "It's not that big of a deal."

"Still, let me in."

I let him in. "My mother loved her bible. Reading from it was one of the things I remember most about her. When she died, I wanted to know what it was about this book that she loved so much. So I read the whole thing."

His eyes widen. "The whole thing?"

I laugh. "Yeah, several times."

“What did you find?” Serious again.

“Hmm. Let’s see. Crimes against humanity, manipulation tactics worthy of the most experienced narcissist, and some pie-in-the-sky promises if you believe everything you read. There was also genocide, rape, slavery.”

His face falls, but he doesn’t disagree.

“She died by suicide, Noah.” I don’t know why I tell him this, but it seems important that he know that although she loved God and her bible as much as he does, it still wasn’t enough.

Compassion blooms across his face. I don’t know why that’s so hard to stomach. But still, I talk some more. “She planned it all out. She was going to take me with her.”

The shock on Noah’s face is almost too much to bear. He pulls me into his chest. It’s strange because I’m so big, and he’s trying to fit me into his small body. Somehow, he makes it work, and my head is cradled in his arms against his shoulder.

“Will you tell me about it?” he asks.

I lift my head and tell Noah about Cilla Salvatore’s last act of love. “June 21st. That’s the day she chose.” I speak into his shoulder. “She overdosed on pills. She mixed my juice with poison. I didn’t drink it. I don’t know why.”

He pulls away and takes my face between his palms. “I don’t know what to say, Ethan. I’m so sorry.”

“Sometimes I get scared that one day you’ll feel so helpless in your faith that you’ll—”

I pause, unable to go on.

“I would never leave you like that, Ethan,” he tells me with so much compassion in his eyes.

“You can’t say that, Noah. She was also strong in her faith, like you.” Still, I ask, “Do you promise you would never try to do something like that?”

He kisses my lips. “I promise you.” And after a beat, he says, “I understand why you hate God.”

My lips lift in a half smile. “I don’t hate the concept of a higher power, Noah. I hate how it’s presented and manipulated by people.”

“I’m so jealous of your brain, Ethan. I love the way you think.”

“I’m jealous of you too.”

He looks at me curiously. “What could I possibly have that you would

want?”

I run my fingers down his face lightly. “Your eyes.”

He frowns, but keeps his smile on his face. “My eyes?”

“My mother had gray eyes. I hated—still do—how much I look like my father. I wish I could have had her eyes, at least. And here you are, with eyes like hers. I’m jealous.”

Noah kisses me. “These eyes are yours now. Because *I’m* yours.”

He takes my breath away with his words. “Mine.” I press my lips softly to his eyes.

“I don’t know how to feel about what happened last week,” he says, out of the blue.

I kiss him again. “You’re not trying to disrespect God, Noah. It just happened. We got lost in the moment, and we didn’t move the bible. You don’t have to go to Hell for that.”

“Are you sure?” He asks like my word is final.

“I’m sure.” And then, in an attempt to loosen the thick air, I tell him, “Your turn. Tell me one of your secrets.”

He answers after a long time. “I love my mom too,” he says.

I rub my thumb across his parted lips. “Why is that a secret?” I ask softly.

“She doesn’t deserve love. She was a terrible mother.” Noah’s eyes search mine. “But you still love your mom even after . . .”

“She was hurting, Noah. She did the best she could until she couldn’t anymore. How can I hold that against her?”

“My mom was hurting too. I don’t think she wanted to be the way she was. I think she just got caught up in the drugs and tried to support her habit, and, before she knew it, she was in so deep she couldn’t find her way out.”

How sad we must seem, me and Noah. Sitting up on a mountain talking about our mothers like this.

“Did Evanson tell you she didn’t deserve to be loved?”

He nods, swallowing thickly. I have never seen Noah look so sad. My blood boils. Evanson is the last person who should be talking about who deserves love and who doesn’t. “He didn’t want her to hurt me anymore. He saved me, Ethan.” His eyes search mine. “Didn’t he?”

The truth is, Evanson *did* give Noah a better life than he would have had if he’d stayed with his mother. I understand Noah’s dilemma.

“Not everyone deserves our forgiveness, Noah,” I say. “Some people deserve to die for the things they’ve done, and suffer in whatever afterlife there might be, but . . .” I press my lips to his, hoping to kiss away the anguish he’s allowing me to see. “. . . But sometimes, some people deserve our forgiveness. Maybe your mom deserves your forgiveness, but only you can know that. I know why my mother did what she did. I don’t hate her for it. It’s okay for you to love your mom, even if she wasn’t a perfect human being.”

“I wish I’d known your mom. People at church still talk about her. She sounds like the perfect human being.”

A smile touches my lips. “She was, in many ways. I wish I could do something to keep her memory alive. To keep *her* alive in some way.”

“Something like what?”

“She loved to help people. She had a special love for abused children. I remember her telling Evanson about building a safe house for abuse victims. Maybe I’ll do it for her one day. And, then, she’ll live. She won’t be forgotten.”

He nods and then he tells me, “I want to find my mom one day after she gets out of prison. If I find her, I’ll take you to her. She’ll never replace your mom, but I just know she’ll love you, Ethan.”

“You’ll share your mom with me?” I make light of it, but this is causing hairline cracks in my heart.

“I’ll share anything with you, Ethan.”

“Alright. Enough of all this serious talk. Come here, and let me kiss you.”

I slip my hand between his legs and he hardens for me immediately. Rubbing him through the material of his jeans, I whisper in his ear. “Tell me your dirtiest fantasy, Noah.”

He breaks the kiss and stares at me. His eyes darken, and, fuck me to hell, his eyes tell me he’s got something to say. “Tell me,” I tease.

He shakes his head, and so I seduce him with kisses to his neck and his face and my hand massaging his erect cock. “I’ll tell you mine if you tell me yours.”

He buries his face into the side of my neck. “You first,” he whispers.

I chuckle. “Hmm, I have so many. Let’s see. Okay, so, imagine you’re being a dick about something. We argue, but you won’t shut up so I unzip

my pants, grab you by the back of your head, and shove my dick inside your mouth to shut you up.”

He groans into my neck. “You’d really be so rough with me?”

“Hmm, fuck, yeah. And you’ll like it.”

Noah climbs on top of me, straddling me. “I would.”

Slipping my hands underneath his knitted sweater, I run my palms up his sides. My thumbs brush over his nipples, and he groans.

“Now be a nasty little choir boy, and tell me yours.”

At first he shakes his head, so I tell him to be a good boy and keep his end of the bargain. Still, he hesitates. But then he holds me close, his fingers pressing into the back of my neck, and his mouth near my ear. “I want . . . Ethan . . . I want . . . to . . . I want to . . . fuck . . .”

He can hardly breathe. His words come out in small gasps, and then he finishes his sentence. “Like brothers.”

My stomach drops to the ground, and my dick is so hard I think I’ll explode right here, right now.

What? *Fuck*.

He misinterprets my silence, and tries to shove away from me. We’re in a confined space, so he’s not going anywhere. I yank him back, and bury his face in my neck. The only place he feels safe. “Hmm. I think you’re cheating, Noah, baby, because you chose *lover*, remember?”

He starts to pull away again. I hold him still, biting his shoulder gently. “But, here there’s no shame. I’ll give you anything you want. Now tell me again.”

From that safe place in my neck, he whispers, “I want us to fuck like . . . brothers.”

“Fuck, Noah, that’s so hot.” Who knew incest fantasies could be so fuckin’ *hot*. Who knew I’d uncover some pseudo-incest kink in *Noah*?

He’s still so tense against me, but *fuck*. He’s not going to get away from this. “You want to fuck like *brothers*, Noah?”

He groans. “Yes.” His whisper is muffled against my neck.

“Fuck, baby.”

He pants against my skin, rutting into my hand.

Jesus Christ. “Have you been thinking about us fucking like brothers?”

“Ethan . . .”

This church boy is so fuckin’ hot. “Don’t worry about it, Noah. It’s just your way of showing how close you need us to be. Now come here, Noah,

baby, and let your brother fuck you.”

He groans loudly against my skin, biting down on my neck and sucking so hard it'll leave a mark. It's awkward, but we manage to get one leg of his pants off and my pants to below my ass and in seconds, I'm inside him, all lubed up and we're fucking . . . *like brothers*.

“Give your brother your sweet little hole, Noah. Let your big brother fuck this ass so good for you.”

Fuck, this is so fucking hot.

Noah goes wild, fucking down on my cock with hot, slapping sounds. His ass smacks against my thighs with each bounce. I'm in awe of him. His head is thrown back, his fingers digging into my shoulders, and, fuck if I don't feel like I won the porn lottery, because this man is truly pornographic in the way he's taking my dick. His cock slaps against my stomach and, Jesus Christ, I plow into his ass, lifting my hips, stabbing up into him hard and deep with my granite hard cock.

“Tell me who's fucking you,” I pant with my fingers digging into his hips.

Noah captures his lower lip between his teeth, and with lustful, hooded eyes, he comes closer, lets go of his lip, and steals my lower lip into a bite. He is absolutely gone. “My *brother* is fucking me,” he tells me, his words falling into my mouth on a low growl. And then he blows my brains right out of my head. “And your little brother wants to fucking *come*, Ethan.”

Jesus fucking Christ. If I could, I'd fucking breed him, make my seed live inside him forever. Mark him on the inside as mine too.

I give this hot little cheater every fucking thing.

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CHAPTER 30

Noah

“Noah, honey. Is that you?”

I creep into the house like a criminal. I’m late. Things took a hell of a detour with Ethan, and now I’m fifteen minutes late.

“Yeah, it’s me. Ms. May.”

Ms. May appears in the entrance hall. “Your father’s in a foul mood. Do you know anything about that?”

My heart thumps in my chest. “Uh, no.”

“Well, he asked me to send you to his office as soon as you got in. Whatever it is, you’re the only one he trusts to get it fixed. So, go on up, and I’ll bring you something to eat. I don’t want to keep him waiting, but I also don’t want you to starve.”

“Okay, Ms. May.”

I make my way upstairs, and I can’t help admiring how deliciously sore my ass is. But with each step back into my real world, the warmth from being safe with Ethan begins to recede inch by inch, and when I stand in front of the closed door of my father’s office, I am once again, Youth Pastor Noah Evanson.

I step inside.

He is seated at his desk with his head in his hands. “Sit, Noah,” he says without looking up.

I sit silently. There’s no way he suspects me. I’ve been very careful. It must be something with the church. Maybe the tithes pool has dropped again. That usually puts him in this sort of mood.

When he lifts his face, I’m startled by how disheveled he looks. “Noah,” he says with an authority usually reserved for the delinquents, like Ethan.

“Is everything alright, dad?”

“Well, I’m not sure, Noah.” He runs his hand down his face and leans back in his chair. “I’ve been praying,” he says. “And the Lord has shown me something.”

“Okay. What did He show you?”

“It was a vision, and you know that visions are usually cryptic, and it’s up to us to use discernment to understand the secret things that the Lord

reveals to us.”

Ethan would say that the God of the whole universe shouldn't play games like that with his children.

“What did you see, dad?” I ask with manufactured earnestness.

“Well, Noah. Frankly, it was about you.”

My heart begins to thud in my chest. No. It can't be. What did God tell him? My palms are sweaty. My body pulses from the back of my neck all the way down to the back of my thighs.

“You were lying in a crib. Just a little baby. I had been rocking you to sleep, and I went out for a second to get you a second bottle. When I returned, a dark figure was leaning into your crib. A demon, Noah. A *demon*. I was frozen into place.” He looks at me from across the desk. “I believe the Lord allowed me to be frozen like that so he could open my eyes, and let me see what was happening. If I hadn't been frozen in place, I would have rebuked the demon immediately in the Name of Jesus, so the Lord allowed fear into my heart so I could watch.”

I'm frozen, stuck in this nightmare unfolding before my eyes.

“Now, Noah, what happened next felt like I was being nailed to the cross with Christ all over again.” He stops to study me. I have to say something. He's waiting for me to say something.

“What happened next?” I ask quietly. All I can think about is how God could betray me like this. Ethan would say God is an abuser.

“Noah, the demon picked you up and held you to its chest.”

“And then?” I can't breathe.

“You smiled. You *smiled*, Noah, and you reached for its face like you—like you *loved* it or something.”

Oh. God.

“And then, the demon turned back to look at me. Noah, by the blood of Jesus, spilled on that wretched cross, I'm telling you now, his face was pure evil. Eyes glowing red. A hole where his mouth should have been, but somehow I sensed . . . no, I *saw* that mouth move, and this evil creature smiled at me.”

I'm sick. If I listen to one more word, I'll need to vomit.

“And then he disappeared. He disappeared *with you*, Noah.”

I sit, mute, but never breaking eye contact with him.

“Noah, this is the Word from the Lord that I got after that vision.” He opens his bible, and flips through the pages, licking his fingers every now

and then until he finds his page. “Daniel chapter seven verse fifteen, Noah. This is what it says, ‘And I, Daniel, was aggrieved in my spirit, and in my body, and the visions of my head troubled me’.”

It feels like my soul is breaking. Not just my heart. Not just the joy I find with Ethan. But my very *essence* is being ripped away from me.

“What should we do?” I ask meekly.

“Noah, I figured the dream out. Someone is trying to take you away from me. Someone evil. And the Lord showed this vision to me to prepare me for battle. To protect you.”

He gets up and walks around the desk. Standing in front of me, he holds out his hand. I take it, and he pulls me out of my seat. With his hands clutching my upper arms, he searches my face. I’m terrified. He’ll see everything. I’ll go to hell, but not before I give an account to this man standing in front of me. I don’t know which is worse.

“As a parent, it is my job to protect you, Noah. And I will, at all costs. Now, I need you to tell me, Noah. Have you been doing something that has attracted the devil into your life like this?”

“No, dad.” But what if the Lord shows him the face of the demon?

“Noah, the devil has come, seeking whom he can destroy. Who he can kill,” he says, quoting the scripture. “Tell me, Noah, have you opened any doors where he could enter?”

“No, dad.” It’s a lying whisper.

“I’ve made a few decisions. I’m sending you to Pastor Steiner.”

“What?”

“Yes, it’s the only way. It breaks my heart to do this. I’ll miss you so much, but the Lord has been very clear in his message. You must leave immediately.”

“What about college?”

“London has some of the best bible schools in the world. I’ve already arranged everything with Pastor Steiner. He knows about the vision. He told me the Lord’s hand is upon me, for He has trusted me with such a thing as this.”

Ethan would say this is the worst act of control and religious abuse he’d ever seen, and if I had the courage I would have said the same thing.

“When do I leave?” I ask, instead.

“Day after tomorrow.”

“I’m still busy with the kids for Christmas.” This can’t be happening.

“I know Christmas is a very special time for you and me. It’ll be our first Christmas away from our own home, but I’ll visit you and we can spend Christmas together. I would never, ever allow for us to be apart at Christmas time, so you don’t have to worry about that.”

He gathers some papers from his desk, setting them right. He’s agitated. “I’ve already arranged everything. Jessica will take over from you with immediate effect. I’ve scheduled a meeting for tomorrow morning to let all the leaders know. You and Jessica can get engaged within the next year, and we’ll have the wedding immediately after you two graduate from bible school.”

My life is over. *Ethan*. What will happen to Ethan and me? I need to get to him. He’ll help me figure out what to do.

“I’ve already booked our flight tickets.”

“Our?”

“Yes. I’m flying with you. Just to make sure you’re safe and settled in nicely. It’ll also give me a chance to see Pastor Steiner.”

He returns to his chair and sits down. “Noah, you know that there is a special favor of the Lord on my life. I have a special gift of discernment. Many times I have fallen, but the Lord himself reached down and picked me up—

I WAS THE ONE WHO PICKED YOU UP. A scream sits, lodged inside my throat. It was not *the Lord*. It was *me*. *You’re just trying to avoid taking responsibility for what you did.*

But I remain silent. If the Lord really did reveal the face of the demon, then I don’t know how much harder our father might make Ethan’s life. How could God be so cruel?

“You’re dismissed, Noah. Goodnight, son. I love you.”

“Goodnight, dad. I love you.” I don’t. I *don’t*. Oh God, I don’t.

I hurry to my room.

Sinking to the floor with my back against the door, I text Ethan.

Me: *I need to see you tomorrow. I can get away for a few hours.*

He responds immediately. *It’s getting too cold. I saved some money. I’ll get us a hotel room. There’s a nice one just outside of town. It’s called the Oakwood Inn Express. I told you about it, remember? Do you know it?*

Me: *No, but I’ll put it on the GPS.*

He tells me to have a good night, and I tell him the same. Then I delete the texts and crawl into my bed.

Tomorrow I'll see Ethan at the Oakwood Inn Express, and he'll help me figure this whole thing out.

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CHAPTER 31

Ethan

Noah's car has been taken away. Something's off. I check his text again while I wait for him at the back side of the orchard. *Dad took my car away. Can you pick me up?*

Noah told me to pick him up at 9pm. When I check the time, it's 9:10. A gnawing unease in my gut tells me something isn't right.

He arrives at 9:15, dumping a red Tupperware into my lap. "I brought you some dinner. I had to wait for dad to leave for his visit to the Prestons' house. He left later than I expected." Then he kisses me, hard and sure. I've yet to get a word in.

Noah seems on edge so, after he's sucked inside my mouth sufficiently, I pull away to inspect his face. "Is everything okay?"

He shakes his head, his eyes cast downward. When he looks at me again, there are tears in his eyes. Panic invades my body. "Noah, did something happen?"

"Just get me out of here, Ethan. I'll tell you everything when we get to the Oakwood Inn."

"Are you in some kind of trouble? You're starting to scare me, Noah." I put the car into ignition and head toward the highway, casting my eyes in his direction every few seconds.

"No. I don't think so."

"What the fuck does that mean, Noah." My voice booms, and he looks at me, surprised. I've never scolded him before. "I'm sorry."

"It's dad."

"What about him?"

"He had a—a vision."

"A fucking what?" I know exactly what he's talking about. Although I've known and seen with my own eyes this kind of delusion many times in my life, I still can't stomach the fact that Noah is one of those people swept up in these ridiculous things. Because if it were true that God gave visions to people, he sure as hell wouldn't have given them to our father, of all people in the world.

“He said he had a vision of me in a crib, and some dark figure—a demon—came to the crib and picked me up, and took me away.”

I remember enough of my mother’s diary to understand how to interpret these ‘visions’. Who is the one person trying to steal Noah away from his faith? From his father? From his life?

“He knows,” I breathe. My mind races back to our first night together. The Mercedes that had passed me when I parked outside my apartment building. He knows. Evanson *knows*.

“If he knows then why hasn’t he come out and asked me? Or you? He would have confronted you if he knew. But God must have told him if his vision is so accurate, right?”

I sneer. “I don’t know, but, if this bullshit is true, then *God* is nothing but a fucking sadist.”

I turn off the highway, making several turns until the Oakwood Inn Express’ lit-up sign comes into view. “We need to be more careful, Noah.” It almost makes it past my lips to tell him that this might be our cue to stop, but I just can’t. It’s been nearly six months. It feels like it’s been forever, and, yet, even that feels like it’s not enough.

I pull into the parking space closest to the entrance. The weather has gone to shit. “You okay to go inside?” I ask.

He nods, and reaches for the door. I exit on my side and fuck—

The wind unleashes a howl, slapping us with its iciness. I round the bumper to get to Noah, and that’s when I see he has only a jersey on. “Jesus, Noah. Where’s your jacket?”

I yank open the back door and grab my jacket. “Here put this on.”

He takes the jacket from me, but the wind whooshes down just as he reaches for it, and the jacket flies out of his hand. He tries to run after it, but it’s long gone. I grab his hand and pull him to the door of the hotel. “I’ll lend you mine,” I say, taking my jacket off. He stops me. “No, Ethan. It must be on the lawn. Let me just—”

We’re standing on the threshold. The front desk is empty. “Don’t worry about it, Noah. Come inside where it’s warm.”

He hesitates, looking back. And then he allows me to pull him into the warmth of the hotel, stopping to kiss him softly. Then, I pick up a key with the number on it from the desk, and we head to the third floor.

Inside, I kiss him against the door. The cold is no longer a problem. Fire blazes in our blood, engulfing us in its flames.

We can figure out our father's vision later. For now, it's just us. Me and Noah. Brothers. Lovers.

He cups my face between his palms, his lust tampered down by so much sadness in his eyes. "Ethan, dad said one more thing about the vision." I hate that he's brought it up again, but Noah doesn't waste his words. If he wanted to say it, it must be important.

"He—he said I smiled at the demon like I—like I . . . loved it."

A lump clogs my throat. "Maybe it loved you too," I say, my voice broken because if this vision is true, then what chance do we have? What chance did we ever have? Evanson will destroy us.

I make love to him, loving every inch of his body, and he does the same. He touches me with a sureness that makes my chest swell with pride for how confident he is these days. His fingers trail up and down my body as naturally as if we were both carved from the same piece of rock. His lips on mine, and then those lips following his fingers, he takes me into his mouth. He explores my cock with his tongue, touching me in places I've only dreamed about. And then, he takes me into his body. Slow and so beautiful. Flesh rubbing against flesh, with nothing between us.

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CHAPTER 32

Noah

We lie wrapped in each other's arms afterward like old lovers. As if, we'll soon get up, shower together, and then go to our kitchen downstairs and make something to eat.

My heart aches for what tomorrow will bring. Ethan is waiting for me to tell him what happened, but I don't want to contaminate our time together just yet. This will be our last time together. I can't bear the thought that it's come to this.

"I wish I could go to a pride parade," I tell him softly, my words falling on his chest, where my head rests. A few months ago I organized and attended a Jesus parade with rot in my heart for the way we undermined the significance of pride parades taking place across the country.

He shifts to look at me. Ethan's gentleness is sometimes painful to accept. He truly is his mother's son. "What else do you wish for?"

"I wish I could wear a jockstrap." I laugh, despite the heaviness in my heart.

Ethan groans and kisses me. "Ah, fuck, Noah. What an image to put inside my head."

I desperately want to keep this moment. "I wish I could drink alcohol and get drunk and have sex while I'm intoxicated," I whisper in his ear.

"Hmm. Shut the fuck up, Noah, baby. Or I'm going to have to make all your wishes come true." He kisses me deeply, his hands squeezing my ass.

"What we have, it's magic, Ethan," I tell him.

"Yes. We're magic together, Noah, baby."

I press my body closer to his, kissing him back, but after a while, with my broken heart, I pull back and I tell him why I needed to see him tonight.

He doesn't explode like I thought he would. Instead, his heartbreak shines in his eyes. Defeat clouds his beautiful face, but he doesn't fight it.

"He knows, Noah. We should be glad this is all he's doing."

"Let's run away together," I tell him desperately.

"For how long, Noah, baby? And, in any case, that's no way to live. I'd rather stay and fight and fall than run away."

"So are you saying I should just go?"

“Yes. It’s the only way for you to be safe. For now. I’ll protect you at all costs, Noah. There’s nothing I won’t do to keep you safe.”

“How will I live without you, Ethan?”

“You will live, Noah. One way or another, you’ll live.”

We get up, hesitant to get changed because being fully clothed would mean it’s time to leave. Ethan pulls on his jeans and sits on the edge of the bed. I slip on my pants. “Come here,” he tells me quietly. He pulls me to sit between his legs on the bed, my back to his chest. He rests his chin on my shoulder, his palms moving gently over my stomach and chest. I turn my head to the side to kiss him. My vision blurs with my tears. “You are not a demon, Ethan, but, if that vision is true, then I love that demon. I have never loved anything more.”

He trails the pad of his thumb across my bottom lip. “And the demon loves the child in the crib, Noah, baby. More than anything in this world.”

My tears fall, and Ethan catches my sadness in his soft kisses. His lips press gently over my eyes, over my cheekbones and down my cheeks, making sure not one of my tears is lost.

“For now, let the child sleep, Noah, baby. Maybe one day the demon will come and steal him away.”

“Maybe the child will grow up and go looking for it,” I whisper.

He smiles and presses his lips to mine. “I love you, Noah. You are the greatest love of my life.”

I cry into his neck, desperate to prolong this time together. If I’d had the strength to speak, I would have told him again how much I love him too. But by the time I gather my strength, and chase away my tears, it’s too late.

The door swings open

Our world implodes.

Our beautiful thing is destroyed.

CHAPTER 33

Ethan

It happens too fast. The kind of fast where if someone asked you later to recount the moments leading up to, and the moments after that crucial moment where everything fucked off to hell, you wouldn't be able to tell them. There'd be gaps in your memory because your brain simply hadn't had enough time to process everything.

At first, we're getting ready to leave. We can't stop kissing because this is our last moment together. I call Noah to sit between my legs on the bed. My arms are banded around his bare stomach. My mouth on his shoulder and his head tilted back. We couldn't have looked more like lovers if we'd tried.

That's what Great Pastor Evanson saw when he barged through the door, his face red as a beet and twisted in the most vile kind of fury I had ever seen on another person's face.

I allow one single second of unparalleled terror and another second on behalf of Noah, and then I grind my molars and steel myself. This is Pastor John Evanson. Universal cunt and hypocritical bitch of the centuries. I'm not afraid of him.

But Noah's vibrating body, still trapped in my arms, is a problem I can't solve by telling this fucking asshole to fuck off. Each breath from Noah is an audible gasp of unadulterated terror.

"Noah," Evanson rasps. "It's not your fault. Come here. Get away from him." He holds out his hand.

The next moments will also likely be nothing but holes in my memory when I look back on it years from now. One minute Noah is frozen into me, and the next, his flight responses kicks into high gear. Almost instantly, he's across the room, hurtling toward Evanson with my shirt and car keys clutched in his hand. But he doesn't stop. He pushes past Evanson, bolting out of the room.

In a way, it's good, having Noah out of the way. Maybe he'll wait in the car. Evanson doesn't go after him. It's an unexpected but welcome move.

Since Noah fled with my t-shirt, I grab the discarded jacket from the floor and rise to my feet, giving Evanson my full height. "Don't touch him,"

I say, my voice laced with quiet venom.

He laughs. A cold, maniacal laugh. “I finally got you,” he snarls. I school my features immediately, denying him a reaction.

He comes closer. “Do you think I came here alone? Officer Purnell is in the parking lot.”

My mask slips. What is this cunt talking about?

“Did you really think I’d let you get away with it? Did you really think I’d let you destroy his life with your *filth*?”

Screeching tires.

My head swings in the direction of the sound. Evanson turns too. I know the sound of my car.

The next few moments will also leave holes in my memory. A crunching *bang* vibrates through the air and I move.

Shoving past Evanson, I take the stairs three at a time. Evanson is behind me. An elderly woman is half blocking the door. I push past her, flying out into the cold, black night. I’m barefoot.

“Noah,” I scream.

Somewhere the woman from inside is talking. I can’t hear her. I’m underwater, and all I can hear are muffled screams. I’m running. There’s a tree just up the street. A lamp post. And my car. Crumpled.

“*Noah*.” Is that me screaming? No. Evanson. It’s Evanson. Just as I reach the crumpled heap of metal that Noah and I had sat in two hours earlier, I’m hauled back. My arm twisted behind me and I’m flung to the ground. A knee pressing into my neck. And the muffled voices.

“*Sodomy*.”

“*Get him out of here*.”

“*Book him, Purnell*.”

“Noah,” I scream, trying to pick my head up. I’m slammed back into the cold earth. Chunks of dirt get caught in my mouth, but I don’t care.

I’m cuffed and hauled to my feet.

Miranda Rights? He’s reading me my fucking *rights*? What the fuck is going on here? I’m shoved into the back of a squad car. An ambulance siren flits through the air. Far away but close enough to know that what is happening is real. It’s *fucking real*.

I fight, screaming like a mad man. “What the fuck are you doing? Purnell, what the fuck are you doing? That’s Noah in that car. That’s my car, and *Noah* is in it.”

“You need to calm down,” Purnell tells me and he shuts the door. The windows are up. I can’t stick my head out. I’m locked inside this motherfucking cop car and I can’t get out.

My heart hammers in my head. The blue and red ambulance lights flicker in the distance. Maybe it’s not Noah. Noah ran out into the street, trying to get home. Someone tried to steal my car. Someone else is in that car. Someone else is crushed in the front seat of my mother’s car. I don’t care if it’s a young father with small children. Just please, *please*, don’t let it be Noah.

An ambulance comes wailing up the street and stops by the tree. Within seconds, a stretcher is wheeled out and there are so many people around I can’t see anything. I yank at the cuffs. It’s no use.

Officer Purnell returns to the car and I shiver with fear. “Is it Noah?” I demand. He doesn’t answer. “Is it Noah?” I scream right into his ear.

He turns around. “Your father was right about you from the start. What you’ve done to Noah . . .” His mouth turns downward. “Special place in hell for people like you.”

He starts the engine and takes off. Tears stream down my face.

“Noah,” I scream. Banging my forehead against the window, I scream. Again and again and again. “*Noahhhhh. Noahhhhh.*” As we pass the crash site, my head explodes. Someone is on the stretcher.

“Is it Noah?” I scream at Purnell, banging my cuffed wrists against his headrest.

“Yes, it’s Noah.”

“Stop the car,” I beg. “Officer Purnell, please. Stop the car. Let me check that he’s okay.”

“You don’t need to worry about that. You’ve got your own problems to deal with.”

He increases speed, and I swing my head back, banging on the window. “Stop the car. Stop the car. Stop the car. *STOP THE FUCKING CAR, PURNELL.*” In my rational mind, I know it’s useless, but I simply cannot accept that this is happening. I’m so out of my depth. I don’t know what’s going on.

I still don’t believe any of it when I’m booked without a word and shoved into a room. I don’t have any shoes on. The room is cold.

I don’t know how much time has passed. *Fuck*, I should have counted the minutes as soon as we left the hotel.

I sit there, still handcuffed. I've lost my mind several times already. Shouting for someone to get in here and tell me what's going on.

"Where's Noah?" I scream through the door. "Did he make it to the hospital?" Over and over I scream but no one comes.

I sink to the floor. Then, mangled, mindless screams for Noah. No one fucking comes. So, I pray. I pray a hundred prayers to Noah's God, my mother's God, to please save Noah.

When the door finally swings open at some point, I shoot up and then stop short.

Evanson stalks into the room.

"Where's Noah?" I demand. "What happened to Noah?"

He seethes across the table. His chest heaves and his clothes are disheveled. He looks like he walked through a hurricane.

Purnell comes rushing in. "You're not supposed to be in here, Pastor."

"I just want five minutes with my son."

"No, Pastor. I can't allow that. Especially under these circumstances. Now, please let me do my job."

Evanson turns to Purnell. "Nothing's going to happen, Officer. How long have you known me? Just give me five minutes."

Purnell backs away. "I'm going to trust you, Pastor, 'cos you never gave me a reason not to, but I'll be in here at the first sign of trouble." He shuts the door behind him on his exit.

I hate this power dynamic but I have to play into it. I need to know what happened to Noah. "I'll do anything; just tell me Noah is okay."

He sneers. "Anything?"

"Anything." I'm shaking.

"Here's the deal. I'll ask you a set of questions. You answer with, *I did*, and, when the officers ask you these same questions, you'll answer in the exact same way. Then, they'll offer you some paperwork, and you'll sign every last page. Do you understand?"

My blood boils. "Yes," I answer.

"You groomed Noah since he was thirteen years old."

I stare at him, stunned. My answer is automatic. "No."

He gets up and leans his knuckles on the desk, glaring at me over it. "He is on life support. I am his legal guardian. Only I get to decide whether to pull the plug. And right now, all of it depends on the words that come out of your mouth. Because as God is my witness, I'll not let him wake up to what

you've done. I'll not let you make a fool out of me twice."

"You're sick," I whisper.

"Sick is thinking you'd get away with these homosexual atrocities. You're a *pedophile*." His spit lands on my cheek. I lift my shoulder to wipe it away.

"You'd rather have him dead than . . . ?" I stop. I can't out Noah. Fuck. Fuck. I switch gears. "You know the truth," I say carefully. It's neither a question nor a statement. It's more like baiting him, trying to get him to say it first.

He straightens. We're the same height so other than the hatred gleaming in his eyes, there's nothing intimidating about him.

I push. "You knew all along."

"What I knew all along was that you groomed Noah."

"You didn't have any visions," I spit out.

A flash of pride passes over his face. Oh, God. This man, who drove my mother to her death, is pure evil.

"You made up a story and made him think God told you." I can't believe this.

All he does is smile.

"You followed me on the night the summer camp started," I breathe. This man has known all along. "How did you find us today?" I have to keep him talking even if I don't know what good it will do.

"Everybody talks about how smart you are, Ethan, but how smart can you be if you haven't figured it out. It's basic technology. I tracked his phone. I just had to wait for the right moment to get you and I did." His smile disappears. "You groomed my son," he spits out.

My heart is a jackhammer in my chest. I don't know what I'm doing. But he'll pull the plug if I don't agree. And if Noah survives, he'd make Noah's life such a living hell Noah might choose to end his own life, like my mother did.

"I did," I whisper.

"You got Noah to trust you enough to go with you to a hotel."

My hands shake inside my cuffs. "I did."

"Inside the hotel, you sexually assaulted him."

Everything inside me dies. No. There must be another way. "Nothing happened between us," I say.

"I've already pulled the security tape—"

Has *that* much time passed?

“— and it’s clear as daylight, you can be seen pulling him into the hotel. It’s clear he was resisting you.”

I start to explain about the jacket but . . . I can’t out Noah. No matter what, it’s not my secret to tell. And I’d promised to protect him at all costs. Isn’t this *all costs*? And he’s not here to defend or protect himself.

“He was crying when I got into that room. You hurt him.”

I shake my head. Noah’s tears were for us. Me and him.

“Inside the hotel, you sexually assaulted him,” Evanson grinds out again.

I was destined for this kind of life anyway. What difference does it make? I hadn’t expected much more out of life.

“Inside the hotel, I sexually assaulted him,” I whisper.

Evanson grins a sickening, wicked grin. “I told you I’d get you, Ethan. I promised on Priscilla’s grave, I’d get you, and I did.”

“Don’t you say her name,” I shout, launching at him.

Purnell is on me like he flew right through the wood in the door. I fight while I’m down and Purnell works hard to keep me to the ground.

“He won’t get away with it, Officer Purnell.” Evanson steps over my head and walks out.

The officers tell me if I plead not guilty I’ll go to trial, and I’ll lose because they have enough evidence. If I admit to the crime, they’d be able to get me a good deal. I don’t even care that I haven’t been offered a lawyer.

I get a phone call. I call Jono and tell him what I told the police. He doesn’t believe a word I’m saying, and I almost cry. I make him promise to check on Noah.

I ask for the deal. They ask me a set of questions. I answer with “I did.” Then, I’m handed a stack of papers and all I can think about it is how bad my handwriting is when I write my statement and how my signature bears my mother’s name.

The best human being on earth, and her last name is being scratched across a stack of police documents.

I sure did make my mother proud.

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PART TWO

Five years later

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CHAPTER 34

Ethan Salvatore

The highway creeps into view, traffic crawling like a funeral procession.

I take the Manhattan Bridge toward Brooklyn. Just like any other fucker living in New York for more than five minutes, I hate the traffic, and the Manhattan Bridge Lower Roadway doesn't disappoint—it's all slow and steady, and poor visibility.

This rotten Tuesday morning seems like a good day for the snow to announce its arrival—a little later and a little lighter than last year, but what the fuck. God could do whatever the hell he wanted. *The perfect start*, they all say, to the world-famous Christmas in New York, and magic and splendor and shit that everybody tweets about every fucking year.

It's only mid-November, but let's act like Christmas is *tomorrow* and not a whole six fucking weeks away.

Spoiler: I hate winter along with all its associations, including Christmas. Call me The Grinch and I'll like it.

I ease my Bugatti Veyron Super Sport into traffic. Even cruising, it sounds like a fuckin' F16 jet plane I'm not even kidding. It's no 2002 Toyota Camry, but I like it all the same.

I switch on my headlights and turn up the heat. The glove compartment calls like a little bitch in heat, and the sound coming out of my mouth is a real, live growl. Sitting in the glove compartment since Saturday night is a pack of Marlboros. Still sealed, if you can believe it (score for Salvatore). I haven't touched those hateful little fuckers in thirty-six hours, but cold winter days really do it for me.

I reach into the glove compartment, pull out the pack, and light one up. After the first drag I lower my hand and glare at the smoke between my thumb and index finger. Then, with a sigh of small victories, I pinch off the burning end and throw the thing into the ashtray. I've been trying to give it up for the last few years. Back in the day, I gave it up for nearly six months.

But it's a cold winter's day, and the victory doesn't last long. Ten seconds later the smoke is dangling from my lips, and I'm sucking all that black, clogging nicotine into my lungs.

My phone lights up on the passenger seat. A text from Ms. May—a good morning message written against a background of flowers, as usual. I'll respond later. It's the same awkward, elephant-in-the-room, circle we'd danced around these last three years:

Good morning, Ethan

Good morning, Ms. May

Have a good day, Ethan.

Thank you, Ms. May. You too.

We don't talk about the past. She knows about the sexual assault charge that was brought down from a possible fifteen years to five because of a plea deal. She says she never believed a word of it, but I know it couldn't have been easy to keep any doubts away. Ms. May must have wondered.

Mr. Tom, who also checks up on me from time to time, just shook his head when he visited me in prison, never saying if he believed it or not.

My father and the police department and the courts kept everything quiet. My father managed to get Noah's records sealed, even though he was already an adult. When I hacked into the police files later, I found out that the reason had been that Noah was entering full-time ministry, and a scandal would severely compromise his ability to contribute to restoring the morals of this country. While it had become common knowledge that I'd sexually assaulted someone, Noah was never mentioned as the victim.

According to Jono, Ms. May had been beside herself, with Noah in hospital and me in prison.

My phone flashes again. Florence Greyson.

I'm tempted to ignore it, because I don't know if I can handle another "*just checking in*" conversation with my extremely competent (but today extremely irritating) secretary.

She's been calling since six a.m., busy rearranging my life to accommodate an onsite meeting that had to get pulled forward three days for a yet-to-be-disclosed reason. Florence is as efficient as they come, however, and I've learned to trust her shuffling and reshuffling of my professional life.

I put her on speaker.

Florence wants to confirm—for the second time this morning—that I would not, in fact, be attending a meeting at my office on Little West 12th but rather an onsite meeting at the corner of Third Ave and Third Street near the Gowanus Canal. In this weather, it would be better to drive toward

Flatbush Avenue and then to Nevin Street, and don't forget to take the left at Atlantic Avenue. And please be careful on Third Avenue, because there are some ice patches near the intersection.

I distinctly remember telling her earlier this morning that I would follow her orders exactly and that I would be sure to watch for the ice patches. I assure her once more.

As soon as she seems satisfied that I've followed her orders exactly, I add, "Give me five minutes. I'm on the bridge."

The tightness in her voice when she replies, "Yes, Ethan," causes me to roll my eyes. I can almost see Florence's eyes narrow in that scolding way of hers that makes you think about that cute little teacher you had in middle school. The one you thought would let you get away with murder, only to realize you were better off with Lizzy The Lunatic Lunch Lady.

Florence is the cute little teacher who won't let you get away with anything.

Anyway, Florence knows it should take me at least fifteen minutes to get to the safe house from the highway. But good ol' Ms. Greyson-from-Wyoming doesn't appreciate the beauty and effectiveness of defensive driving.

"I'm coming 'round the back," I say, and then I hang up before she can get a chance to read me the riot act, because she's convinced I've broken every traffic law known to man this morning alone.

Someone might think it's rude to hang up on Florence like that, but it must be understood that Florence is a stickler for rules in a way that drives me insane. If you give her an inch, she'll go a mile trying to teach you a life lesson of the, "*let's just do it the right way*" variety.

She'd be devastated to learn that there's no such thing as *the right way*.

Luckily for Florence, she's not the one who signed on the dotted line of several multi-million dollar security contracts with the US government.

When I sent myself marching into the slammer for sexual assault ('*SODOMY, Officer Purnell. I saw it with my own eyes. It's SODOMY*'), I knew for sure my life was over, but, where there's a will, there's a way. Satan never leaves his own to suffer for too long. I managed to get Jono and me a lifetime deal from right inside prison.

The National Security Agency paid their weight in gold, as did the Defense Intelligence Agency. There isn't a price high enough to pay for code breaking or code making when it comes to demystifying foreign

intelligence or strengthening the cyber borders that protect U.S government information systems.

I am a master of both.

While citizens protest on the streets, crying out against data breaches, invasion of privacy, and the like, the rest of the world's governments ram into our invisible borders on a daily basis. I'm all about protecting people from themselves. Sometimes people do stupid things because they trust implicitly. They trust their international allies, friends, neighbors, pastors. And they pay dearly, one way or another.

So, I'm the guy creating the technology that analyzes complex data and technical intelligence. I'm the guy writing code that tracks and analyzes phone records, bank transactions, phone calls, and emails of almost every president and prime minister in the world.

Fuck the privacy laws. No head of state touches down on American soil without every single movement being tracked, intercepted, and analyzed. UN Summit? You better believe Salvatore Technologies' cyber presence in New York City is spreading out like a fuckin' epidemic.

Poor Florence. No point in letting her see the brutality required in defending national security. No point in showing the American people that, despite the shit shows currently playing across this land of the free, our government is a motherfuckin' *beast* that fights hard and dirty and lashes back without mercy when its borders and its people are threatened. Money well spent.

You could say I left prison with a little aggressive patriotism.

The bridge starts to calm down a little as the road curves northwest. I increase speed to about thirty miles per hour—a disgrace to a car that can do over two-fifty—but it's just as well because by the time I spot the rotten old brown Toyota, I'm inches away from its tail light. First, there's nothing and then, *BAM!*

The thing comes out of nowhere, and there's only enough time to brake hard and veer left. I'm within the speed limit, but thirty miles in a fuckin' Bugatti is still pretty fuckin' fast. Getting out of the way in time is no small task. And don't forget the brisk fall of snow out there.

Then, the Toyota switches lanes.

What the fuck?! This fucking prick is trying to overtake me. I blast the horn of the two-point-seven-million-dollar vehicle with the jet engine that can go two-hundred-and-fifty fucking miles per hour and curse colorfully:

*What the fuck is wrong with you, asshole.
Get the fuck off the motherfucking road, bastard.
Fucking insolent cunt.
Un-fucking-believable.
And so on.*

I change gears, and the Bugatti roars ahead (no ice patches, I'm not at the intersection yet). I hope the jet sounds scare the fuck out of the Toyota prick and that someone would get that rotten piece of shit off the roads fast, along with its driver.

Five minutes later, I pull into the parking lot of what used to be a shoe factory and coast toward the back where Florence is waiting for me. The place was in an awful state when we acquired it—dilapidated, abandoned for the last twenty years or so—but it had the square footage we needed. We've done a good job restoring it, and we should be ready in three days for the first load. *Load*. Fuck, I hate that word.

I pull the car into one of the parking spaces close to the back entrance and collect my phone and smokes from the passenger seat. Sliding out of the car, I make my way quickly toward the building that will soon be *Cilla's House*.

Florence is hurrying toward me from the left entrance. She's a picture of professional elegance, from the tablet resting on her left arm to the black rimmed glasses sitting on her tiny little nose to the perfectly cut black suit she has on today. If there was sun today, it would have caught hints of red in her dark brown hair. Florence looks older than her twenty-six years. It hardly seems possible that three short years ago she was a frightened little rabbit fresh out of the red state with the biggest crush on her new employer. I'd let her down gently.

Florence knew about as much about being an assistant as I knew about having one, so, we went about it with a great deal of uncertainty, but, eventually, we made it to the other side of the boss/assistant relationship unscathed. My preference for well, *dick*, never came between us, and we've remained the dynamic duo ever since.

It took the first half of that first year, but at some point I stopped trying to pretend I was a boy scout who didn't know any curse words. Florence became the caring, scolding secretary I needed.

She reaches me, and I immediately notice her grim expression. Now, Florence is a stern looking individual usually—she has the most pleasantly

unsmiling face. Today, however, her eyes are darting in every direction but mine, and her lips are pursed severely.

I frown as a warning sound goes off in my head like a clanging cymbal, and, now, I'm massively suspicious of the 6 a.m. phone calls.

She hands me my jacket—the one I'd demanded back from the dry cleaners last week only to realize I hadn't given it to her in the first place. I shrug into the jacket because the steady fall of snow seems to be making its way determinedly toward a blizzard. The bite of the cold is familiar, and I shove down old memories of cold winter days, of a sweet, little church boy with beautiful, gray eyes and a soft laugh.

Florence greets me. "Ethan."

I return the greeting with a dip of my head.

She takes my keys and iPhone, and we make our way back toward the building. As we walk, Florence tells me that Sarah Gilbert, the project manager who'll be overseeing this project, is already present.

Florence tells me she thinks I'll be happy with the progress they've made with the building, but she wanted me to come through for a personal inspection. I already know all that Florence is rattling off right now. I don't know if she believes it, but I always read her prep memos beforehand. And I received her updated memo for this meeting at six o'clock this morning. But I listen anyway, because I like the effort.

I am Innocent will be the first project undertaken by The Salvatore Foundation through *Cilla's House*.

This is how I deal with all the shit I come from. For a moment, my mind stays on *Cilla's House* and so I don't pay much attention to Florence's sneaky little glances up at me at first. As she speaks, I find her eyes darting up every so often. Now, you'd have to know Florence to understand why those sneaky little glances are starting to bother me so much.

Why is Florence acting like a nervous, little school girl?

I'm not much of a *manager*, because I don't usually like people, and I don't like that whole idea of managing people, but I've had to learn a few things since falling into this whole international business life. I try to be nice to Florence as often as possible, but, at the moment, she's talking the biggest load of shit I've ever heard:

"There's been a logistical oversight, Ethan, which means you'll have to approve at least the right wing and south facing part immediately," she says. And as the words tumble out of her mouth, every feature of her face turns

downward. She had the same face when I fetched her from the vet that one time when they had to put her little poodle down.

I stop cold, and Florence has to backpedal a little to avoid slamming into my back.

Immediately? She might as well have released a wrecking ball into my chest from fifty feet away. I turn to face her, a thunderstorm brewing across my face, and my mind already in overdrive. *That* wasn't in her little fucking memo that I got at six o'clock this fucking morning.

"We're almost ready. I just need you to put some pressure on the furniture company. Our furniture was due for delivery two days from now, and they're saying the earliest they can do it is tomorrow morning. We need that furniture within the next four hours.

No. *Say it ain't so, Joe.*

"And if you can authorize the payment for the catering service for the next few days, I would appreciate that. The kitchen is ready, but our kitchen staff can only get here tomorrow," Florence says, and she sounds like she's suddenly lost both her lungs. I stare at her. My head spins. Florence rushes in when she sees she's not getting much of a reaction.

"The cleaning staff is on their way. They're sending extra hands, and they promised to have everything cleaned in two hours. We're battling a terrible stench on the left side, so the maintenance team is already here to deal with it. Luckily, the kids won't be anywhere near that side, so we can keep working there, even after the kids arrive."

I tune out. Florence is rambling.

She bites her lip—to keep it from trembling in terror, I'm sure—because, firstly, the cleaning staff isn't due for another two fucking days. Kitchen staff have all signed contracts to start in three days, and, help me God, what in the fucking hell does *logistical oversight* mean?

Before I allow myself to blow a gasket, I clear my throat, and ask in my most polite tone, "Florence, what in Christ's name are you talking about?" Not a single curse. Colossal effort, but I manage.

Florence pulls her upper lip into her mouth. I watch her sharp intake of breath with some degree of amusement. Florence has never messed up. Not once. She lets out that breath.

"Paul Sanders forgot to inform NY Safehaven that seven trafficked children will be arriving at their premises this afternoon. They filled up their space just this morning. They don't have space for us. The social

workers overseeing the transit are on their way to *Cilla's House*. I offered several hotels as options, but the team bringing the children is not prepared to put the kids up in hotels. Not enough privacy.”

It all comes out like one long sentence, and, when she's done, she looks at the ground again, as if the answers to this fuck-up might be somewhere in the cracks on the concrete. She's nervous. And this makes *me* nervous.

“When are the children arriving?” I ask tightly. “How much time do we have?”

“Four hours.”

“Jesus *Christ*.”

“I'm sorry, Ethan,” she says after a long pause.

I run my hand down my face. Fuck it all to hell. If it's one thing I'd come to hate about *managing people*, it's this no-eye contact apology. If someone told me ten years ago that one day I'd have a job that involved managing people I would have said put a bullet in my head. All this managing people shit is Jono's job. That's why he got the title of *Chief Executive Officer*, and I begged for *Chief Technology Officer* because, well, I wanted to manage *technology*. Not people.

But even I had to face the fact that my first philanthropic work undertaken in my personal capacity meant managing people.

I unclench my jaw. I make this conscious effort of the unclenching of the fucking jaw because Florence had once told me that, when I clench my jaw, I look like I might hurt someone. I have an *angry* face, apparently. I wasn't always like that. Two years in prison for a crime you didn't commit will do that to you, I guess, but, of course, that is all highly classified information, and not something Florence would ever get to know. Making deals with the government has its perks. Cleaning up your criminal record is one of them. Being presented to the world as a squeaky clean genius is another.

Anyway, I don't like the idea of looking like some kind of monster when I'm angry, and I believe Florence because she always tells me the truth. And this isn't her fault, even if she always assumes responsibility for every aspect of my work life.

I loosen my fucking jaw. I'm going to rip Paul Sanders' face off. I should have fired that fucking idiot months ago. “Where the fuck—?” My filthy mouth is old news to Florence, and she cuts in quickly.

“Paul is in Italy with his girlfriend.”

I turn to Florence with a look of such incredulity, she steps back. “He proposed to her this weekend,” she adds, as if *that* bit of information is going to help Paul Sanders' gross negligence case at all.

I switch gears. “Where's Daniel Salisbury?” *That* fucker was one of the Department of Social Services project managers and came highly recommended by Sarah Gilbert. He'd had a problem with punctuality before, and I'm yet to see the spark that Sarah had told me about.

“He called about five minutes ago.” Another intake of breath. “He's running late.”

Strike two for the social services loser. “Get HR on the phone. Schedule a meeting with Paul for the first day he's back.”

Florence nods and pulls out her cell phone.

“Then, get Daniel on the phone. Tell him to turn around and fuck off back to Social Services.” I know my tone is clipped, but I'm so fucking mad I don't care at the moment. Tomorrow, I'll buy Florence a licorice latte and a dozen cupcakes—six red velvet and six harvest apple. She'll complain it's too much sugar, then she'll say *thank you, apology accepted, but we'll probably do this next month again*, and I'll feel like less of an asshole.

The soft flakes of snow land on my face and seep into my already cold bones. I start walking again, trying to keep her role in this whole thing in perspective.

Florence struggles to keep in step. But my mind is racing so she'd better keep up. I had been clear in my instructions: make sure everything is ready before the children arrive. How hard could that have been?

I'm so fucking pissed. Florence knows it, and she's all over it like a bad rash.

I open the door, hold my hand out for Florence to enter first, and follow her inside. She connects to Daniel as we head to the back of the building, to a small area the previous owner had once used as a boardroom.

Florence lets Daniel have it as soon as he picks up. Daniel must have fought her because, she ends the call with a passionate, “No. This project is far too important for you to behave so carelessly. This is it for you.” She disconnects the call.

“What about our volunteers?” I ask. “Will they be ready at such short notice?”

It sounds like it's too f—too *damn* late. That's why the fucking Head of fucking Logistics needed to get his shit together before he went fucking around in Italy with the bonus money he obviously didn't fucking deserve. Jesus, I need to breathe. I'm gonna fire that fucker, for sure.

“Two of our temporary volunteers can start immediately. They'll be here shortly. They'll help this afternoon, and they'll stay on for four weeks. The rest will join us in two days. It's the earliest they could do for us, because they're all finishing up at other facilities. I have an ad out for more volunteer staff.”

This human being needs a bonus.

“For the temp volunteers, I'll just need you to give one of them a letter of recommendation afterwards,” she adds.

I raise an eyebrow. Since when do I give out *recommendations*?

She grins. “It's tough out there, Ethan. People need to work. I'll prepare the documents for you. She recently graduated with a degree in Social Work, and a recommendation from you will go a long way in securing employment.”

Fair enough. “And the other one?”

“A regular humanitarian. Demure character. I don't think that one needs a letter of recommendation. I'll try and keep them on longer if they don't find regular work after Christmas.”

“We have only a few hours. Are you sure we'll make it?” I ask, finally showing the real emotion behind the fury of moments ago. Because *that* is the bottom line—are we going to give these kids a safe place to sleep tonight?

“Yes, Ethan. The two people we have coming in today will be enough for the moment. I knew you'd be upset about the mix up with the dates. I just need your help in getting the furniture here so the kids can sleep comfortably, and I wanted you to take a look at the place before they arrive.”

“We'll get the furniture.”

“Thank you, Ethan. Do you want to meet the volunteers while you're here?” she asks.

“No.”

“Not even the one who needs the recommendation?”

“Yes.”

“Are you sure?”

I give her a look. “Florence, do you want me to meet the volunteer?”

She grins. “Yes please. Just the one who needs the recommendation. She asked if she could meet you.”

“Okay, fine.” Since I’m going to be giving out a recommendation, and all that.

We reach the boardroom. Sarah Gilbert rises from her seat at the far corner. I apologize for the mix-up with the childrens’ arrival times and thank her for coming.

Florence then takes us through the part of the building we’ll be using for the children.

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CHAPTER 35

Noah Evanson

Flatbush Avenue. Nevin Street. Left at Atlantic Avenue. And then those damned ice patches on Third Avenue. If that freaking Ferrari, or whatever kind of car it was, hadn't tried to kill me, then those ice patches at the intersection were certainly bent on finishing the job. What a loser I turned out to be. I can't even get through a simple highway drive. Makes sense, though. I couldn't even drive a brand new Mercedes back then without my anxiety reaching the heavens. Also wrecked a 2002 Toyota Camry one time. Wrapped it nicely around a tree or a lamppost. I'm still not sure. Yeah. Loser with a capital L.

I must have left my lungs out there in the snow because, as I pull into the parking lot of a newly renovated building, I suddenly can't breathe. But who am I kidding? My driving isn't the reason for my anxiety.

A sign post a few feet away brings a smile to my face, despite my mounting nerves.

*BLUE ANGLE COMMERCIAL CONSTRUCTION
FOR: CILLA'S HOUSE (SALVATORE TECHNOLOGIES INC & THE
SALVATORE FOUNDATION)
SAFETY GEAR TO BE WORN AT ALL TIMES
NO UNAUTHORIZED ENTRY*

Cilla's House. The smile doesn't last long. Just like my lungs, my courage has also vanished. Still, my heart swells with pride. He did it. He brought her back to life, like he said he would.

She'll live, Noah. She won't be forgotten.

You did it, Ethan.

I thought it would be easy, trying to see Ethan again. I'd make an appointment to see him, tell him how sorry I am about the past, and then I'd go back to my life in North Carolina. I'd placed the phone call six months ago—mid May—while on a short return home from my ten-month long mission trip in Africa. I wanted to visit Cilla's grave while I was home, but I'm a coward.

The next available appointment to see Ethan Salvatore had been in eighteen months. At first, I thought it was a joke, but Florence Greyson told me that ‘unsolicited appointments’ with Mr. Salvatore personally were strongly discouraged, and I would have to provide a detailed breakdown of what exactly I would be discussing with Mr. Salvatore if I were to be given an appointment, and, still, he’s only available in eighteen months. He’ll be almost thirty when his diary becomes available again for people like me.

“May I ask that you check our website and make your enquiries through our various help portals?” she’d asked very professionally.

I told her I definitely would, and then I deleted Ethan’s executive office number from my call log on my cell phone because I was home for a mid-year break. Even at twenty-three, my father still checks my phone.

I returned to Africa to finish my mission work, and, after months and months of following Ethan’s professional life like a first class stalker in between my evangelizing duties, I hit the jackpot to end all jackpots: Ethan Salvatore’s team was looking for volunteers to work at his new safe house. *Cilla’s House*. They were looking for people to start in the middle of November. I’d been praying for a way to see Ethan, and this felt like an answered prayer.

Florence Greyson hadn’t even batted an eyelash during our video interview.

I was the most impressive candidate for the job, she’d said. She also said it was amazing that I was in Africa at the moment finishing up my mission work, and, if I wanted to stay on at *Cilla’s House* for more than four weeks, I was more than welcome to do so. She had no idea she’d talked to me six months earlier. She also had no idea that if I stayed in New York longer than four weeks, I’d have to be sent back to North Carolina in a straitjacket because that’s the only way I’d keep hands off Mr. Salvatore.

I asked my father for a sabbatical after I returned from Africa. That had been only two weeks ago. He hugged me; telling me if there was anyone who needed a sabbatical, it was me.

“One year of good therapy, three years of Bible College, and nearly one year evangelizing across Southern Africa, trying to win souls for the Lord. Noah, son, no one needs rest more than you,” he said.

Except, it wasn’t as wonderful as he made it seem. What really happened was I got shipped off to England shortly after I came home from the hospital to attend a one-year program that would ‘cure me’ from ‘what

Ethan did to me'. My father never once asked me if I had gone with Ethan willingly. It had been decided that I was not gay, and that Ethan had been trying to 'turn me that way'. The first words my father uttered to me when I got home from the hospital after the accident were: *If you try to see him or contact him, I'll make sure he never gets out.* It might have looked like I was just trying to be a good brother, trying to protect Ethan, but the truth is that I was just being a good coward. I never, not even once, tried to make things right.

I could have told my father I was going somewhere else for my sabbatical, but I never had the courage to tell such big lies. Instead, I promised I wouldn't ever try to reach out to Ethan, 'because of what he did to me'. What I did lie about was what I'd be doing in New York. I told my father I'd be attending a silent retreat in Garrison. I chose this particular retreat because guests are not to be disturbed unless there is an emergency, which means my father could not call to check up on me.

Where I'm really going to be staying is about fifty miles away, in Brooklyn, at a motel I paid for in cash for a thirty-day stay. I also took out an extended car rental plan on a Toyota that had seen better days. My father never let me drive again after the accident. I came out here because I want to just freaking live my life for just a little while. And that included just having the courage to get behind the wheel of a car again.

My father allowed my travels to New York only after I agreed with him that Ethan was a despicable person who tried to take me to hell with him and that I would never, ever betray the Lord like that. I promised I'd be gone only for a month, and I'd be home for Christmas. And that I'd never contact Ethan.

"Promise you'll be home for Christmas," he said.

I promised.

"You know Christmas is always a special time for us. Make sure you come back for Christmas."

I promised again. I would have said and done anything to get him to let me travel to New York. "Don't become like the prodigal son, Noah. I understand I need to let you spread your wings, but I feel like the Lord is telling me that you'll end up like the prodigal son."

I promised him I wouldn't, and he let me go.

I arrived in New York two days ago. My temporary job was meant to start in four days. Getting called in to start early was a change I hadn't

mentally prepared for, but, when Florence Greyson said we might meet the owner, Ethan Salvatore, I choked on my terror and almost booked the first plane back home.

And then I realized that I could ambush my brother at his place of work. I'll ask for two minutes of his time, look at his face again, tell him how sorry I am, and, then, if he doesn't object, I'll stay and work at his safe house for four weeks. I won't have to wait eighteen months for a meeting with him.

Now, sitting in my rented Toyota, I reconsider my plans. I've spent the last five years obsessing about all the ways I've wronged Ethan. So many wrongs. So much betrayal.

Maybe I should just turn back. I could just put this Toyota into gear, and go back home. No one would know. Not our father. Not Ethan. I could take the next flight back to North Carolina, and John Evanson would welcome me back with open arms. Like the father who welcomes his prodigal son back. But, if I'm the prodigal son, then what is Ethan?

He's no son at all. Evanson's famous words. Pastor Evanson said Ethan was the devil's child. He didn't know how right he was, and I'm not talking about Ethan's mom. A devil lived behind those iron gates I called home for so many years. A devil who begged me for forgiveness and asked me to fast with him every other week so he'd be delivered from his sins.

My eyes fall on the words *Cilla's House* once more. Ethan was just a boy aching for his mother's love, grieving her every single day like it had only just happened. He may be the devil's son, but there is no one so pure as Ethan.

One day I'll find my mom, and she can be your mom, too.

Tears shoot to the surface. Always the tears when I remember a promise made by a stupid eighteen-year-old that could never be kept.

You'll really share your mom with me, Noah?

I would share anything with you, Ethan.

I would have given him everything I had. Everything, except one thing. My loyalty. Because I had been more afraid of our father than I'd been about losing Ethan.

But the promise, made five years ago, hasn't been forgotten. I don't know how, but I have to keep this promise. We are brothers, after all. *Only* brothers, so at least this, I should do for him. After everything, the least I should do is share my mother with him. She isn't much, but I know she'd

love Ethan. I just need to find a way to get to her without our father finding out.

I straighten up, grab my phone, and swing open the door.

I know I must go back to my life in the church in four weeks, but I could pretend, at least for a little while, while I'm a couple hundred miles away from home, that I'm living the life I want.

I just want to tell Ethan I'm sorry. I'll see the city and work with trafficked children, and then I'll go back. To my closet. To his father who is more my father than his and live my double life.

I shiver, but it's not from the cold. In a few minutes, I'll come face to face with the love of my life.

Ethan had been right. Beautiful things don't have to last. Sometimes, the memories are so breathtaking, they're enough to last a lifetime. But imagine the joy if the beautiful things *could* last? Imagine *our* joy if our beautiful thing had lasted?

It had been so easy to dream of a life with Ethan and make promises when I was hidden inside his body, away from the world, but, after that night, thinking about Ethan was a physical pain. Anyone might think it was Ethan who pursued me. He was older. Brash and wild. His father's prodigal son with no plans to return. I was the church boy. The golden child. Everything Ethan was not. But sometimes, angels look like demons and demons look like angels. I was the one that begged him to kiss me that first time.

Look at Ethan now. He didn't end up dead from a drug overdose in some ditch.

I square my shoulders and take a deep breath. I'll see him just this one time. I'll work for his beloved *Cilla's House* for four weeks, if he'll let me, and then I'll go back.

I need to see him just once before I let him go.

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CHAPTER 36

Ethan

I threaten Arthur and Company with a very nasty poor service report if they don't get our furniture to us in two hours, throwing the full weight of my status behind my demands. I'm being a complete asshole to the furniture company; I know that. But I'm running on such a tight schedule, there's no time for pleasantries. They treat me far better than they treated Florence. The furniture is on its way.

After inspecting the place and determining that, once the furniture arrives, we should be able to comfortably accommodate the children, I give Florence and Sarah my full attention. Pinching the bridge of my nose, I inhale deeply. Even when you already know it's not going to be pretty, you can never prepare enough for these things.

I turn away from the two of them, my eyes catching the flakes of snow outside. "How old are they?" I ask. It doesn't matter, because they all suffer so much, but when they're exceptionally young, it feels so much worse.

I know my demeanor has changed. It's evident in the way Florence and Sarah respond now. They are less nervous, their own faces softened by the change in the atmosphere; by the change in me.

"The youngest is eleven; the eldest is seventeen."

All I can do is shake my head. What do these predators want from these *children*?

Sarah comes to stand next to me. She holds out her hand. "Thank you, Mr. Salvatore," she says warmly. "We're so grateful for everything you and your team are doing." I accept her acknowledgement on behalf of my Global Impact team with a dip of my head. I am the head of a team of six men and women who use our money to alleviate some of the biggest problems in the world.

"I would like to have you and your team featured in next month's newsletter. We reach sixty million people worldwide online. We'd like them to know that some of the wealthiest men and women in the world are using their personal wealth to make this world better."

"Yes. Anything to get more eyes on this and other issues." My voice has lost its sharp edge.

“Ohio is still trying to keep pregnant girls from crossing state lines for abortion care, but we’re trying to give them as much protection as we can once they get here. It’s messy, but, with people like you and the members of the Global Impact team on our side, we can do so much more,” Sarah says.

“How are the new runaways doing?” I ask.

“Better than when they arrived.”

“All four from Florida?”

“Yes. And we had two new Trans girls come in from Texas late last night.”

“So, our Trans runaways are still on the rise?”

“They are.”

“Well, they’ve come to the right state. We won’t let them down. Our legal team is available, night or day, if you need them and—” I turn to Florence. “Did we clear the additional funding for Sarah’s Trans runaways?”

“Yes, we did.”

“Yes, we received the money yesterday, Mr. Salvatore. Thank you,” Sarah confirms.

“Let Florence know if there’s anything else you need.” I shake Sarah’s hand, and she turns to leave.

Florence walks Sarah out, and I turn back to the makeshift boardroom to answer the call coming through on my phone.

Pastor John Evanson.

The seed planter credited with my existence has tried calling me three times in two days. Well, fuck him. The great pastor could rot in the deepest parts of Hell or Hades or Sheol, or whatever they call it, and it would mean fuck all to me. The only call I want to get is the one telling me this cunt is fucking *dead*.

Florence returns, and saves me from a mile-long internal dialogue about my vile, bigoted sperm donor. “Ethan, I have everything under control here now. Your next meeting is at three o’clock this afternoon. You have Sebastian Stone on video, and then you asked to block time out today so you can work on some of your new programs.”

“Thank you, Florence.”

“But first could you say a quick hi to our volunteer?”

I look up from the email I’m reading. “Yeah, sure.” When I return to my screen, I wish I’d just left the emails for when I returned to my office.

The email contains pictures of the Center for Trafficked Youth in California—one similar to the one we’re trying to build here in New York. We’d been able to bring home three American girls over the last ten months—trafficked into France—because of the work that is being done in that center.

This is why I offer no apologies for what citizens of the world call ‘privacy invasion’. I’ll build every software program to find missing children, and I don’t give a fuck how many privacy laws I have to break to do that. Ordinary citizens don’t get to see the family clinging to their child who was returned to them from some horror brothel in South East Asia or the queer child knocking on our doors, hiding from their unaccepting families and looking for somewhere to sleep.

I scroll through each picture—pictures of the children as soon as they arrive, lifeless eyes so filled with emptiness and hopelessness. *The eyes.* The eyes get me every damn time. A familiar burn in my belly spreads wider and wider with each click, and the images on the screen flash in perfect parallels to the images in my head. Images from a dark and dirty past. From a time before my brother arrived at our front door with a bible under his arm.

Soft voices approaching the doorway snaps me back to the present. Florence returns and standing next to her is a very short, round blonde girl. Young, probably twenty or so. She looks nervous, and for all her fidgeting, I wonder if she’s younger.

“Ethan, this is Melanie Davenport.” Melanie holds out her hand and smiles shyly. I suppress a grin when I catch Florence rolling her eyes. I’m used to girls behaving this way. It doesn’t bother me.

“Miss Davenport, thank you for offering to help.” I take her hand in mine. Her smile is like a looking glass, and I spare her the embarrassment of reading everything that smile is telling me.

Sorry, Ms. Davenport, I've only ever fucked one person as young as you, and it wasn't a girl. That will never happen again.

“It’s nice meeting you, Ms. Davenport. Again, thank you for your time.”

Footsteps outside the boardroom. Florence steps outside.

I listen with amusement to the hushed exchange of indistinct words. The owner of the second voice is apologizing to Florence for being late. “Some maniac in a Ferrari or something on the Manhattan Bridge,” he’s saying.

There is no fucking way. My heart begins to thud in my chest, and it's not because of the Ferrari wisecrack. It's a Bugatti, anyway, but he wouldn't know the difference if it didn't have a Mercedes sign on it.

I inhale deeply, willing my heart to slow its pace. Ms. Davenport's attention is focused on the doorway, so she doesn't notice my near cardiac arrest.

Impossible. He's five hundred miles away. He's an ordained minister now. I fix my eyes on my phone, desperate to get rid of the sound of that voice now echoing like a megaphone in my head. I keep my eyes fixed on my phone. *Fucking idiot*. I give myself a mental shake. *Get a fucking grip*.

Florence steps back into the room. From the corner of my eye I catch a glimpse of a black leather band wrapped around a slim wrist. The words *I Am Who I am* have faded, but they are still noticeable. No one else knows but on the inside of that leather band is a picture of a tiny pride flag. It was all I could afford to give this privileged boy back then.

"Ethan, while you're still here, meet—"

Florence's introduction barely registers.

I raise my head. A pair of the softest gray eyes come into view.

Noah Evanson stands in front of me, eyes wide and searching. The room has disappeared. No one and nothing else exists. Just like before.

I want to say his name out loud, just to hear what it would sound like coming out of my mouth again. *Noah, baby*. It would be the first time in five years.

The symbolism of his name is inked into my upper back; the only good thing to come out of my time in prison, besides my NSA deal. It is inspired by the original Noah from the bible who bowed his head in obedience to his God and to whom we credit the appearance of the rainbow after a storm. The same Noah who sent out a dove and then a raven to look for dry land after God drowned the whole of humanity in the Great Flood.

A raven, entwined with a dove, is carved into my back. One, soft and gentle; pure and innocent like Noah. The other, dark and deceptive, like me. Deceptive, because in the end, it was hard to tell who was the dove and who was the raven. I changed him. I only meant to appease his curiosity, but I turned him into something he wasn't. I led him away from his God. I'm the demon who tried to steal Noah away.

It was sick sometimes how much I enjoyed watching my Noah go from pious Christian to just fuckin,' the *devil*.

What? *My* Noah? The choice of pronoun brings my train of thought to an abrupt end. That lifetime no longer exists. I've put it in my past, and I have no plans to revisit that part of my life. The ice that kept this moment frozen in time begins to crack, releasing me from my moment of stupor.

What the fuck are you doing here, Noah?

His eyes never leave mine. The air is too thick. I can hardly breathe.

His hair is longer than I remember him keeping it; his body filled out impressively, and his eyes . . . sweet Noah gazes back at me with his innocent, gray eyes.

It's all happening in slow motion. His delicious mouth, lifting in a smile that doesn't quite reach his eyes. If only I could ignore how quickly I can tell his real smile from his fake one. The uncertainty radiating from him is screaming at me.

"M-Mr. Salvatore," he says. "It's, uhm, a pleasure to meet you." His tone is jerky and, to our audience, probably just someone nervous for their first day of work. But I see his fear clearly. His eyes sweep over my face, devouring me as much as I devour him. He places his hand in mine.

He shouldn't be here. The stars don't align like this for people like us. I take his lead with that whole *Mr. Salvatore* act. If he gets to be a coward and act like I don't know every single inch of his body, like I don't have the sound of his orgasm playing in my head every single day, then I don't see why I should offer him anything more.

We had our beautiful moment, and then it ended. We knew from the start we'd never make it. It's taken me five long years to put that part of my life behind me. To accept that Noah is safer in the closet, and nothing is more important than his safety. Who am I to judge what level of courage he ought to have had?

But, what in his God's fucking name, is he doing *here*? I go from shocked to just fucking *furious*. Was one destruction not enough for him? Does Noah plan to place us in front of the firing squad a second time? What will be expected of me this time? Have I not already given enough?

What are you fucking doing here, Noah, baby?

I squeeze his hand, accepting his greeting, and, because I can't help it – because this is *Noah* – I run my thumb along the inside of his wrist, grazing his wristband. He feels it too, this unrelenting pull, as if the last five years never happened. His eyes fly up to mine, and I can almost hear the pound of his heart.

None of this makes sense. Everything was finished that night at the Oakwood Inn. I did what I had to do. I did it for him. There was nothing left to say. So, why is he here?

“Mr. Evanson, the pleasure is mine,” I murmur. He presses his lips together, and looks away, breaking the spell.

If Florence or Ms. Davenport have noticed something amiss, they keep it to themselves. I pull myself together and reach back to the table for my keys.

He’s too scared to talk, and I don’t know how to deal with this. I wish I could say that my heart is overwhelmed with joy over seeing him again, but the tightness in my chest is different.

I’m *angry* that we didn’t get to have our forever and that his beliefs are the reason for it. I was the one who said beautiful moments don’t have to last forever but *fuck*. Why the hell not? Because Noah didn’t know how to just fucking live his life the way he wanted? Because of what some invisible, most likely, non-existent entity had to say about it? Because of a cunt named John Evanson?

I snap my jaw shut. Whatever we had was finished five years ago. Now, all I can do is walk away. Whether coincidence or not, he’s here as Florence’s hired help, and I’ll leave it at that.

“Ethan, I’ll be in the office shortly. I’ll take Noah and Melanie through everything.” Florence looks at her wrist watch. “I’ve arranged your lunch already. You’ll take it on your terrace. Jonathan will join you, and I’ll be in later to go through a few important changes to your diary over the next few months.”

“Can you reschedule that diary catch-up for later this week?” Because I need the afternoon to find all the pieces of my soul again.

I turn my attention to Ms. Davenport, and then to *Mr. Evanson*, and—fuck me, I can’t help it—my eyes linger. “Thank you, Ms. Davenport.” My eyes are still trained on Noah. “Thank you, Mr. Evanson,” I say, and I find that my voice is softer than I would have liked. He acknowledges me with a slight nod and then quickly looks away. I want to tell him there’s no need to look so scared, but I also want to tell him to be absolutely fucking terrified that he had the gall to show up here like this after five fucking years.

The boardroom is small, and, with the four of us squashed in here like this, it’s hard to get out without bumping into one of them.

Noah has his arms wrapped around his torso. I grab my things, and, as I pass him, I let the back of my hand brush against the fingers resting on his upper arm. The action is deliberate, the message clear—I want to touch him. He stiffens, and his reaction is not lost on me.

Oh, Noah, baby, what we were. What we could have been.

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CHAPTER 37

Noah

The girl standing next to me looks like someone electrocuted her as she watches Ethan walk away. She won't stop twitching. I side-eye her with murder in my veins for the way she's looking at Ethan, knowing with absolute clarity that 1) it will mean absolutely nothing to him, and 2) I must be extra crazy to think I have any right to all this jealousy running around inside my head like little devils.

Still, my response when she whispers, "He is so hot," is a scalding, "He's *gay*."

She swings her head in my direction, and I can't contain my glee when her whole face falls right to the ground and crashes into the concrete beneath our feet.

Ethan is still in the vicinity, and he inclines his head slightly, like he's heard this little exchange. The beginning of a smile touches the corner of his mouth, and I wonder if he's thinking about the times he teased me about my psychotic jealous streak. I don't get a chance to find out, because he turns his body fully, away from us, speaking to his secretary softly as he leaves. It's terrifying seeing him face to face. Pretending not to know him had been a freeze response I wasn't expecting to have. But, Jesus Christ, he's so beautiful. He's bulked up a little. Not too much, just enough to know that he must take better care of his body now than he did then. His hair is shorter than he used to keep it. His face is also fuller, and he has a light scruff. For one second I imagine rubbing my cheek across his to feel that rough scrape of his beard.

The girl sticks out her hand at me, distracting me from my thoughts. "I'm Melanie Davenport. Are you here for the volunteer work too?"

"Yes," I murmur, my eyes following Ethan's retreating figure, returning my eyes to Melanie Davenport only once Ethan has disappeared around the corner.

"Are you from around here?"

"No. I'm from North Carolina"

"What's your deal?"

“Uh, well. I—” I don't want to tell her I'm on a sabbatical, because that will mean I'll have to tell her I'm an ordained minister, and that is one title I don't want to carry around during my time here. I came here to be someone else. Or maybe, to be myself. Whichever it is, one thing is certain: I'm not in New York to evangelize anyone.

“When did you get here?” Melanie asks. She comes off as a little invasive, but I don't think she has any hidden agendas. I'm just too used to always questioning the motives of people around me. “A few days ago. What about you?”

“Born and bred New Yorker. I'm trying to get some work experience. How long are you staying?”

“Just a few more weeks.”

“Okay.” She eyes me suspiciously. “So, you're sure Ethan Salvatore is gay?”

“Yeah, I'm sure.”

“How sure are you?” She peers up at me as if somehow she could wrangle a different answer out of me. I could tell her what Ethan's dick felt like in my mouth . . . and other places, but, well, I didn't come to New York with *that* much courage.

“How could you not have known that when you applied for this position?” I ask.

“I don't go investigating people's sexuality when I apply for jobs,” she says dryly.

I blink. That . . . makes perfect sense. It's a little unnerving. People here are so much more relaxed. They don't seem to have steel rods rammed up their asses about things like sexuality. “Sorry,” I tell her. Florence returns to the boardroom. “Thank you two for coming through on such short notice.”

She takes us through the building, showing us where we'll be working.

“The furniture will arrive shortly. You'll ensure the beds are made, and that there are enough blankets to get the kids through the night.”

She points behind us. “Through here is the kitchen. You'll oversee the catering until our kitchen staff get here, and then you'll work with the kitchen staff from the day after tomorrow. She walks, and we follow.

The furniture arrives, and, when Melanie and I are done, each bedroom, with their twin single beds, soft glow from the lamps and heavy bedding, looks like a warm, comforting bedroom found in any middle class home.

The catering company arrives and Melanie and I help them set up. Once that's done, Florence makes a final inspection, and then places a call to Ethan to tell him that everything went well. "The children are seven minutes away," she says.

Melanie and I stand off to the side in the parking lot when a black van pulls up to the side.

"Stand aside," she tells us. There is a sense of foreboding as Florence walks to the van and is greeted by three women. They speak quietly before making their way to us.

Florence introduces them.

"Melanie, Noah, meet our social workers. Phoebe McLean, Emma Stewart, and Darlene Whitaker."

Melanie and I have taken on the somber mood and greet the social workers with serious faces.

They smile, but it's obvious they have bigger things on their minds.

"It's nice to meet you. The children in the van were removed from a facility near the border. They have not eaten in at least three days and have not bathed for at least eighteen days. Please don't get too near them. Control the tone and volume of your voices if you speak to them. Don't be surprised when they don't look at you or answer you when you speak to them. They are very, very hungry, so we'll get some food into their bellies first. Then they will need to bathe."

Emma Stewart speaks. "They'll be given a full examination—" she turns to Florence "—has that been arranged?"

"Yes," Florence says. "Mr. Salvatore has made provision for whatever medical attention the children may need. The doctors are on standby."

The third social worker, Darlene Whitaker, sighs, her face looking like she hasn't slept in days. "Thank God. Let them eat and get settled, then bring in the doctors."

"Please stand back," Phoebe McLean says.

Melanie and I shuffle back with our heads down. The children are brought out of the van. I watch them from the corner of my eye. Each child is handled with the same care one would use when dealing with an infant.

It's nothing less than something out of a nightmare. When I heard that Ethan had opened a safe house for trafficked children, *this* was not what I imagined.

You can't see their feet. All you can see are clumps of caked in mud. As they walk, they lose some of the clumps. Dirt clings to every exposed part of their bodies, and their dirty clothes are streaked with grime, ripped in various places. They walk as if taking the next step is a step closer to something worse than where they've come from.

The social workers walk close to them, bending every now and then to speak softly. Some stare straight ahead, their eyes devoid of any emotion. Others nod, but the fear in their eyes is choking to watch.

They pass us, entering the safe house, and the full weight of Ethan's world settles in the pit of my stomach. This is his world. This is his work. This is Ethan, making the world a better place. He doesn't believe in a God, and he hates the church. But his heart for the broken and the hurting is bigger than anything I've ever seen in any church. Ethan is a better man than any man I've ever known. Certainly a better man than me. I don't deserve a place in his world.

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CHAPTER 38

Ethan

The floor-to-ceiling windows on the left side of my office overlook the best parts of New York. Although I loathe being in the middle of the traffic and the impossibly quick pulse of the city, there's something to say about sitting in my air-conditioned office and watching the madness below. My terrace, where I've entertained business partners and nurtured strategic friendships within its private and comfortable space over the last three years, sits just adjacent to the impressive window view. This is all I need to remind myself of who I am in *this* world; of the difference I strive to make every day; of the many, many people all over the world who benefit from my work. There's nothing here—in this office or the people that I choose to surround myself with—to remind me of who I was five, six, ten years ago. Yet, the biggest, sweetest reminder stood before me not two hours ago pretending he didn't know me.

I always imagined what it would be like if I ever saw Noah again. Hundreds of times before, I imagined disappearing with him. A hundred more times, I imagined sending him back to his life, far away from me.

But more times than that, I imagined taking him in my arms and hiding him there. Tasting him just once more. And for a second in that boardroom, I wanted to do just that. I haven't asked Florence about how he ended up there. She wouldn't have let him anywhere near *Cilla's House* if his credentials hadn't checked out, so I know everything about him ending up here is legitimate.

"Spill it," Jono says from where he's seated on the leather couch adjacent to my desk. His head is tilted all the way back, his eyes shut, and he's pinching the bridge of his nose. A bottle of water dangles from his hand, over the armrest. "Spill it," he says again. I stifle a sigh. I don't think I have the energy for Jono's finely tuned *some-shit-is-up* detector.

It's hilarious how Jono and I ended up here. Two geniuses with rocks for brains sitting in a high rise building in New York City because one day every single file of every single inmate at Central Prison disappeared, including mine. The entire database of serial killers, rapists, every kind of white and blue collar criminal vanished into thin air. Guess who knew how

to recover encrypted files from a ransomware attack so big the ransom demand would have crippled a small third world country? Not the National Security Agency.

By then I'd already been called up to the warden's office for basic jobs like fixing software malfunctions, permanently deleting porn site visits, that kind of thing. It was stupid child's play, but understanding technology impresses people unnecessarily. I earned a reputation for being able to fix any hardware or software problem.

It took me eight days to recover the hijacked files. But before I even got started I demanded to negotiate my compensation. They said they didn't negotiate with sex offenders, and I told them they could then go and negotiate with the cyber criminals who were demanding forty million dollars for the decryption algorithm.

It was all top secret. Not even Jono knows the exact details of the deal I cut with the NSA, and he knows not to ask too many questions. The only important thing is that I got my record wiped clean like I never existed in that database, and they got back all their files. I sort of blackmailed them, but it was all good business. The deal not only got me out of a prison sentence, but it also rocketed Jono and me into superstardom in the business world. The app we were building back in the day was a small fry compared to what we're building for the government these days. We also do tons of private work, and that brings in the millions too.

Jono picked me up one warm June morning, not long after my deal with the NSA, in his rotten Ford with our clothes dumped in the back seat, my mother's bible and a block of cheese, and we drove ten hours to Thomas Street in Tribeca, Lower Manhattan. We may or may not have started our work with the NSA at their New York hub for mass surveillance. It's an *if I told you the truth, I'd have to kill you* kind of situation.

Three years later, here we are. Jono is now the CEO of Salvatore Tech, and, according to some sources, he has more money than me, has a dirtier mouth than me and he has fucked more men (and women) than I have. The first two, I neither confirm nor deny. The third, well, I can only speak for the gay body count, and I'm not quite the fuck boy people usually take me for. Not after Noah, anyway.

Jono is also, 'according to some sources', smooth like silk panties. I have no comment on that one. Jono has a lot of "sources" of which he is very proud.

Standing eye to eye with me in height and with his tree trunk arms, bald head, and deep brown skin that apparently drives everyone in the gender spectrum crazy, it's no surprise that Jono hasn't 'settled down with a church girl' like his family wished he would. The other problem is that he might end up settling down with a nice *boy*, and I don't know what his father will do then.

I settle into the chair behind my desk and flip open my laptop, glaring at the screen as if that would make Jono just go away. "What are you, my fucking shrink?" I ask, my tone going for nonchalance.

Jono stands up to leave. I keep my eyes on the email I'm pretending to read.

"Fuck off, Salvatore."

Jono puts his water bottle down on my gleaming oak desk that Florence had cleaned very recently. I hate clutter, and Florence makes sure everything is neat and in straight lines. So, I tell Jono, "That's gonna leave a fucking stain, bossman." Of course, it's just water, but still.

Jono picks up his bottle. "So, what now? You're so fucking important you can't look at a person when he's talking to you?"

I glance up. "The fuck you talking about, tool?" Although, I know exactly what he's talking about. I've been out of it since he got here.

"You better get your shit together. Don't you have a video call with Sebastian?"

"You don't have to remind me, Blood. I already have a secretary, remember? Her name is Florence."

"Shut the fuck up, Ethan. This meeting is important. You need to get your head out yo' ass. You look like you've died ten times." Jono carries on as if I hadn't spoken. "What the fuck is wrong with you? You've been spaced out ever since I got here."

I lean back in my chair but offer no explanation. Jono is my oldest friend. Jono refused to believe that I'd sexually assaulted (no, *SODOMIZED*) an innocent boy in a hotel room even when I signed my life away saying I did. Jono knew how to respect a man's space, so he never forced it out of me. He simply didn't believe I sexually assaulted Noah, and I appreciated that even if I never confirmed it. He's one of the few people who know that Noah is the person I'd admitted to sexually assaulting.

When I hold my silence, Jono heads for the door. "Get your shit together," he warns again.

“I saw him today,” I say finally, to Jono’s retreating stride.

Jono stops short. He doesn’t need the details. He backtracks, shaking his head. “What’s he doing here, Ethan?”

I rub the side of my chin. I need a shave. “He’s on the temporary volunteer list for *Cilla’s House*.”

Jono eyes me suspiciously. “For fuck’s sake, Ethan, don’t tell me you had him hired.”

“Of course I didn’t get him hired. Do I have *BIG FUCKING IDIOT* written across my forehead?” I shoot across the room.

“No, but you got that pretty little dove inked into your skin—which sounds all nice an’ pretty an’ all that, but, Blood, what the fuck?”

I ignore the reference to the tattoo. I scratch at the stubble on my cheek, then fill Jono in on how one minute I’m losing my mind over the logistical fuck up at *Cilla’s House*, and the next thing Noah is standing in front of me, greeting me like he’d never seen me before.

Jono whistles. “How are you feeling about it?”

“I won’t lie, Jono. I’m a little pissed he’d show up without some kind of warning. Something like this should come with a warning, right?”

“Ethan, you went to fucking prison for him, and he did nothing to stop it when he woke up from his coma. You *should* be fucking pissed.”

“I’d have done anything for him. You know that, Jono,” I say softly now. It’s the closest I’ve come to telling Jono the truth.

Jono heads for the door once more. “Man, I know, but it’s just too fucked up, Ethan. I don’t want to watch you get caught up in all that religious fuckin’ terrorism again. Just—just be careful.”

I stare at nothing long after Jono leaves, my mind working overtime over this sudden upset to my life. I run my hand down my face, sinking deeper into my chair and looking around my office. Mine is not the typical set up. There’s no sense of permanency here. If there ever was a fire or some other catastrophe and everything in this office was destroyed, there’s nothing I’d miss. Everything could be replaced—desk, armchair, leather couch, laptop, phone, and a painting of the Statue of Liberty on one bare wall (and that only at Florence’s insistence). That’s all there is. Nothing of any personal importance exists in this office.

It occurs to me that if I walked away from all of this and disappeared, no one would be able to piece together anything about the occupant of this office.

Here there's no hint of my involvement in creating software for clients that ranged from the super-elite to small trauma and rehabilitation centers around the country. There isn't a hint of any of my achievements or philanthropic work in this office. Hundreds of thousands of people all over the world are saved from becoming victims of ransomware attacks when they use my decryption tools. Hundreds of thousands of people around the world benefit from my work. And we write good code for the government. Everything we do is to protect people.

I pick up a report I had Florence print out for me earlier this week, paging through it. Sometimes I think my obsessive need to be like my mother gets out of hand. But how can helping people who can't help themselves ever be too much?

The report documents the vision and goals of an exclusive group of millionaires and billionaires committed to tackling the world's most pressing issues. It was the best thing I could think of when I was deciding what to do with all this money I was making from the government. I gave it a stupid name, because I'm the least creative person in the world—Global Impact—and then I asked five of the wealthiest men and women in the world to part with their millions, so we could make the world better. Our lives are not filled with fluff and pretty things. We deal with the wretched filth and ugliness of this world on a daily basis. We see the cruelty and degradation of human beings in ways the general population could hardly imagine.

The Global Impact team identified various pressing world issues and each of us took ownership of one. I own Technological Advancement for Social Good, which includes building the technology required to locate kidnapped children. *Cilla's House* is my own personal project.

My eyes move across the report. These people do good things, like I try to.

Jono owns Social Justice and Equality. He makes sure people get the legal representation they wouldn't otherwise be able to acquire. A particularly astounding case we recently had handled was that of a trans man named Jacob Watkins, who was brutally raped last year. No one would take him seriously when he tried to report it. Jono worked with some of the best lawyers to get him the justice he deserved.

Ambrosia Khan, CEO of BioGen Pharma, came on board with financial backing for easy access to breakthrough medicines.

Sebastian Stone, CEO of Stone Incorporated, gives his money to create agricultural automation and increase food security so people can fucking eat.

Dr. Rose Foster pumps millions of her own money into getting clean water and sanitation to the millions who don't have access to this basic human right.

And our latest member, Eli Saxon, son of one of the pioneers of cyber security, recently came on board with tens of millions of dollars that will be used for research and development of medicine and immunotherapy for those suffering with life threatening illnesses, like cancer.

We work with the best scientists and doctors and subject matter experts to make sure our money is put to good use. And all of this is done over and above our regular jobs.

Surely, this makes me different from the person I was five years ago? Surely, I've paid my penance for whatever sins I committed in my younger years? And surely, my mother would be pleased with the son she left behind?

I set the report down and look around my office again. A heavy sense of loneliness settles in my chest. My office has no family photos. No squiggly notes and hand drawn cards from nieces or nephews . . . or children. No framed photo from a wedding or honeymoon or engagement party. No holiday photos with parents.

Nothing to show that I *belong* somewhere. That I belong to *someone*. There's no *Ethan* in this office.

Who would know that I was just a normal person, like everybody else, who just wanted to make his mother proud? To make his little stepbrother proud?

I lean back in my chair and close my eyes. A headache is building at the back of my head.

My eyes still shut, I massage my temple on the left side with the heel of my hand. In the last few hours, I've re-lived those early days with Noah more times than I cared to count. Like a scab that kept getting peeled back before the skin underneath had completely healed.

My phone lights up with a text. Ms. May's name flashes on the screen.

I sigh. I forgot to text her back earlier. I do so now, telling her I'm okay, how are you Ms. May, and have a good day.

I set my phone face down on the desk. My mind goes back to that first conversation I'd had with Jono after I'd been arrested.

“Jesus Christ, Ethan. What are you fucking doing with *Noah*?” he'd asked.

Well, the truth is I had no idea. It'd started with one meaningless kiss. A joke to unsettle him a little bit because he'd been asking some stupid questions.

It ended in a fucking plea bargain.

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CHAPTER 39

Noah

I let myself into my motel room around six p.m.

I have a new friend named Melanie and a whole new respect for Ethan. Along with that respect is a pretty solid amount of terror. The man who stood in front of me earlier this morning is not a man who'd bring me chocolate milkshakes or help me with my sermon notes on the top of a cliff. I've never seen Ethan in anything but sweats and hoodies and his hair falling half onto his face. Today, he looked like a man in charge of the entire world; his presence so commanding. People talk about him so reverently here.

I look around my room. How the tables have turned. My heart lifts at the idea that Ethan would have all the good food that he loves to eat and he wouldn't have to live poorly anymore. And here I am, living in a cheap motel. The comparison hardly counts because I could easily return to my life of luxury anytime I want, but, although this living arrangement is a far cry from the home I left behind, I've never been happier. On the side table is a bottle of lube—one of my first purchases in New York after I gained my four weeks of freedom. Not because I thought I'd need it, but, because if I go back to North Carolina, I'll never be able to perform such a simple act as to purchase a bottle of lube.

The freedom here feeds me and keeps me full. I'd choose living like this as a free human being over the life waiting for me to return to in four weeks.

I sit on the edge of my bed, contemplating what I'll do next. My phone lights up several times. I answer Ms. May's texts, telling her I'm okay. I ignore the rest. They're all the same:

Hi son, just checking on you

Hi son, I see you were online but haven't yet responded to my texts

Hi son, let me know that you're okay. You could send just one text, at the very least

I'm not interested in any of the other texts either. Jessica wasn't pleased that I was leaving again after just two days of returning home. It annoyed

me that she took such a strong stance on my time and my plans, but I have no one to blame but myself. I never once told her to back off.

I pull down the ribbon on my screen to check Jessica's text without having to open it. *Miss you, Noah. Can't wait for Christmas, so I can see you again.*

A deep sigh leaves my body. I can't be certain, but I may have left North Carolina an engaged man. It's as ridiculous as it sounds. A long standing agreement made just after high school graduation was resurrected after college and then again while I was in Africa.

"A formal engagement is long overdue", my father had said. "We should be planning a wedding now that you're done with college and your mission work."

I asked to be given more time to let my life settle down. I didn't say I didn't want to marry Jessica, and that is where all my problems originated from.

I curl up on my bed, not bothering with any dinner, hoping to dream about Ethan, where, perhaps, I would be able to touch him again.

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CHAPTER 40

Ethan

By the time Monday rolls in—a little under a week since I nearly drowned in a sea of big, gray eyes—I’m feeling pretty good. I resisted the urge to go back to the safe house, asking, instead, for Sarah and Florence to keep me updated.

I also haven’t looked through the reference letters Florence had put together for, not just Melanie Davenport, but Noah too. “Just in case,” she said, when I asked her about it. Copies have been emailed to both volunteers.

But with my morning rush of four back-to-back meetings now out of the way, I fix my eyes on copies of the letters of recommendation sitting on my desk, picking up the one on top. My thumb moves across his name. Once upon a time we shared the same last name. In the eyes of the law, we were brothers.

Brothers. Lovers. Soulmates. Strangers. You only got to pick one.

In the end, I had to keep him safe. In the end, I picked *stranger*. Someone who meant nothing to me. There’d been no other way. If saving myself meant outing him, it was always going to be him. I’d never have outed him.

I run my hand down my face, conflicted. I would give anything to have him, but things like that are not meant to work out for me.

With a heavy sigh, I grab a smoke and a lighter and head for the terrace. I’m at the threshold, flicking on the lighter when Florence swings open my door.

She steps inside, looking confused and furious. I raise the cigarette to my lips, light it up, and look at her questioningly through a cloud of smoke.

“Ethan, do you know Noah Evanson personally?” she asks.

“Why?” I ask, my heart hammering in my chest.

“He’s downstairs. Security called me, asking if I’d speak to him. He says he wants to see you for ten minutes, and, if I just tell you that it’s him, you might agree.”

“Yes, I know him, Florence,” I say. What’s the point of pretending anymore?

“Are you serious? But last week when I introduced the two of you . . .?”

“We have some complicated history. Let him through.”

Florence gives me a clipped nod, but she doesn't push the issue. My time is a precious commodity, and Florence already has a hard enough time trading my hours profitably. These kinds of upsets just make her life unnecessarily harder, but this isn't an opportunity I'm capable of passing up. After everything, surely I can give him ten minutes? I gave him so much more once upon a time. And he gave me so much, too.

I walk out onto the terrace, my heart a boulder in my throat. I take a pull of my smoke, wishing there was time for a strong drink. I'm facing away from my office door. Florence's hushed voice flits through the doorway, and then I feel, rather than hear, Noah step out onto the terrace. I can't bring myself to turn around.

How you affect me, even now, Noah, baby. The silence draws out and finally, I turn to face him.

Today, when I'm more prepared, I can admire him as he walks toward me.

He is exquisite.

I'm not accustomed to his hair like this. His hairstyle is the way mine used to be. Now, I keep my hair short, the way he used to.

Those soft grays look at me now the same way they had that night at the Oakwood Express.

Tell me why you're here, Noah. I should be angry that he's here. That he won't let sleeping dogs lie. I *am* angry, but, fuck, to see him now is like breathing again after being held under water for too long.

He moves toward me. I remain rooted to the spot, my eyes never leaving his now. He comes to stand before me. How easy it would be to tuck him neatly under my chin.

The boulder in my throat increases in weight.

The silence should have been uncomfortable. Time shouldn't pause like this. But where Noah is concerned, the world stops spinning. Everything else becomes obsolete.

He watches me as I watch him. My gaze, devouring every inch of his face. The face that had turned up toward me so easily, so innocently when he was barely eighteen. Eyes that had pleaded for what I so desperately wanted to give him anyway, eyes that had seen some of my invisible scars, left by my mother's death, a mouth that had opened beneath mine so timidly . . . lips that had uttered sweet nothings into the cold night air.

What we have is magic, Ethan.

Yes. Magic. Another thing forbidden by his religion. Noah and I were not allowed to have magic.

He breaks the silence with a slight clearing of his throat, and I'm railroaded back to reality.

"Ethan," he murmurs. The ash has eaten away most of my smoke, so I turn away to stub it out. And to collect myself. My name on Noah's lips is almost too much to bear. Because when he says my name, all I hear are his soft grunts while he tried to control his lust and his sweet vulgarity when it got too much and he had to let himself go, lifting his hips and offering me his cock. When I turn to face him again, I've gathered enough of my equilibrium and some of my senses.

"Thank you for letting me see you," he says. "I know how busy you are. So, I appreciate . . ."

"Why are you here, Noah?" I ask, keeping my voice even, even though what I want to do is gather him in my arms and ask him how he is. Tell him how good he looks. But I won't make the same mistake twice. I can't let Noah in again. I don't have any more fight left in me. I don't know why he's here, in my office, in my world, in my *life*. I don't know why he would send us back to the past like this. I don't know what he's looking for in New York.

What I *do* know is that this is not a reunion of any kind.

"I wanted to thank you, in person, for the letter of recommendation. I got the email . . ."

That isn't why he's here. We both know that.

He takes a deep, shaky breath. "Uh, I also wanted to, uh, apologize for everything." He looks away, shamelessly uneasy. "For everything that happened. I never should have—" another deep breath, "—never should have let it happen. And—and I'm so sorry about your car . . . for wrecking it."

That's not all that got wrecked that night, Noah, baby but I'd do it all over again for you. I just can't let you back into my life.

He waves his hand around the terrace and toward my office. "And, uh, I'm very glad to see that you've done so well, Ethan."

So, he's here to apologize and to congratulate me? I know Noah better than this.

I step closer, needing to remove the space between us, despite the warning bells clanging in my head. I study him, hardly able to contain my desperate need to tip his chin up and kiss him.

He looks away, his face coloring under my scrutiny.

“Noah, what’s going on?”

“I—I just wanted to see you, just this once, Ethan. I’m sorry for barging in on your life like this. For harassing your secretary. She said she couldn’t let people just walk into your office, and I understand that but I told her if she told you it was me, maybe . . . maybe you’d say yes.”

“People usually need to make an appointment months in advance to see me.” I’m aware of the softness of my voice.

“I know. I’m sorry. I thought I’d get a chance to talk to you at *Cilla’s House*—” his eyes light up “—you did it, Ethan. No one will ever forget her.”

For just this one moment, it’s five years ago and his head is on my chest, listening to my heartbeat while we talk about our mothers.

“Yes, Noah. Now no one will ever forget her.”

“You did it.” His proud smile sends me back to the time I wanted to do all the things that made him look at me this way.

“I needed to see you one last time, Ethan. Before . . .”

“Before what, Noah?”

“Before I take up my post at church as a full-time pastor.” The light in his eyes dies a little at the end of his words.

“You shouldn’t be here, Noah.” I need to keep my head above water. I can’t drown in him now. One of us has to remember the past.

He nods too hard. “I know that. I wouldn’t have come. But this new position . . . it’s a big deal. I wouldn’t have been able to do this—come and see you—after I start.”

“It is a big deal. Congratulations, Noah.”

“Thank you.” But his eyes beg me for things no ordained minister should ever be thinking about. I have to put a stop to this.

“Thank you for coming. When do you go back?” The pain in my chest for asking this question is a knife wound.

He feels it, too. Our pain, our sorrow, is the same. “I have three weeks left. I’ll be gone before Christmas. I’m here as a volunteer at *Cilla’s House* for four weeks.”

I have so many questions. Has he had time to do all the sightseeing people usually come to New York for? Is he truly happy about becoming a pastor? How did he survive the accident?

But I ask none of them, because to ask is to become invested, and we can never be invested in each other ever again.

“I was wondering, uhm, if you would like to have lunch with me.” His words come out in a breathless rush. He looks up at me sharply, as if he hadn’t meant for the words to pop out of his pretty mouth. I have the urge to laugh because, right now, he looks so much like he had all those years ago when I’d whisper swear words in his ear as I took him to the edge and flung him into oblivion. Shocked and shy and bold all at once, while he repeated words that were forbidden from falling out of his mouth.

“Lunch?”

He turns a delicious shade of pink, and breathes shallowly. *Don’t be nervous, Noah.* It’s just me. It’s just us.

He misinterprets my silence.

“Oh, God, I’m sorry, you must have a million things to do. I . . . I should —”

He steps back. And with a sinking feeling that horrifies me, I realize he’s leaving.

The words shoot out of my mouth like a bullet out of a nine-millimeter. “No.”

What the fuck am I doing? This is the opposite of what I should be doing. Then the second bullet. “I’m not busy.” I am, but is there any restraint when it comes to Noah?

I face the sickening realization that every step he takes away from me is like a bullet to the head. I don’t want him to go.

I want to pull his hips against mine to see if he would push his hardness into mine, rub his cock against mine like he used to. If he would hold my head and thrust his dick into my mouth when I bent to suck. Like he used to.

I clear my throat and make one last ditch attempt to keep this from escalating. “Lunch shouldn’t hurt if you’re leaving soon.”

His face lights up, and I remember a shy eighteen-year-old boy trying to tongue lock through the open window of a 2002 Toyota Camry because he’d jumped out of his brand new Mercedes and ran to the Camry for one last kiss. We were high up on the cliff. No one would have seen us.

“We could have a drink?” he says.

“A drink, Noah, baby?” The endearment, unintended, spoken out loud, throws me first. Then him.

His hand moves to rub the side of his neck. My eyes follow the movement.

I want to kiss you right there, Noah, baby.

“You sure you won’t want a chocolate milkshake?” I ask, to distract from the words uttered a second ago, but with that I may as well have said *come here, Noah, baby, I need to feel you one last time.*

Noah’s face flushes.

“Maybe the milkshake for me,” he says, giving up his tough guy act.

He steps forward, only an inch of space between us now. I look down, but his eyes are trained on my open collar. He’s too goddamn close. I want to tip his head backward, taste him, for just one moment.

I fight hard to suppress the urge to back him into the nearest wall, grab his cock, and fist him just the way he likes.

I turn away and buzz Florence from my phone. “Florence, get me a reservation for two at a restaurant close by.”

Turning back to Noah, I dismiss him as gently as I can. “Get the details from Florence on your way out.”

Twenty minutes after Hurricane Noah tore through my office and my perfectly calm and dull life, I find myself still standing on the terrace, trying to figure out what the fuck I’m doing.

I need to get him out of my system, I reason. He said he wanted to see me just one last time before he went back to his life. Maybe I need that too—to see him one last time before he goes back to his life. Prove to myself that things are different now. That we could never be what we were.

I inhale deeply. I have it all figured out. It doesn’t have to get complicated. I’ll wish him a good and happy life. Tell him to travel safely on his way back home. Maybe I’ll ask him for a goodbye hug. Maybe I won’t. How would I be able to touch him and then . . . let him go?

Maurizio’s is a quaint little restaurant on a corner street on West 4th Street.

The light fall of New York snow makes it look all picturesque and whatever. I pull up to the curb and park.

The interior of the restaurant is typical of a small Italian restaurant. The smell of pasta and freshly baked ciabatta and focaccia breads filled the air; the friendly banter of staff—some English and some Italian—flits through the space. If you closed your eyes, you might have thought you were in the home of a simple family in a small Italian village.

I pause at the threshold of the entrance and check my watch. Four o’ clock. It was a monumental task not to arrive too early.

A short, burly man with a shock of black hair rushes to the door just as I enter.

“Mr. Salvatore?” His heavy Italian accent mixes well with a hint of New York. He looks about forty, but it’s very child-like the way he beams up at me.

I shift, endeared, but slightly uncomfortable. Adults who are this happy in real life should be avoided at all costs. I learned a long time ago that there was always something wrong with people who looked *too* happy. Those people don’t last long. Mothers are infamous culprits of people who pretend to be happy. Never trust a mother’s smile. It’s not evidence of her happiness. She hides terrible things behind her smile.

I press my lips in what I hope looks like a smile and nod in acknowledgement. The man holds out his hand.

“Well, what do you know? Mr. Ethan Salvatore.” He clasps my hand in an earth moving shake. “Mr. Salvatore. My name is Maurizio Alessandrini, but you can call me Mauri. Welcome to my humble restaurant. It is such an honor to have you here, sir,” he says with so much enthusiasm and vigor that I manage an actual smile while the older man takes his fill of hand shaking.

I catch a glimpse of Noah at the corner table. He stands, watching the odd exchange taking place at the doorway.

“You made a donation to the Cancer Association, sir,” Mauri says, as he shakes his head, his expression sobering a little. “My son—” He grins sheepishly “—I got a late start. Took me twenty years to convince my girl to marry me and give me a child.” Another sheepish grin. “My boy—he got sponsored by the Cancer Association. Two rounds of chemo. You saved his life, Mr. Salvatore.” His words come out fast and heavy.

I remember the donation. It was a joint venture with one of the members of my Global Impact team, Eli Saxon. We donated a combined amount of seventeen million dollars towards cancer research and treatment for children without access to sufficient healthcare.

“It was a joint effort with my partners, Mr. Alessandrini. I’ll be sure to pass on your thanks.”

“Thank you, sir, thank you. Now, Mr. Salvatore, we make the best pasta in all of New York.” He leans forward as if he’s about to share the secret to eternal life, and his bushy eyebrows gather together severely. “That’s because I use my great grandmama’s secret recipe. No one in all of America knows my great grandmama’s secrets.”

I try for another smile.

“Mr. Salvatore, you will eat the best pasta in all of New York today. Come, I will seat you. Are you eating alone, Mr. Salvatore?”

“No, Mr. Alessandrini,” I finally manage to get a word in. “I’m meeting someone.”

The big man looks around the small space, and Noah lifts his hand when Mauri spots him. I move toward him, and Mauri follows. Mauri’s eyes bounce between me and Noah, and then he beams like he’s discovered something new. “Ah, I see. Look over there, Mr. Salvatore,” he says, pointing to the left wall. The entire wall is covered in splashes of rainbow colors, and, across the space in black letters it says: LOVE IS LOVE AND IF YOU DON’T LIKE IT, MIND YOUR OWN BUSINESS.

“We are all allies here, Mr. Salvatore,” he says, and before I can thank him for his support, he turns to Noah. “You have the kindest man in your company today, sir.”

I look away, avoiding Noah’s gaze. I hate it when people say things like that about me. I feel like a phony.

The older man dances off, barking orders for table number four.

Noah takes his seat. His gaze slides down my body and up again. It won’t be the first time Noah has eaten me up with his eyes.

I remove one leather glove and slide into the chair opposite him. His eyes meet mine across the small space.

Silence.

I watch as he colors under my stare, his eyes darting away from me every now and then. Why does this feel like the rekindling of an old flame?

Nothing can change the past. What we want and what we're allowed to have are two different things.

When Noah finally looks at me again, he has a smile on his face. Fuck, but he's beautiful.

"Everybody loves you," he says, gesturing to Mauri, who is still ranting somewhere near the kitchen.

Noah is still trying to find a way to start a conversation when Mauri returns with a large oval pasta bowl and two forks. "Shrimp and chicken penne," he announces boastfully, and then turns to Noah. "I didn't put green onion for you."

He leans forward as if needing to study Noah's face. "You look like you don't like green onion." Noah blinks in surprise, and I hide a grin. This man is hilarious. And he's right on the money.

The crazy Italian sets down the dish in the middle of the small round table and places a fork on each of the table mats. I catch his eye, and he winks in my direction. Cheeky bastard.

Noah doesn't get the all too obvious ploy because he starts to push the dish toward me. Mauri places his big hand over Noah's and pulls the dish back to the center of the table. The confusion on his face tightens something in my chest. He's still so innocent.

"No, sir," Mauri admonishes gently. "It is one thing to share a meal, but lovers must eat from the same plate sometimes. It keeps marriages strong. That's what my great grandmamma used to say."

Noah's eyes widen, and he starts to protest. But Mauri seems convinced enough, so he walks off before Noah has managed one coherent sentence. His face is on fire and this time I remember all the times before when he blushed this red. All the times he'd let me love him before everything went up in flames.

"Ethan." Noah's voice, soft and husky, drags me back to the present.

The plate of pasta is untouched. "Uh, yes."

Before he can speak again, Mauri returns to check on us. Noticing the pasta hasn't yet been touched, he frowns, and then bends to pick up the unused forks. He hands one to each of us. "Eat," Mauri orders.

Mauri is a funny guy. I oblige him, leaning forward to take a forkful of the creamy white pasta.

Mauri glances at Noah. "No, no, no, no, no. Together," he says, rubbing his hands together. He smiles encouragingly and then moves his hand in a

“come, come now” motion. Noah takes a tentative forkful and parts his lips for the first bite. His tongue comes out to lick a stray drop of pasta sauce off the corner of his top lip.

Well. Fuck.

I take a forkful of food into my mouth and Noah does the same, his smile stretching across his face. Mauri is delighted. “Yes, yes. See? Beautiful.” He claps his hands and bounces off again.

I lean back in my chair, watching Noah openly now. I wish he wouldn’t be so nervous.

“Are you seeing someone?” he asks finally.

“I’m not.” We had never been in the habit of mincing words or lying to each other.

“I followed everything you did, you know.”

“Is that how you ended up at *Cilla’s House*?”

“Yes, I saw the ad.”

“Why didn’t you just come and see me?”

“I tried. Your diary was booked up for eighteen months.”

“You were supposed to have moved on with your life, Noah.”

“How could I have gone on, Ethan? Knowing it was my silence that sent you to prison. I couldn’t live with myself.”

“I made you a promise that I’d protect you at all costs. My life wasn’t much. I was probably better off locked up.”

“You deserved better, Ethan.”

“And you deserved to be protected.”

“I’m living a lie, Ethan. How long must I live this lie?”

“I don’t know, Noah, but your father will never allow this. He’s the only family you have.”

His eyes die a little. I’ve hurt him with my words but he tries to be brave. “But what if *you’re* the only family I want?” he says quietly.

It takes everything out of me not to reach over and pull him into me. “Noah, maybe you wouldn’t have gone around thinking about these things if it weren’t for me getting involved in your life.”

“I hate to break it to you, but you didn’t turn me gay, Ethan,” he says dryly. And then, “And anyway, if it hadn’t been you, it would have been someone else.”

The mood has lifted. I meet his eyes across the table. Fuck, it feels like the good old days. “Someone else? They would have been fuckin’ dead

before they ever laid a finger on you.”

Fire ignites immediately, engulfing us both. I’ve taken us back to a time when I owned every inch of his body.

“No one else will ever touch me, Ethan.”

“Noah, baby,” I whisper, breaking us all over again. “Stop this. Please. Do what you came here to do and go back.”

“I will. I promise. I understand, Ethan. I didn’t come here for anything. I only wanted to see you one last time. I swear, it was nothing more than that.”

I can’t let us carry on like this.

“You’re here for three more weeks?”

“Yes.”

“Promise me you’ll go back.”

“I promise. Maybe I’ll come back when he’s old.”

I scoff. “You mean, *dead*?”

He gasps.

I lean forward with narrowed eyes. “I wish he would die so whatever hold he has on you can go with him to the grave, and I can take you back.” I shouldn’t have said that last part, but there’s no use dwelling on it now.

He’s silent for a time after that. I hope his silence is because he feels the weight of our situation too.

“Tell me about yourself, Ethan. There isn’t that much on the internet, except for your charities.”

I take his lead to tread on safer territory.

“I went into software engineering. I write code for a few government agencies.”

He smiles, impressed. “You’re very smart, Ethan.”

“I guess I am.”

“Your business is doing well.” It could have been an observation or a question. I’m not sure.

“People pay good money for stuff they don’t understand and don’t know how to do.”

He cocks his head toward my car, parked in view just outside. “Don’t you have a chauffeur?”

“What’s the point of owning cars like and letting someone else drive it?”

“You’re totally right. It’s a beautiful car. You deserve all the good things, Ethan.”

“You do too, Noah.”

Fuck, how easy it is to fall into these soft moments.

His tongue comes out to swipe at a drop of pasta sauce. I try to look away. It's too late. The image of me sucking on Noah's tongue is already firmly etched into my brain. If I'm not careful, I'll fuck him the first chance I get before he leaves this city.

He turns serious. “I want to apologize, Ethan. Properly. For all the trouble all those years ago. For everything.”

“We would have had to end it at some point, Noah.” We were forced to stop in the end, but it doesn't mean it wasn't the right thing to happen.

“Sometimes, I wonder what would have happened if he hadn't caught us.”

I'd have fucked him every single day of our lives until we *did* get caught. But I've spent five years trying to live a life my mother would be proud of, and I have to remember that the life I have now doesn't include Noah.

Noah's life is about hiding and conforming and pretending. He's not brave enough to choose his own happiness, and I can't make him brave. I learnt how to be brave when my mother died and having anything to do with Noah now would force me to make myself small and invisible, and I can't do that. I'm not the punk I used to be. Too many people depend on me to be bold and unapologetic about my values and my views about the world.

And knowing that I can never have him ignites a ball of rage inside me. And as ashamed as I am over it, it's Noah that I feel this rage for. We're adults, functioning at some level of sanity to admit some of the truth. We can be as gentle as we like about it, but the truth is all Noah had to do was stand up for himself as soon as he could and tell our father that the sex had been consensual.

And all *I* had to do was stand up for myself and plead not guilty. Noah couldn't muster the courage, and I was complicit in his choice by acting like a martyr. Protecting him before protecting myself. Would I do it again? Yes. But it doesn't mean it would be the right choice no matter how many times I'd choose his well-being over mine.

We both lost. Noah is still in the closet. I'm a convicted sex offender who bought my way out of prison. And he *still* won't tell the truth.

“Would we still have been together if he hadn't caught us?” Noah presses.

“Yes,” I tell him honestly. “But it would have ended in disaster no matter which way you look at it. The world you live in is too cruel for you.” Just like it had been too cruel for my mother.

“What if I just stayed here? I could live here. I could live here with you.”

I allow the beginning of a smile. He says it so innocently. Like it’s so simple. “As brothers?”

“As whatever we are.”

“In secret? Will you have to hide me? Will I have to hide you?”

He falters and my rage is instant. It’s all encompassing. I’m angry with this fucking world that won’t let me have him.

I’m angry with myself because I don’t blame him for his choices any more than I blame my mother for hers. They are the same: too fragile for this world. Too weak to stand up against John Evanson and against the fucking church. But I’m also angry that he won’t stand up. Just the same way my mother never stood up.

“Go back home, Noah. There’s nothing left of us. Things are the way they’re supposed to be.” I say it with all the gentleness I can muster, fighting my way through the deep ache inside my soul.

“You’re right,” he says after a long time. His smile is forced. “Of course, you’re right,” he repeats with manufactured conviction. “I just wanted to, you know . . . I didn’t want it hanging over us anymore. I’ve been carrying it around with me for a long time, and I know you have too. It feels like an insult to say thank you for what you did for me, so I’ll say it like this: thank you for protecting me.” He’s babbling. “But anyway, yes. You’re right, things are the way they’re supposed to be. I didn’t come here with any hidden agendas, Ethan. I just came to make things right. As right as things could be made, I suppose.”

“You have, Noah.” And then, what else can I do but end this meeting. What needed to be said has been said. “I need to go,” I say, while everything in me begs for just one more moment with him.

He nods, a terrible reluctance reflecting in his eyes. A war in his soul too.

I fish out my wallet. I know it looks rude, cutting the meeting short while he’s still eating, but I don’t think I can sit here with him another minute. A sourness settles in my stomach for this parting of ways but it has to be done. There is no middle ground with me and Noah. It’s all or nothing. And right now, it’s nothing. There’s no other way around it.

“Stay. Finish your food,” I tell him, rising from my chair.

He shakes his head. "I'll go too."

Mauri kicks up a terrible fuss about us leaving so early and, after several reassurances that I would return for more pasta—with Noah—the nice but slightly overbearing man lets us leave.

It's colder than expected today. Noah rubs his unclad hands together, then balls them up and blows into the tunnels he's made with his fists. In a different version of reality, I could have, perhaps, pulled him close and gotten him warm.

I pull off my gloves and hand them over to him. He takes them after a beat. "Thank you." His voice is soft, almost a whisper.

We stand there stupidly for a forever moment, looking at each other.

"So, I'll see you then," he says, rubbing the side of his neck with one hand.

It's impossible not to touch him. My hand moves to the hand at his neck, my fingers closing over his hand. "You're going to make a great pastor, Noah."

I bring his hand to his side, intending to release my loose grip but he turns his hand, locking our fingers together. "Do you really believe that, Ethan? You know me better than anyone in this world. How can I be a good pastor after . . . after everything I did with you?"

"God will forgive you."

"How can He forgive me for something I'm not sorry for?"

I don't know what to tell him. I don't have the words he's looking for. And I can never again allow for us to have secrets. Five years ago he showed me in various ways the things he needed, and I gave him everything I had to give. Even now, in this moment, I want him with every breath I take and I know he'll come willingly if I ask it of him but his absolute terror of coming out remains as much an obstacle now as it had then.

"He's a loving God, remember? He'll understand. You won't go to hell, Noah."

Noah smooths a stray strand of hair and clears his throat. "I know things will never be the same. I—I don't expect them to. But we should break up. Officially. We never got a chance for that, even."

Oh, Noah, baby. I can't bear to look at the agony in his eyes. But if this is what he needs to go back to the life he knows, what else can I do but give it to him? When have I ever refused this man anything?

He steps closer until he's only a breath away, turning his face up to mine. "Please, Ethan. Just give me the words," he says in a half whisper. "I know we're grown men and I'm being stupid. Maybe I just need this one last thing. I won't ask you for anything else, I promise."

"Noah . . ." I choke out. I'm not sure if the strain in my voice is because of my heart breaking or because of the proximity of his mouth.

"Please, Ethan. We won't ever see each other again after this. I promise. I'll work at *Cilla's House*, then I'll leave quietly. But this is the very last time I'll see you, Ethan. Help me close this part of my life. Just say the words. Tell me it's over between us."

Oh, Noah, baby, I want to take you home and fuck you right into the fucking heavens. To taste every inch of your body again. To suck inside your thighs and leave marks.

I do as he says. "It's over between us." I've killed us both.

He leans forward and, for a millisecond, rests his forehead on my chest. A familiar move. One where I must then cradle the back of his head and kiss the top of his head. When he looks up again, those gray eyes are searching. I keep my hands locked at my sides.

Stop looking for us, Noah, baby. We don't exist anymore.

"Do you forgive me for what happened?" His voice is breaking me.

"There is nothing to forgive," I say gruffly but I can't hold his gaze. Because I'm only human. I can forgive him for his fear, but I'll never forgive him for loving his father and his God more than he loved me.

I accepted whatever he could give me, but, fuck if I hadn't wished he'd given me all, like I'd given him all; if I hadn't raged silently sometimes over the fact that if there was one other person in the world I wished would have chosen me, I'd have wished for it to have been him. But he turned out to be just like my mother. There was not enough courage to fight. She chose to die, instead. And Noah chose to live a lie, as if he were dead.

"Thank you," Noah says. His mouth lifts in a smile so sad it would have made angels cry. He brushes past me, then stops and turns.

"Ethan?" I turn to him. "Do you remember—?"

My eyes locked with his. He shakes his head. "Never mind." And he walks away.

The present collides with a distant past, because all I see as I tear down First Avenue are sad, gray eyes. The eyes from a faraway time are more dead than sad. Noah's eyes at least still had some life in them.

I put both out of my mind.

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CHAPTER 41

Noah

It's over between us.

I asked him to break my heart. I prepared for it. Made myself ready for this unimaginable heartbreak. But even with all my preparations, I cannot bear this loss.

I'm unable to continue in this world. I can't bear to live in a world where I can't rest inside Ethan. How will I go on after seeing him again? I'm a liar. I said I'll come and see him, say sorry, and leave. But I can't leave. I can't leave him.

My body is curled into a ball on my stiff mattress, my tears long soaked into the scratchy blanket beneath my cheek.

Maybe I'll go to sleep and just never wake up again. Maybe the world is better off without me. Look at what Ethan has done with his life. What valuable contribution have I made to this world? I'm just a homeless child who got left outside by the gutter one day. If I'd died that day, no one would have noticed or cared. Why should it be different now?

Why did Evanson come and get me? Why did he bring me to Ethan only to take Ethan away from me almost immediately afterwards.

My tears choke me. My temples throb with the force of my despair. No amount of reasoning can stop these wretched tears.

Lying in this bed, I search for all of my broken pieces so I can examine each one and try my best to find Ethan in each piece. I don't have to search for long. He is in every shattered piece of my being.

He's there on Christmas when I opened my gifts even when he had none to open. He's at my birthday party even when he's never had one the entire time I lived with him. At my sports games when my father was nowhere to be found even when he promised he'd be there. Ethan is there in all my first moments. My first kiss. My first love. He's there in my fear. In my joy, in my insecurity, in my weakness.

Oh, Ethan. Wait for me, please. I'll come out. Please, just give me one last chance to gather my courage. *Please help me, God. Father in heaven, help me. Help me. Please, I beg you. Help me. Let me have Ethan. Please. Let me have Ethan.*

My phone lights up near my head. More of my father's texts. In an unprecedented fit of rage, I hurl the phone across the room. My internal screams drown out the roars of fury. *Stop. Just stop. Just fucking stop.*

The screams are inside my head, but I can hear them as if someone is screaming inside my ear. The anguish doesn't end. *It's all your fault. You did this to us.* Choking on my sobs, I hurl accusations at my father. Ethan's father. It's all his fault. He did this to us.

Unable to soothe my grief over this unbearable loss, I reach for Ethan's gloves. Holding them to my heart, I pray like I've never prayed before.

Heavenly Father, please give me just one more chance. Just one more chance to see him. And then, I give you my word, I'll never ask for him again. I'll never again ask you to make this one exception to let me be with Ethan.

I fall asleep, Ethan's name a prayer on my lips.

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CHAPTER 42

Ethan

A cigarette dangles from between my thumb and index finger. It hadn't been ashed since I lit it up five minutes earlier.

Sad, gray eyes have haunted me for the last three days. I close my eyes and think about how my life has always been just one fuck up after another, as if I was made for this kind of shit.

Before Noah, I didn't give a fuck about the future. About life or happiness. But after him, there was just so much to *lose*.

He was Pastor Evanson's perfect son and my brother. I knew he was off limits.

Our father must have been hailed as a picture of integrity when he made his announcement to his precious church.

If my son is guilty, he must face the laws of our country that now sit in judgment of him. My prayer is that he seeks the Lord's forgiveness, and that he holds himself accountable for this sin. According to Jono, who went into church that day like an undercover government agent, the congregation had agreed to stand with the great pastor while he faced this battle from the devil.

No one knew Noah was the supposed victim, but everyone got the news that I had sexually assaulted someone. Luckily, people don't care for long, and I've made sure that part of my life never creeps into this part of my life. But with Noah here now, the lines have become blurred.

I pinch off the burning end of my cigarette. The rage that I keep in check so well concerning my father now boils over, and my breathing comes in short gasps. If only that adoring congregation who had flogged Evanson with sobs of sympathy knew what I know about their precious, fucking preacher.

If that ransomware attack hadn't happened at Central prison and if I was even one percent less smart, I'd still be rotting away.

The phone on my desk buzzes. I flick the stub of my unsmoked cigarette into the ashtray and head back inside.

"Ethan, I have Noah downstairs." Florence's voice is open annoyance, because once again, Noah has arrived without an appointment. "You have

ten minutes before your meeting with Jonathan,” she adds after a moment. “Do you want me to let him through?”

“Yes, let him through.”

“You sure?”

No. I’m not sure. I steady my breathing, run my hands through my hair. This isn’t working out the way we’d agreed. “Yes. I’m sure it won’t be long.”

Florence sighs but knows not to ask questions.

Less than two minutes later, Noah is inside my office. I stare at him across the room, feeling stupidly grateful for the massive oak desk separating us.

In his hands, he holds a pair of gloves. Mine, from three days ago. Noah squares his shoulders and clears his throat—a poor attempt at looking controlled.

The demons I’d been fighting since that first day have all come back seven times stronger each time. The depth of the ever-present ache I feel for Noah, the sadness of what should have been but never was, and the bursts of rage over all of it has been suffocating the last few days. It’s like I’m operating on at least three different personalities. One where I want him with my entire being. Another where I hate him so much it makes me sick. And another still, where I want to hang on a cross like Jesus so Noah would choose me.

We agreed that it would end the day at the restaurant, yet, all I can think of now, while he stands in front of me, is wrapping him in my arms and forgetting everything. Of touching him, talking with him.

He walks around the desk until he’s standing in front of me. *Too damn close*. His hands come up, and he presses the gloves to my chest.

“I just wanted to return your gloves. Thank you for letting me in.” He looks tired. Hasn’t he been sleeping well?

He looks like the shy, composed Christian boy I’d grown up with. Who would ever guess how fucking wild he really is. For all his soft, shy composure and his Christian values, there is a part of him that’s just so fuckin’ ungodly. The thought makes me hard.

I raise my hand to take the gloves. My hand closes over his, drinking in every contour of his face. *Just one kiss*. I beg all the unholy gods. *Let me have just one fucking kiss*.

“I knew, when everybody got to know the real you, they’d love you too,” he says softly. His last word of that statement is not lost on me. His tongue comes out to lick his bottom lip. His eyes flick up to lock with mine and then drops to my mouth as he turns his face upward and parts his lips.

“Just one kiss, Ethan.” he whispers against my mouth.

I can’t. I just fucking can’t do this again no matter how much I want to. “No, Noah,” I whisper.

“Please don’t say no,” he whispers.

“Please, Noah,” I beg, even as my head dips.

“Please, Ethan. Just once,” he begs back, reaching for me.

Just one kiss. I release the hand resting against my chest. My palms come up to grasp each side of his throat, my thumbs stroking his cheeks.

My mouth is on his, hard and forceful. I thrust my tongue against his teeth, demanding that he open for me immediately. And fuck me, he opens, a moan coming from deep in his throat, a sound so full of the need that mirrors the raging fire inside me.

Noah’s hands clutch the front of my shirt, and he leans heavily against my body for support. My hands drop to grip his hips. Pulling him closer I hold him firmly against me. Fucking Christ, like always, he submits immediately, and Noah’s submission crushes any sliver of doubt or reason that might have lingered in my mind.

I am rock hard for him.

I push into his stomach so he will feel exactly what he does to me. Maybe the reality of it all will scare him into ending this madness, because God knows I cannot drag myself away from him now. A gasp escapes his now swollen lips and Noah pushes into my erection. Holy Jesus Christ.

He throws his head back, angling just right for me to feast on his jaw, his throat. Soft, smooth flesh, freshly shaved, betrayed only by the furious beating pulse at his throat. *Oh, Noah, baby. It’s been so long.*

His fingers fist into my hair, and he drags me up to his mouth again. This time, the kiss is different. Hot, wild, greedy. I’m just one fucking breath away from ripping off his clothes.

All I can think about is getting my hands on his naked skin. Noah is as lost as I am. There is no one to bring us back. His body begs me as mine begs him for a connection deeper than this. A kind of touch more than skin deep. Together we race to that place reserved for us when we are like this together. This is what we were. This is what we can never be again.

It's only when the phone on my desk buzzes that I realize I have him on my desk, both my hands inside his shirt and his leg wrapped around my waist.

I jerk back as if a bomb has exploded in my head.

What am I doing? What *the fuck* am I doing?

Noah raises his head, his breathing totally out of control. Fuck, I'm fucking panting too. He makes no attempt to move, and I frown at my delight in having Noah on my desk, gasping. In the old days, we didn't have these massive, solid wood desks to fuck on, but I'll bet every last dime I have that, if I swiped everything off this desk right this minute, Noah would open his body up for me like a fucking flower blooming in the spring.

I disentangle my fingers from his hair and lean over to answer this distraction. "Yes, Florence." My voice is hoarse. I clear my throat.

"Your meeting with Jonathan is coming up." And then after a pointed pause, she adds, "I asked him to give you a few minutes. He's grabbing a latte."

Florence is my best friend; I swear. Because I definitely need a fucking minute to get my shit together. And if those still dreamy eyes are anything to go by, Noah is going to need a minute, too.

I rake my hands through his hair, hoping to get some order in it as Noah scrambles off my desk. My lips curl up in some kind of fucked-up satisfaction as I watch him scurry to bring his own appearance to some kind of order. *We're still so good together, Noah, baby.*

When Jono walks through the door, he wastes no time telling me that it was most definitely Noah Evanson who'd passed him when he exited the elevator twenty seconds ago.

I stop him about half way. "Not now, Jono."

"You've got to be fucking kidding me." He carries on as if I hadn't spoken.

I sigh heavily, dragging my hand down my face. Sometimes, I could do without a friend like Jono. Times when I want to completely fuck something up and want nobody there to stop me. "Not now, Jono," I repeat.

"What the fuck was that all about?" he demands.

"Fuck, I don't know."

"Why did he come here?"

I lean all the way back in my chair and close my eyes. "He's my brother, Jono. He's allowed to visit me."

I try again. “He returned my gloves.”

Jono glances at the floor. “You mean these gloves?” he asks dryly, leaning over and dramatically straightening my laptop, which is currently facing the left wall, as if he needs me to know that *he knows* Noah didn’t *just* return the gloves.

“I’m fuckin’ losing my mind, bro.”

“We’re going to talk about it after this meeting,” he says, dropping the first draft of our revised reverse engineering malware process document onto my desk with a thud. “And fix your fucking hair, Ethan.”

I send the process document back to the security analysts with notes on their Reconstruction of High Level Logic. Jono gave me the third degree about leaving the past where it belongs before he left, and I had nothing to offer in my or Noah’s defense.

What Noah and I have—had—was always going to be there. On an intellectual level, I can admit that not being together is not about how we *feel*. I can admit that given the first opportunity to be with him I would. I’d steal that boy away and never let him go. Because our demons don’t exist between us. Our demons are the outside world. People. Theology. God. Remove those things, and nothing would stop us. But those outside factors *do* exist. There is no ambiguity there.

My feelings for Noah are as true today as they were when he gazed up at me and asked me to tell him what it felt like to be kissed. But what is all of it worth? We are the ocean on opposite ends of the world: you can’t separate us, but no matter how much we try we will never come together.

Salvatore Tech owns the most powerful cyber security tools in the world. We dominate in every single country, and we make millions. I have more money than I’ll ever be able to spend.

Five years ago, one of the things I struggled to deal with was the fact that I was going nowhere slowly, and Noah was this golden, pampered child. Even if there had been a chance for us, I had nothing to offer him. I was never going to accept the trust fund my mother left for me. I never wanted to profit from her death. And I was not going to get rich on the money of a man who smiled for the cameras with his young wife and child at his side, basked in the love and admiration of thousands of church goers every week

then went home and subjected that wife to sexual acts that terrified and shamed her so much she died from it.

Now, I have all this money and still; it's not enough to have Noah.

I turn away from the computer screen, close my eyes. My mother's sad, gray eyes swim behind my eyelids. But these eyes are not just sad. They're dead. Like their soul has retreated into some dark corner, blocking out the vicious atrocities being committed against their body. For the first six years of my life, in every picture and in almost every memory stored in my head, all I saw were sad gray eyes. It was her eyes that never let me trust her smile, no matter how radiant it was. My mother was always sad. Her eyes were always sad.

Most of the time, I can't bear to think about it. Now, I allow myself just one moment to remember. I think of a timid, innocent, sheltered eighteen-year-old girl. Of the destruction and devastation of those last few minutes before my conception. The shame, the terror, the pain my mother must have felt in those final moments before I was forced into her womb. Her cries of hopelessness because she knew she hadn't had the strength to fight back. Then the marriage that followed. A marriage to protect the reputation of the church. Because not even the great Evanson lineage would have withstood the scandal of the future pastor having raped and impregnated the elder's only daughter.

And they let her down too. Her parents. She wrote all about it in her diary. They hated what happened to her, but they made her keep quiet about it. She was already pregnant, so she had to get married.

All that was left after that had been the sad, gray eyes of a brutalized young girl.

I exhale, the poking pain in my chest telling me that I had stopped breathing for a time. Florence's voice breaks into my thoughts. "Ethan, John Evanson on the line for you. He won't say if there is any relation to Noah Evanson." The pen I'd been holding against my lip falls with a menacing clatter. Florence clears her throat. "May I put him through?"

The shock reverberating through me is palpable. The past is ramming itself into the present, making it hard to know which is which. "Put him through."

I pick up the handheld. "Salvatore," I bark into the earpiece. Because I'm not a street punk anymore.

"Ethan."

His voice is exactly as I remember it. He's using the same threatening tone now that he used when he told me what he would do to Noah if I didn't answer his questions exactly the way he told me to.

You sexually assaulted Noah Evanson.

I did.

"Ethan." he repeats.

"What can I do for you, Evanson? I can't imagine what business you and I could possibly have. And you have some nerve calling my office."

"Actually, we do have some business that I'd like to discuss with you. I'd like to meet in person."

My grip on the handheld is reaching its breaking point. Over my dead fucking body.

"It's about Noah."

Jesus, fuck. "Are you aware that I am in New York City?"

"So am I. We'll meet somewhere close to Fourth Avenue."

"Hawkins on Fifth Avenue. Tell them you're meeting me," I bark. "Seven p.m."

I disconnect the line without saying goodbye.

Hawkins is one of the most exclusive clubs on the Upper West Side. "Mr. Salvatore, good to see you again," Annabelle Thompson, the club's concierge, greets me at the door.

I hand my coat over to her for the catch-all. "Good to see you too, Anna."

"Lounge, sir?"

"Yes, please. I'm meeting John Evanson."

"Yes, Mr. Salvatore. He's at the bar. I'll bring him through."

I nod once and make my way to the private lounge on the far west end. *I'm not a loser anymore.* I repeat the words in my head as I walk, working hard to remind myself that this is my world, and Evanson is an unwelcome visitor. In my world, I'm the one in charge. I'm not a fucking loser anymore.

Samantha, my hostess, greets me at the doorway. "Mr. Evanson will join you in a moment, Mr. Salvatore," she says. "Can I get you your lobster risotto, or would you prefer something else this evening?"

"Nothing to eat, Samantha," I reply. This is not a fine dining experience.

Samantha leads the way to my usual table, and, before she turns to leave, she says, “Mr. Salvatore, my apologies to you and Mr. Archer for your ribeye being over-sauced the last time you were here.”

I shrug. Jono had made a passing comment about it, and I barely remember the evening. But when your membership is twenty thousand dollars a year plus four thousand for the one-time initiation fee, remembering to apologize for an over-sauced ribeye is apparently important.

I rest my phone and car keys on the table before sinking into the comfortable nubuck leather chair. On the polished coffee table nearby, a sealed pack of Marlboros and a scotch waits.

I look around the familiar setting, swirling the scotch in my hand. Every inch of the place screams class, from the solid walnut bar to the hand-carved fireplace to the exotic cocktails. Class and money. But what's money worth if this is all I get out of it? Noah's reappearance has brought up some disturbing feelings. Feelings that make a man with everything that money can buy think about all the things that money can't buy. Peace. Love, maybe. A connection to another human being that has nothing to do with material wealth.

“Mr. Salvatore, Mr. Evanson, sir.”

I snap my head up, stand, and face the man who almost made good on his promise to destroy me.

He looks exactly the same. I haven't seen this bastard in five years, but he looks like he hasn't aged a single minute. His broad-framed shoulders puff out, making him seem bigger than his six-foot-three. His eyes study me with disdain. It's like looking into a mirror. I hate how much like him I look.

The thin line of his mouth twists downward with hatred and disapproval, even as he stands on the grounds of a building that I could buy and own within fifteen minutes if I wanted to.

I clench my jaw and steel myself against the rage that this man still disapproves of me even when I have grown up to be better than him in every imaginable way.

Samantha gestures for Evanson to take the seat across from me. Evanson watches me for a moment. I return the icy glare without a hint of trepidation. Not a street punk anymore. Samantha places a bottle of water and a glass on the table.

Evanson ignores her and the drink. His eyes are fixed on me. “Noah arrived in New York City a few weeks ago.” He leans back into his seat, rubs his cheek.

I say nothing.

“He’s on a sabbatical. A much needed rest before he takes up his position at church.”

Radio silence from me.

“Have you seen Noah?”

I ignore the question. “What’s this all about, Evanson?”

“Have you seen my son, Ethan?” he repeats through gritted teeth, his voice dripping with contempt.

I lean back into my chair, taking a swing of the gold liquid. “I don’t have to tell you anything.”

Evanson motions around the lounge and sneers. “You think all this makes you special?”

I force myself to keep my expression devoid of the impact this one statement has made. No, I don’t think all of this makes me special. In fact, most days I feel like an imposter.

Evanson leans forward, his face twisted into a snarl. “It doesn’t matter how much money you have, you are still your mother’s child. All you’re good for is destroying good things. You tried it with Noah, and, if it hadn’t been for me, you’d have succeeded.” Then with a nasty smirk he says, “And I hope you are more, uh, cautious in your . . . *dealings* with other men these days.” He spits out *other men*.

A hiss escapes through my teeth. I hate this man more than anything in this world.

Evanson chuckles and it's a dirty, ugly sound. “I know men like you, Ethan. Pedophiles. I’m here to remind you that I am still a very important man. I could still topple this little house of cards you’ve built. My son is not like you. He’s not vile and despicable. He’s a man of *God*, like me. You think he’ll give up *God* for the likes of *you*?”

“Why are you really here? To tell me to stay away from him?”

“Stay away from him, Ethan, or, I swear to God, I’ll ruin you. Again. I’ll let the whole world know that not only are you a convicted sex offender but that you willingly admitted it. And don’t think Noah will say one word in your defense. My son knows he’s a man of God.” He smirks. “And this time, you won’t weasel your way out of it. Whatever you did inside Central

Prison to get out and end up here—” he waves his hand around the room — “you won’t be so lucky if I were to tell the world that you’re nothing but a pedophile. You know very well how influential I am. Just the publicity would be a PR nightmare for you.”

The fucking cunt is right to some degree. Guilty or innocent, the publicity will, in fact, ruin what I’ve built; completely discredit me in the eyes of my peers, close friends, and business associates and destroy very important relationships from which millions of people depend on and benefit from. Except, he’ll never be able to prove it. I double and triple checked, and there is not a single shred of evidence—digital or physical—that exists anymore. It’s like it never happened. He may be able to cause a small scandal among his church circles, but without evidence, it’ll all be just hot air.

Still, it’ll be a problem I’d rather not have to deal with. I’m not scared of Evanson, but I *am* a little pissed that Noah showing up in my life has also dragged this asshole back into my life.

His lips curl up into that ugly sneer again. “You can build safe houses, move in the big leagues, pump money into whatever charity you want,” he spits out, “but, when America learns that you were convicted of sexually assaulting your *brother*, what do you think that’s gonna do for your precious reputation? You’ll be finished.”

“You wouldn’t drag Noah into this.” He kept Noah out of it the first time.

“This time, if I have to, I will.”

Everything in me roars for vindication from a crime I didn’t commit. Only Noah’s soft eyes flashing through my mind keeps me from screaming that it had been fucking *consensual*. That Noah *wanted* it. That his precious son is fucking *gay*, and in love with me as much as I am in love with him, even after all these fucking years.

“Noah is engaged to be married. *To a woman.*”

It’s like being shot in the head and having the bullet narrowly miss blowing out your brains. At first it’s like something exploded inside your flesh and you feel your skin tearing away. There’s a burning, crushing sensation that leaves you paralyzed. And finally, your brain screams as it processes the searing bolts of pain, radiating outward from the point of impact while your body prepares for survival mode.

I rise to my feet, grab my keys and phone. I am in survival mode. I fight to keep my brain from fracturing. I won’t be able to keep this facade of

control for much longer.

Evanson rises to his feet too. "Where do you think you're going?"

I'm going to pay my little brother a little visit.

"We're not done here," the older man bites out.

"Yes. We are." I sound like a razor blade sliding across your eyeball.

"And don't worry about the bill, the club has already charged it to my card," I say, and I stride out without a backward glance.

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CHAPTER 43

Noah

My phone pings.

Unknown number: *Are you alone?*

Creepy, horror movie one-oh-one, except, this isn't creepy at all.

Me: *You have my number?*

Unknown number: . . .

Okay. Stupid question.

Me: *Yes. I'm alone*

My heart pounds, a beat so familiar to my ears when Ethan is involved. *Yes, I'm alone.* The only words that ever mattered back then when our father was away on a conference and I could sneak Ethan into the house. We fucked so hard and fast sometimes I'd still feel his glorious invasion of my body when I preached the Sunday evening youth sermon the next day.

It isn't even fifteen seconds, and my door rattles with three confident bangs.

I scramble off the bed, my blood singing and my heart rocketing to the heavens. When I pull the door open, everything in the universe slows down. Nothing exists, not even the universal tick of the seconds passing us by, time standing still just for us, just for this moment.

His eyes bore into mine, and, when I raise my face to meet his gaze, I know every plan I ever made to erase him from my life has already shattered into irreparable fragments. I'm not sure why he's here but it doesn't matter. It only matters that he's here.

"Come in." What comes out of my mouth is a croak.

He strides in, giving the room a disapproving once-over.

"Why are you living like this?" he snaps. Despite his visible agitation, I don't miss the demanding softness in his voice. He's worried about me.

"Like what?" I ask.

He waves his hand from side to side. "Like . . . fucking *this*, Noah. Don't act dumb." He glares at me, and I'm slightly taken aback by his annoyance.

Wrapping my arms around my torso, I lift my left shoulder in a shrug. "I didn't want to take too much of our father's money."

“You need to tell me what’s going on here.” Again, that hardness in his voice which only yields a greater sense of safety even if he looks like he wants to strangle me.

“It was the best I could afford for a month-long stay.”

He looks around and I stand next to him, waiting for him to finish his inspection. “You need to tell me exactly why you’re living in squalor, firstly.”

“It’s not squalor, Ethan. This is how regular people with no money live. You just think I was born with a silver spoon in my mouth. I wasn’t, you know. This is probably how my mom and I lived before I came to live with you.”

His eyes narrow. “Does your father know you’re living like this?”

“No. He thinks I’m living at a retreat center in Garrison. And I want to keep it that way.”

“You’re still leaving in a few weeks, right?”

“I don’t know anymore.”

“What the fuck does that mean?”

I remain rooted to the spot, a worried frown creasing my forehead. “Ethan, have I done something wrong? I won’t go to your office again if that’s what this is about. Your secretary told me your diary is full for the next whole year so I know—”

“This sabbatical of yours, Noah. Are you sure it’s not some kind of extended bachelor party for one?”

Oh God. “How do you know about that?” I breathe. I have never seen Ethan so angry.

“So, it’s true then?”

“How did you find out?”

“Your fucking father thought it was necessary to fly out here to tell me. What happened, Noah? Did my invitation get lost in the mail?”

“He’s here?” My voice shakes.

There’s a moment of softness that passes through his eyes but it’s gone in an instant. “Yes,” he hisses. “Noah, if you told me you were bi and you wanted to marry this girl, I could let you go. If that is what made you happy, I would fucking let you go. But this? This fucking lie you’re living? How much more miserable do you want to make yourself?”

“It’s not what you think, Ethan,” I breathe. I’ll have to deal with my father coming to New York later because Ethan is talking like I’m still his,

and I don't know if I can let that go. I don't know if he remembers that we officially broke up outside a small Italian restaurant not so long ago. I've cried so many tears over that day.

"Then what is it, Noah?" His voice booms, bouncing off the walls angrily. It shouldn't make any sense, the way he's acting because there's nothing between us, but the words not spoken between us since the day at *Cilla's House* have been loud and clear.

"You don't understand, Ethan," I shoot back. "I didn't say yes."

"Well, did you fucking say no? Did you say anything at all?"

I struggle to answer. He's calling me out on my spinelessness. He's not just asking about this engagement. I'm hearing all the unspoken accusations—both his and my own:

When you woke up from the hospital, did you say anything at all?

When you heard about the sexual assault conviction, did you say anything at all?

When they sent you to conversion therapy, did you say anything at all?

When you returned from bible school, did you say anything at all?

"Yeah, that's what I fucking thought. It's one thing to live a fucking lie, but to live it with a whole other human being for the rest of your fucking life? Where is your courage, Noah?" He hurls the words at me.

"I have none," I hurl back. "I have *none*. I'm not like you. I'm not some fucking trailblazer out there saving the world. I'm just some fucking loser who'll have to get on my knees and pray tonight for using a stupid word like *fucking* because I'm too fucking scared of burning in fucking hell. I live my life in fear of punishment every single day."

Something in me snaps, and I go on a rampage. "You think I like being like this? Every fucking morning, I wake up, and I can't stand to look in the mirror. I hate my life. I *hate* myself for being this spineless idiot who has no control over his life. Do you think I *want* to live like this, Ethan? Do you think I don't wake up every fucking morning and tell myself that today is the day I come out. I'll tell everyone, and I won't care about what they have to say about it."

Hysteria pumps in my blood. "But I'm so scared. I'm so fucking scared, Ethan, and I hate myself for being so weak. I *hate* myself. I hate—"

"Stop talking, Noah." The edge in Ethan's voice is unmistakable.

I can't, despite the warning in his voice. "I *fucking hate myself*," I yell. I'm losing my sane mind. "I wish I was dead. I should have died in that

fucking gutter.”

“If you don’t shut up, I’m going to shut you up,” he grinds out.

But I don’t care anymore. “I wish I was dead,” I blurt out. “I wish I’d never woken up from that coma. I go to sleep hoping I won’t wake up. I want to fucking *die*, Ethan. I don’t know how to live without you. I wish I was dead. I wish I was fucking dea—”

It all happens so fast. At first, I’m a babbling mess, self-deprecating words pouring out of my mouth. The next moment, Ethan is advancing toward me, unbuckling his belt. I hardly have time for the words to die on my lips. He moves in one clean motion.

Ethan grabs me by the back of my head. At the same time he drops onto the bed, yanking me to my knees between his legs and slams my face into his groin. On instinct, I open my mouth and take his cock all the way.

“I *said*, shut the *fuck up*, Noah,” he hisses.

Holy Jesus Christ. I gag trying to take him into my throat. He fists my hair and pulls my head back. I protest the separation from Ethan’s cock, but I needn’t have worried. He slams my face back into his groin, and I suck that dick for all I’m worth, shameless for the fact that this isn’t the kind of blowjob I’m meant to enjoy.

“You want to fucking die?” he growls. He pulls me off his cock, his hand buried in my hair, pulling until I’m forced to look up at him. “You promised. You fucking promised you would never do that. Liar,” he hisses. “You’re a fucking liar. A spineless liar who’d rather fucking die than fight for what you want?” For just one moment, I see a flash of Evanson’s cruelty in Ethan’s eyes. But—

Oh, God. Tears stream down my face. It’s not cruelty. He’s hurt. I broke a sacred promise.

I would never leave you like that.

Ethan doesn’t deserve pain, but, if he did for whatever reason, this—the words I have just uttered—was too much. I made him a promise that I would never do what his mother did, and I took it back with a few careless words.

“Ethan, I’m sorry—”

He doesn’t care. He slams my face back down onto his dick. “You can go back to your cozy, little life in North Carolina and tell your soon-to-be fucking *wife* what you’ve been doing on your knees while you were out

here on your little, fucking sabbatical,” he snarls, while he controls the movement of my head, directing his own blowjob.

“You can tell your fucking *wife* how much you loved sucking your brother’s cock.”

My dick leaks in my pants. I moan around Ethan’s cock, my saliva leaking out of the corners of my mouth. He pulls at my hair again, but I grab hold of his wrist, yanking his hand away and holding it to his thigh. I need to suck this cock. For five years, I dreamed about this dick.

I leave his cock for a second, pulling his face down to mine. “One day, I’ll tell *everyone* how much I love sucking my brother’s cock. I’ll come out one day. I know I can’t ask this of you. I can’t ask you to wait for me, but don’t forget me, Ethan. Don’t forget *us*,” I tell him desperately.

“Forget you?” he spits out. A soft, hateful sound. “Can a man forget his brother, Noah? After knowing you the way I did, can I ever forget you?”

“I’m sorry, Ethan.” My apology tumbles from my mouth, pure and true. “I won’t marry her. The engagement isn’t formalized. Our parents are making arrangements. They all just assume it’s what we want.”

I take his cock in my hand. “Now, let me finish what you started.”

Ethan isn’t done. He pulls my hand off his dick, tightening his hold on my hair. Then, he turns my face and rubs my cheek over the length of his dick.

“You want this cock, Noah?”

“Yes,” I whisper. My skin stretches over my Adam’s apple with the strength of Ethan’s grip.

“Beg, Noah, baby. Beg for this cock, like I begged God to save you that night.”

I have no shame. “Please, Ethan. Give me this cock.”

“More.”

“Let me have this cock, just this one time. I beg you, Ethan. Fuck my face with this dick. Please, Eth—”

He slams my face back down.

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CHAPTER 44

Ethan

When he was eighteen and opening his mouth for my cock like this, he was just a boy. Now, a *man* sucks my dick with sure movements, no doubt fueled by his desperation. I, too, am desperate. Desperate and relieved that he's not planning to get married. I'm shaking with terror and rage that he talked about ending his life. That he would leave me. That everything has become too much for him like it became too much for Cilla.

I yank him up and away from my cock. He fights me, but I'm stronger than him. Dragging him up to his bed, I flip him onto his back, slinking my hands around those hips to grip his ass. I pull back for a second to take in much needed oxygen, but Noah is a greedy motherfucker when he forgets about God. And I want nothing more than to make him forget his fucking God. I want him to be a heathen, like me. Maybe then he wouldn't wish to be dead.

His neck cranes upward, chasing my mouth for more kisses, and, fuck us all to hell, I lower my body onto his, grab a fistful of his hair and smash my lips to his again. My fury gives way to this insatiable need for my brother.

It's just like before, but fucking hotter. So much hotter, with my hands filled with light but solid muscle everywhere I touch. Soft skin encasing those sinewy ropes underneath. *You have grown, Noah, baby.*

"He wants you home," I tell him between kisses. "He thinks I'm the one keeping you here." I leave out the part about him threatening to expose my dirty little secret.

"I—I—just can't go back yet, Ethan. I'll figure out a way to keep him away."

He reaches up to kiss me again but I push his head back into the pillow. "If it were up to me, I'd murder anyone who ever tried to take you away from me. If it were possible, I'd never let you go."

"I know, Ethan."

"Your father is a vile, despicable excuse for a human, but he's not stupid, Noah. Do you think he hasn't questioned why of all the places in the country you'd choose New York?"

Noah bites his lip. It's too distracting so I reach out and pop it right out of his mouth.

"I made him a promise that I—I—that I won't look for you."

"Do you think he believed one word of it?"

"He has to."

"He's marrying you off, and the fact that he came to me asking about you —"

"He won't find out. I have it all under control."

Except, my little brother has nothing under control.

His breathing accelerates. "I want to stay until Christmas if you'll let me stay at *Cilla's House*."

"He'll never let you spend Christmas away from home. And besides, Noah, you can't stay in this city for one more minute and expect me to keep my hands off you."

"Just this one time will be enough. I'll make sure of it," he breathes. "I won't interfere in your life after this; I promise." But nothing about what's coming out of his mouth is the truth.

I press my body into his. Chest to chest. Forehead to forehead. "You can't live in this city for one more fucking minute and expect me to fuck you only once, Noah," I clarify, in case he didn't understand that I will fuck him today and any day after that if he remains in New York.

His harsh breath lands across my lips. "Will you fuck me every chance you get?"

I capture his lips with mine, kissing him hard and deep. "The first thing you need is to get out of this fucking dump. You'll live with me. At my fucking house. And yes, Noah, baby. I'll fuck you every fucking chance I get." Everything I've said is true, but there's another reason. He said he wanted to die. I don't know how I'll prevent it, but I'll have to find a way and maybe having him live with me will help him not feel that way.

I lean down to nip at his ear lobe. "Oh Noah, baby. We'll fuck like lovers, but we'll also fuck like . . . brothers, won't we?" I'll corrupt Noah. More than I corrupted him before. His faith is killing him, and I can't let Noah die.

A breath whooshes out of his body. His eyes flicker with the memories. Ah, fuck yeah. Church boys are the fucking best, but Noah is the best of them all.

"You remember how you loved to fuck like brothers, don't you, Noah?"

His forehead drops to connect with my pectoral, his lips brushing against my shirt, open mouthed.

“You remember how you loved to pretend we were real brothers, fucking like animals?” I ask, scraping my teeth over his ear.

“Hnhh, yes,” he whispers into the material of my shirt.

“You remember how you would beg me to fuck you?”

Harsh, heavy breathing at my neck. “Yes, Ethan.”

“Tell me you want me to fuck you.” His dick digs into my stomach. I can almost taste his pre-cum.

He hesitates. Like he used to in the beginning, all those years ago. He doesn't need much. But he does need *something*. A small nudge from the devil to fall into hell.

“Tell me, Noah, baby. Say it. Tell me to fuck my brother's ass,” I coax. He needs it this way. Permission to let go. Somewhere to hide from himself for a little while.

He gasps and the sweetness of his unraveling hardens my dick even more. He's almost there. Almost at the edge of the black, bottomless pit of sin, and, when he falls, his beast will emerge and we'll fuck like brothers.

Fuck Evanson. Fuck the church. And fuck Noah, too, when he decides to go back to his God. But for now, he's my horny fucking angel.

“Ethan . . .” he breathes into my mouth, afraid. So afraid to fall. My name falling from his lips is a call for help. *Help me fall*, he's saying. And as promised, I don't hide him from himself. I let him see his need for my cock. Pressing into him, I let him feel my need for him, too.

“Say it, Noah, baby.”

An eternity inside this moment as he teeters on the edge. And then—

“Fuck me, Ethan . . . fuck your . . . fuck your brother's ass—”

I swallow his mouth in mine, biting down hard on his bottom lip. Scraping upward to suck on his top lip. Lips smashing together, we kiss. Hard and sloppy and wild, we kiss like we used to. Like we're on a time limit. Like the world would end if we stopped.

We don't simply undress. I rip at his clothes, wrenching the material from his body, demanding for his nakedness with every piece of discarded clothing. And he is no different.

Like before, like *always* before, he claws at my shirt, his movements choppy and possessive. His hands, racing over my chest, grabbing for uncooperative buttons and belt buckles. I'm better than him. Not that I'm

better, but that I'm less desperate than he is. He's naked underneath me because I could still think straight while I undressed him. He's so far gone he can't get his fingers around my shirt buttons properly.

"Get these fucking clothes *off*," he snaps pettily, his fingers tugging at my shirt while his mouth eats at mine.

"Easy, sweet angel," I soothe softly. Helping him, I remove my clothes until we're both naked.

But even naked, we aren't close enough. I need to be inside him, absorbing his cells into my body, and I know it's the same for him.

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CHAPTER 45

Noah

Ethan's mouth is on mine, his thick fingers wrapped around my neck. I cover that hand with mine, keeping it there, arching my neck so he'll increase his grip.

Tears spring to my eyes immediately when he tightens his hold on my neck. I don't deserve him. I don't deserve the way this man knows me. His unwavering understanding of everything I am but cannot be. My Adam's apple slides up and down against his fingers, fighting for space and finding little. It's the way I prefer it.

The first touch of his erection to mine sends my hips flying off the bed to meet that most desired part of him. Like always before, he tilts his hips forward, and we are balls to balls. Pressing forward even more, he presses his balls against mine, rubbing softly.

"Like this, Noah, baby?" he whispers against my ear.

"Y-yes, fuck, yes, just like that," I whimper. *Yes, strangle me while you rub your balls against mine like that.* Fuck, yes.

Fuck everything. Fuck God and fuck church and fuck our father. Just for this moment. *Please, I beg somewhere in the back of my head. Please God, let me just have this one moment.*

Ethan lifts his face from mine but keeps his hand at my neck. He trails his lips over my chin, then sinks his teeth into the skin there. I groan without shame, lifting my face for more. He bites his way down the column of my neck, removing his fingers momentarily to suck my skin into his mouth as he moves lower, and my heart soars for the fact that I will have his marks for weeks after today.

My hands claw at his back, pulling him further against me, my legs spread wide and bent at the knees so I can feel more of his dick pressed against mine and his balls rubbing against mine.

"Look at how much you love it when your brother fucks you," he whispers.

Ethan's words fuel my erection, sending blood racing to my dick and hardening me to the point of pain. But it's safe here. Ethan makes it safe.

He understands. It's simply my need to feel close to him, he said once, and this is the fastest way for me to get *this close*.

"Your fantasies are safe with me," he whispers now. "We'll fuck like brothers, Noah, baby."

"Yes," I whisper back, praying to the Devil that he'll keep talking to me like this.

"Are you gonna let your big brother fuck your sweet hole, Noah, baby?"

"Y—yes," I whisper desperately.

"Isn't it great? How we can fuck like brothers? We're brothers, but we're not."

He's reinforcing the safety between us. He knows I need this. Even when I don't get it, when it's hard for me to wrap my head around my sick, incestuous fantasies, *he* understands.

Our bodies clash in a pseudo-fucking movement, our dicks leaking, and pre-cum mixing and dripping onto our stomachs.

"But right now, we're brothers," Ethan continues near my ear. "So let me hear you say it, Noah. Say 'fuck me, brother'."

My stomach dips with his words, and I grab the back of his head, pulling him close so I can answer him in the safety offered by the crook of his shoulder. Closing my eyes, I slip into my deepest, most beautiful fantasy.

"Fuck me, brother," I whisper.

"Can you imagine the blood running through our veins, our DNA?"

"Ah, fuck, yes," I hiss.

"We share the same blood, how about that, Noah? Blood brothers fucking like this. You like that?"

"I fucking love it."

"That's us right now. We're blood brothers, and I'm about to stuff my cock deep inside your ass."

"Fuck me, brother. Fuck me, Ethan. Put that cock inside me."

"First tell me how much you missed having your brother's cock inside you."

"I missed my brother's cock so fucking much. I need my brother's fucking cock inside me right fucking now."

Ethan starts to pull away, but I can't let him go even an inch. "You gotta let me get us ready, Noah, baby. I can't fuck you if I don't get us ready," he whispers against my lips.

"We don't need a condom," I argue. I reach back for a bottle of lube.

“Yes, we do,” he says through gritted teeth when I reach down to grab his dick.

“I haven’t been with any—”

He pins me with a hard stare, and I finally ease my grip on the back of his head. He settles on his knees between my legs, after retrieving a condom from his pants pocket.

“I haven’t been with anyone,” I repeat slowly, watching his face. He doesn’t reassure me of the same.

“Who touched you?” I ask unnecessarily while he works the lube into me. It’s none of my business. I’m the last person who should be questioning him about who he’s been with these last few years. And I have no business lacing my question with so much bitterness.

He grins while he rolls the condom down his thick, hot cock. I can’t resist tracking his movements. “Did you want me to wait for you, Noah?” And then, rolling his nuts between his fingers while I watch him do it, he adds, “I would have, if I’d known there was even a one percent chance you’d come back to me.”

“Was it good?” I bite out. Rational thought isn’t part of the deal right now. It’s not lost on me that I’ve questioned him like this before. And I didn’t have the right to back then, either.

Ethan isn’t the least bit moved by my jealousy even if he was the one raging in here just ten minutes ago about Jessica.

“Yes.” He drops his head and swallows my cock.

But I need to know who’s been touching him. So I squirm, pulling him up to me. Forehead to forehead, I bite his lip.

“What was his name,” I ask pettily.

“Hmm, don’t remember.” He chuckles into my mouth. “It was just sex, Noah, baby.”

I hate it, and I tell him so. Then I ask more inappropriate questions while he slides his dick against mine. “But it was good? Having sex with someone else?”

“So good.” He sucks across my parted lips, and then sucks my chin into his mouth, biting.

I hiss with pleasure. “What if I’d had sex with Jessica? Or another man?”

“Would it have been good?” he asks. He draws my hand upward, burying his nose in my armpit, inhaling. Then he drags his tongue over the inside of my armpit.

“Yes,” I snap, suppressing a groan.

“Would you have closed your eyes, pretending it was me?” He moves up, sucking at the skin under my ear.

“Yes,” I moan, offering more of my neck to his mouth.

“Then, we’re the same,” he murmurs.

“You’re a hypocrite,” I gasp, scratching down his back.

“I’m not the one fucking engaged to a woman, Noah. Now open that fucking ass and take this fucking cock,” he grits out, slamming into me and tearing my soul apart.

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CHAPTER 46

Ethan

I fuck him relentlessly. Engagements and nameless hookups forgotten, even if he's right to call me a hypocrite.

"Noah, baby," I whisper into his hair.

"More, Ethan. *Fuck* me," he demands into my mouth. Low and fiery, his voice reaches deep inside and pulls me down into that place where no one can tell who is the angel and who is the devil.

It's been too long. We don't last even five minutes.

He falls.

Oh, Noah. How beautiful you are when you fall.

I fall with him, and together we repeat history.

He lies in my arms afterwards, his body tucked so closely to mine you'd have to peel him off me. Still, I pull him closer. His arm tightens around my waist.

"I should have been less harsh with you about Jessica Crompton." I speak into his hair.

He shifts, lifting his face to mine. "You're kind of hot when you're mad."

I kiss his grinning face.

"It was only one hookup about a year ago," I say. I know how much it might have hurt him, but I won't keep things like that away from him. His eyes flash with jealousy but he nods. "I shouldn't be mad about it, but I can't stand the thought, Ethan."

"Well, I'm still mad about this fucking engagement you're letting yourself get pushed into."

"I'm going to find a way to get out of it."

I pull him closer, wrapping my arms around him tightly. "How are you, Noah? Really?"

"I'm a little beaten down, to be honest," he says softly.

I kiss his forehead. "Tell me everything."

"I don't even know where to start." The pad of his thumb moves softly over my cheekbone. I bring his hand down to my mouth, kissing his knuckles.

"Start with the last thing you remember before the accident."

He smiles. But it's a sad smile. "It was so cold."

"I gave you my jacket when we got to the Oakwood Inn."

"It flew away. I wanted to go back to get it, but you said to leave it alone."

"Go on."

"We went into the hotel. It was going to be our last night together. I was leaving for London the day after. Do you ever remember me telling you about the conversion therapy I was scheduled for?"

"Conversion therapy?" There's no escaping the venom in my voice. "No. You never mentioned that. What conversion therapy?"

Noah sighs. "Dad told me that he'd told me about it and that I'd agreed but . . . I couldn't remember."

"How would you not have remembered something like that?"

Another sigh. He looks like he's trying to find the words and failing. "Maybe he lied, but there's a lot I don't remember."

"What do you mean?"

"I remember going up to the room with you. I remember us—" he pulls his lips into his mouth "—having sex. And then nothing. I woke up in the hospital. I still have gaps in my memory."

I run the pad of my thumb over his cheekbone. "I'm sorry, Noah. I should shoot Evanson for making you go to therapy. That kind of thing is fucking illegal in most places now."

"They just call it counseling, and they get away with it." And then, "What I did was unforgivable, Ethan. I'm so sorry. Why did you do it? Why didn't you say it was consensual? What happened that night?"

"You were nowhere near ready to come out. You were in a hospital, and I didn't know if you would make it. I couldn't out you like that. You ran out of the room when he barged in. You grabbed my keys . . ."

My throat closes up, remembering the bang that filled the air the moment Noah hit the tree. "I got outside, and Officer Purnell took me down. I fought. Tried to get them to tell me what happened. He wouldn't say anything. I saw a stretcher. He said it was you on it. He took me down to the station."

It's hard to go on, remembering that day.

Tears gather in his eyes. "You'd rather have gone to prison? Is that what I did to you? How I made you feel? Like keeping my secret was more important than your life?"

“Evanson came in some time later. He said you were on life support, and, if I didn’t tell the police that it was sexual assault, he’d pull the plug. Noah, your life was more important than anything else at that moment. Maybe I had some hope that if I did it then God would let you live. I didn’t know what else to do.”

Silence settles, both of us contemplating that last night we were together. “I don’t know how to get away from him,” Noah says softly. “I feel so . . . *entangled*. Please don’t hate me for it, Ethan, but I feel so much guilt when I think about cutting him off. I’m all he has.”

“You don’t owe him anything,” I say tightly. “It’s disgusting that he would make you feel like you’re abandoning him or something if you choose to live a life that makes you happy. He’s sick.”

Noah doesn’t say anything for a long time.

“Tell me about after you woke up in the hospital,” I say when the silence has stretched out long enough.

“Physically, I was okay. I got better every day. But mentally, everything was just a mess. I remember being so *confused* all the time. Like I knew there were things I needed to remember and I did remember eventually but it was like individual puzzle pieces. I remembered things, but I just couldn’t put them all together.”

“Did you know what had happened to you?”

“Not at first. Dad told me everything afterward. Well, a lot of it were lies . . .”

“What did he tell you?” I bring the throw from the bottom of the bed over his shoulders.

“He told me you’d sexually assaulted me.” Noah looks up at me then. “I was still struggling to remember everything, but I knew that was a lie. I guess not remembering everything so well made me a little brave for a while. I told him it wasn’t sexual assault.” He sighs and kisses my shoulder. “It was the closest I came to telling him the truth but it still wasn’t enough.”

I sense the tension in his voice. “You don’t have to talk about it, Noah.”

His hair tickles my shoulder when he shakes his head. “No, I need to get all of this out.” He shifts until we’re eye to eye. “Ethan, he refuses to consider the possibility that I’m gay. He talks like there must be something else causing me to be this way. A demon. An ‘open doorway’ into my soul. You.”

“Evangelical Christianity at its finest,” I murmur, trying to keep my anger in check.

“I wanted to come and see you when I got out of the hospital. I wanted to tell the police the truth, but he told me that you’d confessed and if I interfered he’d make sure you never got out.”

“It was an impossible situation.”

“It’s not an excuse, Ethan. I left like a coward. I went to therapy for a year, bible school for three years, and missionary work for ten months. I went to learn how to be more like Jesus and how to get other people to be more like Jesus, and I let you rot in that prison.”

“I made it out, Noah. And you’re forgetting it wasn’t my first time being on the wrong side of the law. I did what I did to protect you. Please accept that.”

“I’m grateful, Ethan, and, one day I’ll make it right.”

“Make it right by being happy and safe.”

“Do you mean, *being silent*?”

I stare into his eyes. Yes, it’s true that he needs to grow a backbone about his sexuality, but what is the point in denying the reality? Noah doesn’t have that kind of courage, and I’m in no position to judge him for it. No one is. “I mean, be happy and safe, Noah. Whatever that means for you. If one day, coming out means being happy and safe then that’s what I want for you. If being happy and safe means going back to North Carolina and doing full time ministry, then that’s what I want for you.”

“How did you get like this, Ethan?” His eyes shine and if I’m right, this man looks *proud* of me. I could get addicted to this.

“Like what?”

“So . . . selfless.”

What can I tell him? That all I ever wanted was to make my mother proud? To grow up and be just like her? Except, I’ll live. I won’t let anyone try to control me the way she was controlled. But in all the other ways, I wanted to be just like her.

“Tell me, Ethan,” Noah says.

“My mother was like that, Noah. She judged no one and nothing. And if she’d lived, she’d never have judged me for my sexuality. Or you, if you’d still come to live with us. I wanted to be just like her.”

Sadness settles between us, heavy but also comforting. Sometimes, sadness can be comforting. Maybe because we’re not always allowed to just

be sad, so, when it finds a safe place, like the one Noah and I have right now, it comes in and just sits with us.

“I wish I’d met her.”

“You would have loved her.”

We kiss after that. A soft, gentle kiss, mixing with our sadness, turning the moment into something tender.

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CHAPTER 47

Noah

I'm seated at the foot of the bed, trying to dress inconspicuously. Ethan stands against the dresser, naked as the day he was born, smoking a cigarette after he'd asked for permission to smoke inside.

I try to keep my eyes on . . . other things, but Ethan's body is the most incredible thing I have ever seen. His tattoos—new to me—are incredible. I was too scared to ask to see them earlier, but now, I'm dying to ask. Except, his nakedness is a little distracting. I'm envious of Ethan's freedom. The freedom he has inside his head. He's had some crappy things happen to him too, but he never lets anyone inside his head, like I do.

There's no shame with Ethan. He can stand there in front of me, naked, and not feel an ounce of shame. I can't even look at my own naked body without feeling like I've sinned against God.

"You'd better start packing your stuff," he says.

"You say it like it's some kind of threat."

"It is."

"It's not. I'd die to live with you. But why would you want that, especially after our father came over here? Surely you don't want that kind of trouble again."

"Maybe I need some new memories to carry me through the rest of my life." He says it casually, but his words are soaked in sadness.

I am incapable of a worthy enough response.

"Just in case you die early," he adds after a beat.

I lower my eyes. "I'm not suicidal, Ethan. I promise." Bringing my eyes back to his, I try to soothe this great fear of his. "I just get so tired sometimes."

"Come here, Noah," he says after a moment. His voice has gone soft again. He pinches off the burning end of his cigarette and places it on the dresser.

I reach for my pants. "No," Ethan says. "Come to me, naked, Noah."

I hesitate, his stare pinning me in place. But he doesn't let up.

I rise from the bed, dropping my clothes to the ground. His eyes don't leave mine, and I keep my eyes on him while trembling with the need to

maintain my modesty. His eyes drop, igniting a trail of fire from my face to my neck. Flames licking down my body, chasing the trail created by Ethan's languid scrutiny. I walk to him, and by the time I've reached him, my cock is hard again, brushing against his thigh.

"For these next few weeks, we'll pretend that everything is okay. I know we broke up, but just stay with me for a little while before you go back."

"Tell me to come out, Ethan, and I will. If you make me choose, I will. This time I'll choose."

He shifts, causing his dick to brush against my stomach. I grind my molars to keep the intensity of my response at bay as my cock leaks with my accelerating need for Ethan's body again. "No, Noah. You have to be responsible for every choice you make."

"What if we get caught again?"

His hand comes around my waist and he brings our bodies together. I bite off a groan of pleasure. "Then you have some very important decisions to make. You were not around to make them the first time, but, this time, you'll have to face that fork in the road and decide."

"How do you make these decisions, Ethan? How do you simply not care about what people say or think about you?"

"You've got it wrong, Noah. I do care about what people think about me. But I'm selective about who those people are. I don't care about what Evanson thinks about me, but I care about what those kids at my safe house think about me. I care about whether they trust me, whether they see me as someone who will always look out for them. I care about what my employees think about me. I know I'm an asshole sometimes, and I'm working on that. I'm learning how to be nice to people when they don't do their jobs properly, but if they think I'm hurting them in some way, then I need to know about it so I can fix it."

I admire him while he talks. There is such a humble maturity to Ethan. He was always like this, but now it's impossible not to see how strong willed and grounded he is. Back then, it was easy to miss it when it was hidden behind his rebellious youth persona.

I realize I've slipped my arms around his neck. We're pressed against each other from thigh to chest, our bodies molded together. Like this, the world is as it should be. Me and Ethan. Together. If my father had just accepted Ethan, accepted *us*, we could have been so happy.

“You’re not an asshole. You never were. But I did hear about how scary it is working for you.”

He grins guiltily. “Yeah, I know. Jono told me, and Florence too. I’m getting better.”

Ethan’s hands move down to squeeze my ass. I drop my head to his shoulder with a moan.

I’m finally in Ethan’s arms. I’m home.

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CHAPTER 48

Ethan

“Big things on the agenda today, Ethan.”

I nod in Florence’s direction, hoping I can make it through this meeting without letting my mind get stuck in the last few hours of my life. I don’t know what I’m doing just yet. I don’t have a game plan, but I know to trust my gut. So far, nothing feels off.

“Give it to me,” I tell Florence.

She sets a cup of coffee in front of me. “Coffee first.”

I drink as instructed.

Florence takes a seat across from me. “Okay. Let’s do the good stuff first.” She settles down with her tablet. “First up. *Cilla’s House* is fully operational. The building is in excellent shape. The administration process is going well and the children are being given the best integration support available.”

“Are any of them ready to go home?”

“No, not yet. Two of them may be ready in about two months, but we’re not rushing them, Ethan. They’re setting the pace, and our people are working with it.”

“Okay. Go on.”

“Next. Jacob Watkins.”

“Yeah. How is he doing?” Jacob Watkins’ gang rape last year made national news when a group of men wanted to prove that Jacob was a biological woman. They are now all behind bars, thanks to the relentless work of the legal experts we employed on Jacob’s behalf.

“He’s doing great, Ethan. He was so brave at the sentencing hearing. He reached out a few weeks ago to say he’s ready to start working again. He wants to open his gallery in about eighteen months, where he’ll be showcasing dozens of photos of abuse survivors. He sent me some. Do you want to see?”

“Yes, show me.”

Florence talks while she gets to the photos. “Jacob decided to focus on erotic photography. He said he didn’t want his attack to take away his ability to appreciate and capture sexuality in a bold and healthy way. He

wants to remain a strong advocate for sexual freedom. His models are everyday people across the gender spectrum who fought to overcome their struggles. Here, look.” Florence turns her tablet to me.

A young woman, early twenties maybe, gazes up at me, covered in nothing more than her mass of dark brown hair, the tips curling around her breasts to half cover her nipples. She’s lying on a white sofa, her right leg placed in a way that covers all but the top left part of the V shape of her vagina. The hint of her most intimate parts made the inviting look in her brilliant green eyes all the more alluring.

“Look at the notes Jacob made at the bottom, and then swipe for the rest,” Florence says. The notes say that this model is twenty-five-years old, had her first child at seventeen, was ousted by her family for it, dropped by her baby’s father before the baby was born, and has just come out of a three-year relationship with a man who abused her physically and told her every day that she was fat and that no other man would ever want her.

I swipe across the screen. Seven in total. Each one is as beautiful as the last. And with each one, there are notes about each model, detailing some kind of insecurity or struggle, from abuse to secret self-image problems and tough situations involving forced outings and non-acceptance of gender and sexual orientation. Yet, none of it can be seen in their pictures. They look like strong, healthy individuals with the world at their feet.

“The last one is my favorite,” Florence says. “Six months post top surgery.”

It’s a photo of a transgender man, shirtless. The half-moon shaped scars around the breast area are still visible, but they look healthy.

“They look great. I like that Jacob hasn’t retreated into some dark hole after what they did to him. What does he need from me?”

“Just your presence as an honored guest at his gallery opening. You and the members of your Global Impact team.”

“Did you manage to make space for me to attend?”

“Yes, I did. I tried to get you all together sooner than the gallery opening, but it’s impossible to get six international businessmen in one room in the next twelve months. All the secretaries are working together to have the gallery opening slotted into all of your diaries. I happened to talk to Sebastian Stone last week, and I mentioned it. He’s happy to attend, but I’m waiting for his secretary to confirm. He said Colt Hanson and Spencer Grange will definitely attend, even if he can’t.”

“Great, I’ll give him a call sometime next week to catch up.”

“Eli Saxon isn’t sure if he’ll make it.”

“How’s Axel doing?”

“Good, Eli said in his email, but they have some important things coming up in the next year. He didn’t want to commit to attending the gallery opening just yet.”

“Noted.”

“Right. Now onto the bad news. So, you’ve made some people very, very upset in Tennessee.”

“You mean with the money we gave their libraries?” I grin. We don’t give a fuck about them congressmen.

“Yes. The governor has been ranting about it since last night. According to them, you don’t have any reason to cross state lines with your money in this way.” Florence shakes her head. “It’s absolutely ludicrous, Ethan.”

“What are they saying?”

“That if you want to pump money into their state, you should respect the majority rule there and put your money into initiatives that benefit the people.”

“So, not libraries, then?”

“They’re saying you’re a gay man throwing money at drag queens when you know full well that they have condemned the reading of books to children by drag queens and that’s— ” she makes air quotes — “disrespectful.”

The degree of my fury, if unchecked, might give me an aneurysm so I breathe through the bigotry.

“They’re playing dirty on every social media platform. It’s not yet confirmed but you might be on Fox News later tonight. You’ll be reached for comment at least.”

“Is that so?”

Florence shakes her head and smiles. “I know you’re going to annihilate them. Just tell me what to do.”

“So, they have a problem with me giving money to the libraries that are allowing drag queens to read at story hour?”

“Yes.”

“Florence, get the data team to get me the dirt of every single senior pastor, deacon, youth pastor, and *especially* every Sunday school teacher in the state of Tennessee.”

“I’m on it.”

“Let’s see how Sunday school teachers who read bible stories to kids measure up to drag queens. Let the analytics say who’s more dangerous.”

“Got it. Next, David Kazinski has invited you to be a guest on his podcast. Again.”

“We don’t negotiate with terrorists,” I say in a bored tone.

Florence chuckles. “He said he just wants to talk politics. His followers have been hounding him about getting you on.”

“And like every time before, I won’t waste one second of my life talking to an extremist Conservative political debater and professional idiot. He thinks because he talks fast and gaslights his opponents with some carefully constructed debating skills, he’s entitled to summon anyone to his table? No. I’m never going to do shows that question the valid existence of queer people. Queer existence across the entire spectrum is not up for debate. Tell him to fuck off, as always.”

“I’ve already told him you’ll engage only on issues that pertain to the safety and protection of the community, but I’ll reiterate it when I formally decline the invitation.”

“Great. Anything else?”

“Yes. Carl Munroe from *This is America* online magazine also called again. He wants to come over and interview you about your recent comments in the media about child hunger in America, and he wants to live stream for his followers. I told him you’re not afraid of live TV and live streams, so he should be prepared if he’s going to talk to you about feeding children with any hidden right wing agendas. He said he can put his differences with you aside and have a civil conversation. I know he grinds your bones, and we usually decline his invitations; however, I wanted to run this one by you. You’ve been wanting a right wing platform to talk about child hunger, and I think he’s going to want to talk about the library funding in Tennessee too. I think it’ll be fun to get your comments in front of his conservative viewers, especially if the data analysis from the Sunday school teachers versus the Drag Queens story time checks out. What do you think?”

“I don’t know why these people keep insisting on debating whether children need to eat at school. And yeah, it’ll be fun if our analysis checks out. I’ll talk to him.”

Florence makes her final notes and closes off the meeting. I feel pretty good that at least some parts of my life are still fully under my control.

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CHAPTER 49

Noah

Ethan texted to say he'd pick me up as soon as I was ready, but I asked him if I could take the bus instead. He said no. I said I'd never taken the bus anywhere in my life for as long as I could remember. He told me to stop acting like a rebellious teenager. I said I don't know if I was ever given a chance to be a teenager. He called me after that and offered a thousand apologies for saying no to me.

I'll be staying with him for the remainder of my sabbatical. The last time we made it six months before we got caught. We can make it through a few weeks. I'd still like to stay until Christmas, but that is a battle I'm not sure I'll win with my father.

"Mr. Evanson?"

I turn at the sound of my name.

"You're Mr. Evanson, right?"

I nod at the approaching elderly man. He holds out his hand. "I'm Elliot Shaw. I manage this building. Mr. Salvatore told me to expect you." A smile spreading across his face causes the skin at the corners of his eyes to crinkle. "May I take your bags?"

"Uhm, yes. Thank you." I hand him my duffel bag and keep the one on my shoulder.

"This way, Mr. Evanson."

I follow him through a set of access controlled glass doors, down a wide carpeted hallway of sorts and stop in front of a set of elevators.

"Your first time here?"

I laugh, slightly embarrassed. "Yes. First time."

"Well, Mr. Salvatore is a great host. He'll make sure you see everything our city has to offer. You from out of state?"

"North Carolina."

The elevator doors open with a soft *ding*.

"Well. Welcome to New York, Mr. Evanson. Mr. Salvatore usually arrives home around nine o' clock most weekdays, but I'm sure he's arranged all of that with you."

Mr. Salvatore hadn't arranged anything of that sort with me. I thought he'd already be home. The elevator arrives.

"Well, there you go. I'm sure I'll see you again, Mr. Evanson."

"Thank you, Mr. Shaw," I reply, taking my bag from him.

Ethan lives in the penthouse.

I step into the apartment and set my bags down on the floor near the wall. This place is nothing like I'd expected. It's . . . warm. Like it houses a young family. A *happy* young family. Overstuffed couches, big fluffy rugs, a fireplace, heavy drapes framing the windows.

Everything is neat and clean. I turn a slow three-sixty. Not a thing out of place. So much like Ethan.

I don't know what to do with myself.

I sit on the couch, wondering how Ethan spends his evenings usually. Does he cook his own food? Does he read before bed? Maybe he works on his laptop until his eyeballs fall off, and then he sleeps, gets up, and does it all over again. I'm sure he doesn't do his own laundry or clean. He must pay people to do that.

Ethan lives like . . . how I used to. Expensive. The difference between him and me is that everything I see in front of me now is the product of Ethan's hard work. Nothing was ever just handed over to him.

My phone lights up.

Ethan: *I'm almost home. Make yourself comfortable.*

I almost ask him how many minutes exactly it will be before he's here, but I settle for, *Okay*.

Making myself at home involves sitting on the couch with my hands in my lap like a pew warmer waiting for the pastor to declare his blessing.

I move only when the elevator chimes with Ethan's arrival. I rise from my seat, suddenly unsure of my presence here. Ethan is not the same person I knew five years ago. Maybe I shouldn't have agreed to living here with him. But we're brothers, and that's allowed even if it is the most deluded thing I have ever told myself.

Ethan stands at the entrance of his own home, staring at me from across the great expanse of the room. His hands are in his pockets. He's wearing black pants and a black dress shirt. The top two buttons of his shirt have been popped open and one part of his shirt has been pulled out of the waistband. I know I'm drooling.

“You need to stop checking me out like that,” Ethan says, walking toward me. Except it’s not just that he’s walking. He looks like a predator approaching its prey. And the prey is urging him forward.

“I’m sorry,” I say. My face is hot with embarrassment.

He stands in front of me now, a soft laugh escaping his lips. “Welcome home,” he says with equal softness.

Home. If only. “Thank you for letting me stay.”

He nods. “Are you hungry?”

“Not that much.”

“Are you fasting again?”

I can’t maintain eye contact. “No. I don’t have to fast anymore.” In recent years the truth about my fasting had begun to build layers and layers of rage. Rage so intense the magnitude of it scares me.

“Okay. Then let’s have a drink to celebrate you being here.”

“Alcohol?”

Ethan touches his thumb to the corner of my mouth. “Yes. You wanna know what my biggest regret is, Noah?”

I shake my head. My stomach drops to the ground because I won’t be able to handle Ethan telling me that *I* was his biggest regret.

“My biggest regret is not giving you alcohol when you were younger.”

“Oh.”

He moves to the open plan kitchen and produces two glasses and soon I have a glass in my hand with a glittery brown liquid.

I’m still rooted to the spot I had started off in when Ethan walked in.

He clinks my glass. “It is my eternal regret that we didn’t have drunk sex.”

My stomach clenches with the thought. “I– I was underage.”

He grins. “I regret we didn’t have underage drunk sex.”

Oh. God.

“You haven’t had even one taste of hard liquor, Noah? Even now?”

“I’ve had—I’ve had wine.” I feel stupid. The wine was part of communion. I’ve never had a drink apart from that ever in my life.

He leans in and kisses my mouth. “Can you imagine how we’d fuck if we were both drunk? I know you have. It’s one of your wishes, remember?”

I can’t breathe with the images slamming through my mind. I remember.

“Drink, Noah,” he says.

I drink. It's a big, overcompensating gulp. And it sets my body on fire, starting at my throat and burning all the way into my stomach. I cough and sputter and choke. Ethan chuckles and rubs my bent over back. "Don't worry, you'll learn."

I have every intention of learning.

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CHAPTER 50

Ethan

The media is losing its mind. Social platforms have delivered every meme conceivable about the ongoing war between me and Tennessee's Governor Ramsay with the majority of public opinion swinging in our favor.

He says I should put my money to better use, but he's not surprised that, as a gay man with money to burn, I would put my political agenda before the safety of the children.

Our response was a counter-attack of epic proportions. I have ripped Governor Ramsay limb from limb with analytics that must have had his head exploding when it dropped this morning. The count of Sunday school teachers who have sexually molested the children they were teaching and reading bible stories to every Sunday is *staggering*.

Between the media circus and trying to keep my mind off my new house guest and ignoring a dozen more of John Evanson's calls, I manage to sit down with Carl Munroe to talk about free lunches for children in school. He seemed impressed that eighty-five thousand of his followers have joined his live stream, citing it must be my pretty face that pulled in such big numbers. I told him (and them) I'd hoped their enthusiasm would help put food in the mouths of children.

After that, I almost told him to get the fuck out of my office several times when he made statements like "*Parents are responsible for feeding their children, or they shouldn't have them,*"

"*Children go to school to learn Math, Science, and Language. Not to eat.*"

I began to wonder what the whole point of the discussion was, so I told him that no matter what argument he came up with, the children always end up suffering. Until he could come up with a solution that involved children not suffering, I wasn't interested in anything he had to say.

He was still brave enough to bring up my library funding in Tennessee after that, asking me if I would take personal responsibility for any children harmed by drag queens in those libraries. I said yes, because statistically, drag queens pose no threat to children. Then, I gave him the church's

statistics and asked him if he would take personal responsibility for the hundreds and thousands of children who have been molested by priests, pastors, deacons, elders, and Sunday school teachers for hundreds and hundreds of years.

He sputtered and remarked on how our view count had grown and oh, look at this funny comment about someone wishing they could blow Ethan Salvatore.

Eventually, I did ask Carl Munroe to kindly fuck off, which he did.

My work takes me well into the evening hours, and, after my meetings, I make my way to my basement parking. Several of our employees greet me on the way down, and I'm reminded again of the person I am now. The people who know me now would never believe the person who existed five years ago and the person they know now are the same. I've changed so much.

I'm finally the person my mother would be proud of. I like the life I've carved out for myself. The life that doesn't have any connections to my old life.

I'm torn between my need to protect the life I have now and keeping Noah close, even if it's only temporarily. He told me he'll come out if I tell him to. I hate that idea because I want him to do it on his own, but I'm beginning to want him with a desperation that has made my values pliable.

Many times over the last few hours. I've contemplated giving him that exact ultimatum, but I find myself becoming resentful that he won't do it on his own. And the vicious cycle continues when I tell myself that I have no right to judge him.

More than once, I've thought about my mother and what she did. To call Noah weak would be to call her weak. And I know she had not been weak. She'd fought harder than anyone I know, and maybe this is the hardest Noah can fight. Who am I to decide what is considered a worthy fight on Noah's behalf? Or on my mother's behalf?

And on and on the mind games went.

When I enter the apartment, I find Noah standing at the bar. He grins at me from over there and then steps toward me. But he doesn't just step. He tip toes like he's not walking on solid ground and then seems to rethink his plan about walking and grabs the counter, holding onto it for dear life.

I pull my lips into my mouth to keep from laughing.

This motherfucker is *plastered*. *Flying*. In the fuckin' *twilight zone*.

“Ethan?” he squeaks from the bar counter.

“Yeah, Noah?” I don’t move.

“Uh, well. I’m not sure—”

“What’s going on?” I ask lightly. He looks like he wants to come to me but his hold on that counter is currently keeping him alive. I stay where I am because he’s just too cute.

“Well. I did something amazing today.”

“Oh, yeah? What did you do?”

“I went somewhere after work.”

“Where’d you go?”

He giggles. Holding onto the counter with both hands now like he’s going to fall right through the floor if he moves an inch, he *giggles*.

“Shhh, Ethan.” He’s whispering, looking around like someone will hear us.

“Oh, okay,” I whisper back.

“Yeah. I went to a bar.” He drops his voice again. “Shh. It was a *gay* bar.”

“Okay,” I whisper again.

“But I didn’t drink there. I came back home—I mean, *here*; I came back *here*—then I had some of your hard liquor.” He squints. “It’s awful. Are you proud of me?”

My stomach drops when he makes the point that this is not his home. I forcefully set it aside. “Yes. Did you have a good time at the bar?”

He thinks about that for a second, his body swaying with his inability to keep himself upright. “Well. I did. I can’t believe there are so many happy gay people in the world.”

When I don’t answer, he peers at me. This guy won’t make it even two steps in any direction on his own. He’s holding onto that counter for dear life. I let him suffer a little while longer.

“Ethan, how can some gay people be so happy? I don’t get it.”

He seems to forget his question immediately after he asks it because he moves on quickly. “Ethan? Can you come get me from here? I don’t why but I can’t move without holding this counter and it’s too heavy to carry it with me to the couch. So, ah, can you come get me?”

I laugh. God, he’s so fucking cute.

I walk over to him. He takes a step forward and falls into my arms. I hold him up. “Are you sure you got this drunk here and not at the bar?” I ask.

“Nooooo, no, no, no. It was all here, Ethan. I didn’t drink one drop of alcohol at the bar. I didn’t even know what to order. There was a drink on the menu called *sex on the beach*.” He drops his forehead to my chest and giggles again. “Imagine how I would have sounded—‘Excuse me, barman, can I have, ah, sex on the beach, please?’” His giggling escalates.

Okay. Drunk Noah is my favorite.

“How much did you drink when you got home? A whole bottle of vodka?”

He frowns. I put my arms around his shoulders, and walk him to the couch. “No, I don’t think so. I had vodka, then I took a shower, and then I think I drank brandy.”

I have to dump him onto the couch because he’s all elbows. Totally limbless.

He’s already half asleep but holds onto me with a surprising amount of strength for a guy who can’t even walk.

His head flops onto my chest, so I just hold him like that.

“I’m so in love with you, Ethan,” he murmurs into my chest. The place where he’s resting his head tightens. “I’m so in love with you it hurts to think about it.”

“Shh, Noah. You’re just drunk.” But I’m selfish. I don’t really want him to stop talking.

“You were my childhood crush. My first love. I loved you right from the start, Ethan. Please believe me.”

“I believe you.”

“Sometimes, I want to tell Evanson that I don’t want to be his son anymore. I don’t want to worship his God anymore. I don’t want to be an Evanson anymore. I want to be a Salvatore. Even if I can’t be with you, maybe you can share your name with me as—as—your brother.”

He’s breaking my heart.

“If I came out, would you take me back?”

He’s drunk, I know, but, even if he’d asked the question sober, the answer would have been the same. “Yes, Noah. I’d take you back so fast your head would spin.” And then, I take advantage of the situation. “Would you really choose me, Noah?”

“Yes, Ethan.” His voice shakes against my chest. “I’m choosing you now. I’m choosing me, and I’m choosing you.”

He picks his head up then and looks at me. “Ethan, sometimes I don’t like God because he keeps me away from you.” His face is pained. “Because why shouldn’t I love you the way I do? Tell me, Ethan.”

“You can,” I whisper.

“Tell me you still love me, Ethan.”

His eyes search mine. Despite his state, there is a speck of clarity in his gaze.

“I still love you, Noah. I love you more than anything in this world.”

“When did you start?”

“I’ve always loved you but the kind of love you’re asking me about . . . I think it was when Ms. May told me to take you to the fireworks festival. Do you remember?”

“Yes, you kissed that Declan.”

“Yeah. I watched you watching the fireworks, and it wasn’t Declan I wanted to kiss that night.”

“You wanted to kiss *me*?”

“You’re drunk, Noah. Let’s talk about this tomorrow,”

“No, wait. Would you have kissed me right there, in front of everyone?”

“If you’d have let me, yes.”

“I was so angry when I saw you kissing Declan. Kiss me now, Ethan. Let’s pretend it happened that way at the beach that night. Tell me how it would have happened.”

I sigh. He should go to bed, but, what he’s asking for, I can’t resist giving it to him. I pull him closer until we’re both comfortable. His face is upturned. “You’re watching the fireworks, and you’re fascinated by it. Declan leaves, and I come up behind you. I pull you into my arms, and I kiss your neck.” I press my lips to the side of his neck. “Like this. You know it’s me because no one else would have dared to touch you like that. They would know you belong to me.”

Noah closes his eyes, whispering, “Yes.”

“I hold you like that while you watch the fireworks. And then, when the sky is filled with lights, I turn you to me and I kiss you—” I drop my lips to his — “like this.”

He moans into my mouth.

“Again, Ethan,” he whispers when I pull away. I kiss him again. The way I wanted to that day five years ago. Soft and innocent.

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CHAPTER 51

Noah

It's still dark when I crack open an eyelid. Squinting at my phone, I check the time. Ten-thirty p.m. And I'm still very drunk. Alcohol is as awful and fantastic as I imagined.

Ethan isn't in bed, and, when I peer through the semi-darkness, I spot him near the window, with a drink in his hand. He's shirtless.

The room is dark but not so dark that I can't admire that beautiful back. I sit up straighter to admire the way his back tapers at the waist. The muscles in his upper back . . . Ethan is a work of art. I can't see much of his tattoos, but the little of what I can see sets my drunken senses ablaze.

My eyes track the raven on his left shoulder blade. I'm sure he already knows that it had been the raven that brought the first sign of life after the Great Flood. Not the dove. If he says I'm the dove, and he's the raven then he's the one who brings life. *He's* the good one. Not me.

He turns, meeting my gaze across the room. "How're you feeling?" he asks. His voice. It *purrs*, hardening me immediately. He tosses back the last of his drink and comes over to the bed. He curls his arm around my waist and pulls me to the center of the bed, covering me with his body. His hair is damp. He's had a shower. I lift my face to his, and we kiss. Deep and long. He tastes intoxicated.

"Have you been drinking?" I ask between bites of kisses.

"So fuckin' drunk, Noah, baby. And I had to drink all alone because you passed out."

"I'm sorry." I drag my tongue across his parted lips. "Fuck me, Ethan," I whisper.

"You're still drunk too," he says, bringing his tongue out to swipe over mine.

"Do you mind that I am?"

"Yes. How can you consent when you're still so drunk?"

"I consented five years ago, Ethan. It still stands. I thought it was your eternal regret that we didn't have drunk sex." I rub against him. I must be very drunk. I don't usually have this much courage.

Ethan pushes his pelvis into me. “Not all fantasies should come true,” he murmurs.

I can’t believe I’ve known this guy for fifteen years and I’ve never seen him drunk before.

“You let us fuck like brothers, Ethan. The least I can do is force you to have drunk sex with me. Besides, you’re drunk too.”

He laughs lightly.

I slide my thigh over his waist, rubbing my crotch into his. “Don’t you want to fuck your brother, Ethan?” I whisper, my alcohol-soaked blood singing. I kiss him along the shape of his jaw. “I’m so hot for you, Ethan. I don’t care how drunk I am. Or how drunk you are. Let’s have drunk sex.”

“Come here, you intoxicated little church boy,” Ethan growls. He strips me off my sweats, and I relieve him of his, kicking them out of the way. I reach back to the nightstand for the lube and shove it into Ethan’s hands. “I want to fuck like—”

Ethan gets it before I can finish the sentence.

“Spread your legs for me, *little brother*,” he demands.

The muscles in my stomach clench and unclench with Ethan’s words. I spread my legs.

“Wider, Noah, baby. Show your brother that greedy hole of yours.”

Groaning, I plant my feet flat on the bed, spreading my thighs wider.

“No, Noah. Like this.” He brings my legs up, pushing my knees into my chest. I hold them there, and Ethan begins a trail of kisses from my calf, to the back of my thighs and then his tongue sweeps across my balls.

Ahh, *fuckkkk*.

He takes my nuts into his mouth, sucking softly. I can’t contain the fuck sounds coming out of my mouth.

He drags his tongue up over the length of my cock and then reaches up to kiss my neck. “Look at this dick, blushing for me.”

Fuck, I can’t breathe. I’m panting. “Ethan, talk to me,” I gasp into the air.

“I want to be inside you first, baby.”

He lathers us with lube, and, in seconds he’s inside me. His body covers mine, and he kisses me while he moves slowly inside me. “You want me to talk dirty to you, Noah, baby?”

“Yesss.”

“Hmm. Look at you, having sex with your brother. You’re such a nasty fucking thing, Noah. Do you know how nasty and hot you are when you

want to fuck like brothers?”

I pant. “More, Ethan.”

“I love fucking like brothers. I love stuffing my cock into this hot, sweet hole. My *brother*’s hole.”

“Do you like fucking your intoxicated brother, Ethan?” I whisper.

“Fuck, yes,” he growls in my ear. “You’re such a needy whore for my cock when you’re drunk.”

“Yes, I’m your needy, fucking drunk whore, Ethan.”

He pumps my ass, fucking me like the whore that I am. I’m not a godly saint on my way to heaven. I’m Ethan’s fucking drunk whore. I’m a whore for Ethan’s cock. “Ethan,” I gasp. “I need to come.”

“Come, Noah. Come for your brother.”

I come, absorbing Ethan’s orgasm into my body. My legs slip down from around his back. I can hardly keep my eyes open. All I can think of is how Ethan makes all my dreams come true.

“Sleep, Noah,” Ethan murmurs in my ear after he gathers my body close to his, and I must have, because when I open my eyes again, the morning light greets me, as well as an empty bed.

Contrary to what I’d expected, I don’t have a big black hole in my head after last night. I might have a slight headache, but that’s the extent of my suffering. I remember everything from last night, including the decision I made. The absolute freedom I have when I’m with Ethan keeps me on this high. The sex between us is incredible, but it’s the safety he provides and the freedom that comes with that, which pushes me forward in the most important decision I’ll ever make.

I make a trip to the bathroom and check my phone. Ethan has left me a text telling me he had to go into work early and if I would like to have dinner tonight at that Italian restaurant we went to that first time. I tell him I can’t wait. I’ll tell Ethan about my decision to come out at dinner.

I’ll risk my father’s wrath. God’s wrath. Eternal hellfire. But I’ve made the decision.

For the first time in my life, I feel a sense of peace. Like I finally have a chance to have the life I want. And what I want is to be free from my father’s control and manipulation. I may have the title of *minister*, but I’m finally beginning to understand the meaning of *faith*. I need to have faith in *myself*. I need to trust that I know what’s best for me. What Ethan and I have is worth fighting for. I’m five years too late. I won’t wait any longer.

And with this newfound faith, I text our father: *I've decided to spend Christmas in New York.*

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CHAPTER 52

Ethan

Mauri, the owner of the Italian restaurant Noah and I will be eating at tonight, welcomes us back to his restaurant with a knowing grin. He feeds us every kind of pasta, promising that the next one will be better than the last. We sit at a corner table, and I guess you could say it's our first real date. The privacy offered by the position of our table allows for me to reach over and kiss Noah whenever I want to. The laughter of other diners seated around us is a distant echo. To be this happy feels reckless, and I'm not sure Noah and I know what we're doing, but to be with him like this is too hard to resist.

He'll be gone in a month, but I asked for this time so I can have a few more memories. I'm determined to do just that.

Midway through dinner, Noah drops a bombshell. "I want to come out, Ethan," he says. His words tighten my chest with both shocked joy and insurmountable fear.

"There's so much I want to do, Ethan. And although I'm grateful for the life I was given when I came to live with you and—and dad, there's so much I can't do because of him. Like my mother. I want to find her. But I can't because I know how upset it would make him. You. I can't be with you because I'm so afraid of what he'd do. I'm not even half a person because I have to live my life exactly the way he dictates. But mostly, Ethan, I can't live this lie anymore."

I reach across the table, my fingers intertwining tightly with his. If Noah is determined to do this, then he's about to start a war with our father and his God, and as I meet his gaze, I tell him I'm with him all the way. John Evanson has nothing on me, and once his hold on Noah is broken, nothing will stand in our way.

I didn't expect Noah's decision to have such a profound impact on me. Within the space of five minutes, a lightness I've never felt before has settled inside me. For the first time in my life, I feel optimistic about the future. *My future. Our future.*

I take a few days off to enjoy Noah's company as he begins to mentally prepare for what's to come.

The crisp winter morning wraps New York City in a soft blanket of snow the next day. I promised to show Noah the city.

Our first stop is obviously Central Park. With our gloved fingers interlaced, we walk like we have a right to be outside like this: happy and free. It's surreal, being with him like this, in a way we've never been able to be: publicly and freely.

I show him the Bethesda Terrace, where street performers are usually found. "We'll come back when it's warmer for the music," I tell him.

Noah smiles up at me, his eyes sparkling, his gloved hand finding mine. Since making his decision there is a lightness about him too. His smiles are more frequent. His laughter too. "Let's promise to do that, Ethan." I understand his need for this assurance. I need it too. We don't have a good track record of things working out for us so our fear is understandable. "I promise, we'll come back."

We explore the park at Noah's pace: slowly. He stops to admire the seemingly insignificant things: families playing in the snow and couples laughing while ice skating. Many people come here to people-watch, and Noah is no different. I don't miss how he watches the couples with awe in his face. It tugs at my heart to know that he hasn't been allowed to enjoy these small things. But, all of that is changing. Noah is gathering his courage.

I glance at Noah, his hand fitting perfectly into mine. I'm humbled that I get to hold his hand like this. He smiles up at me every now and then while we walk. His happiness makes his face radiant. So different from the man I met a few weeks ago. He looks so *free*.

We cross the Bow Bridge, and, from there, we admire the skyline. And then, in the middle of a crowd of people, I pull Noah to me and bring our lips together in a soft kiss. He kisses me back, although he's so shy about it.

Noah is dying to see Times Square. So, the next day that's where we go.

"It's so beautiful, Ethan. Like a snow globe."

For the first time, I'm impressed by the season. Usually, I hate winter, but when I glance over at Noah and watch his growing happiness, I become more and more grateful for this season that has brought him so much joy.

As the snowflakes fall gently around us, I realize I'm happier than I ever remember being.

"I love this city, Ethan," he says.

“*Home*, Noah. Say this is *home*.” We haven’t worked out the details yet, but he’s not taken back his decision to come out.

“Home,” he whispers.

We get lost in the crowd, just two people, in love and enjoying the city.

Noah's gaze meets mine, and the world around us fades into the background. “*You* are home, Ethan,” he says.

I smile, my heart full for the first time since my mother died. “And *you* are home, Noah,” I tell him.

I watch him as he basks in his happiness. “Thank you, Noah,” I whisper. My throat constricts.

Noah gazes up at me tenderly. “For what, Ethan?”

“For being brave. For being brave for us.”

His eyes glisten. “I’m sorry it took so long, Ethan. And I’m sorry for what you had to face to bring us to this point.”

“No one will ever take you away from me again,” I say fiercely.

Noah's fingers intertwine with mine. “And no one will ever take you away from me again, Ethan.”

We make our way home, happy and wild with need for each other. I fuck him slow and easy. And when I rouse from my sleep the next morning, I’m more rested than I’ve ever been. Noah is still asleep, so I slip out of the bed quietly, take a shower, and then settle in my home office for some work. I’ve been gone for three days and I need to catch up.

My phone buzzes several times—emails coming through. I scroll through the mundane stuff without giving them much attention. Then, something in the subject line of the seventh email catches my eye.

No.

Subject line: Your police records.

Jesus Christ.

No.

My fingers tremble as I tap the email open. The first line hits me like a sucker-punch.

“I will take this public. Leave Noah alone.”

My eyes linger on the attachments, a split second stretched into an eternity. With a deep breath, I tap, and my heart sinks at the sight of a copy of the class B felony conviction.

There's a paper trail—there shouldn't be a paper trail. I'd double-checked, triple-checked, digging through files to make sure no trace remained. Despite the bile sitting in my throat, I study the document.

They are photos, taken with a cell phone. Evanson took pictures of the original documents. The document is situated on a table, and the third picture has someone's hand next to the paper, as if the person is holding it down. Whoever it is has a distinctive tattoo between their thumb and index finger. A set of initials and set of numbers—*P & G, 2-2-02*

I slump into my chair.

I wish my mother were still here. Maybe she'd know what to do. But that's the reason she died. She *didn't* know what to do. She didn't know how to overcome her husband's psychosis.

I reach into my drawer and pull out her bible. I haven't looked through it in such a long time.

The book is old and worn, soft with age, so, when I hold the book in my palm, it falls open. The scripture it opens to isn't just a coincidence. It's not just that the silky pages just happened to open to a particular verse. Instead, it's as if someone had opened up the book to that very page over and over again until the creases became almost like a bookmark.

Deuteronomy 22:28-29

If a man happens to meet a virgin who is not pledged to be married and rapes her and they are discovered, he shall pay her father fifty shekels of silver. He must marry the young woman for he had violated her. He can never divorce her as long as he lives.

It kills me to think about how many times she must have read that verse, trying to make sense of it. How trapped she must have felt knowing that she had no choice in how she would live her life after John Evanson raped her. That according to her God, it had been her duty to marry him and that she could never seek a divorce. What outrageous bullshit.

The pages slide to the first page.

This bible belongs to

Pricilla Salvatore Evanson

Presented by

John Evanson

I move my thumb to trace lightly over her first name.

To everyone else, she was Pricilla. To me, she was Cilla. Because Pricilla was far too much effort for a four-year-old who had better things to do with his time. There were pagers to break. Shaving blades to be dropped into the toilet. Still full juice boxes to be emptied out onto dad's new armchair. We'd only managed to get away with the shaving blades situation.

We paid dearly for everything else. "Daddy's home" was not an exclamation of excitement, like "Ethan, guess what? *DADDY'S HOME!!*" The announcement of daddy's arrival was more of the scramble-to-get-everything-in-order-QUICKLY kind because daddy decided to skip the night vigil at church and came home early.

We really were not expecting him. The faithful Pastor Evanson had never missed a night vigil before, which is what Cilla muttered and moaned under her breath as she raced around the living room grabbing packets of half-eaten potato chips and straightening out the pillows. I helped by pushing all the Lego pieces under the couches because otherwise, there would be the brown belt and the basement.

The belt was for her neck and the basement was where he took her to commit all kinds of crimes against her and her body.

And as always, thinking about my mother's abuse by my father triggers that familiar feeling of the world closing in on me.

The bible slips from my grasp and lands on the desk with a soft thud. I need a smoke so badly my chest aches. I step out onto the balcony with a cigarette between my fingers. The nicotine fills my lungs better than the cold, crisp air.

I sink into a wicker chair, the smoke curling upwards. For the first time, I'm not angry about being cornered. I'm just tired, bone-deep fucking exhausted.

I close my eyes, considering my options. I could just fucking steal Noah away, and no one will ever see us again. I press my fingers to the space between my eyebrows, the tension mounting.

Thoughts about my mother return. A heaviness settles over me again as I remember my last moments with her—lying in her lifeless arms. Just twenty-five years old. Dead.

Had she been awake or asleep when I crawled onto that bed? The memory refuses to surface. I know I'd climbed onto the bed. I know I'd nestled into her arms, but the rest is a fog. The memory is a maze with walls too high to scale.

And then there are the images that haunt me—the ropes, the brown belt around her neck. The gray eyes that locked onto mine through the crack in the door while I watched. The horror and shame in her eyes while my innocent eyes watched the torture being inflicted on her. Those eyes, I can't forget.

I take another drag of my cigarette, my thoughts shifting to the present, to the safe house named after her. To the children whose will to live sustains them minute by minute despite the horrors that had been inflicted on them. Suddenly, Cilla Salvatore doesn't look like the innocent victim anymore.

I stand and walk to the railing, gripping it as I force myself to breathe evenly. Cilla was a woman who couldn't face life, a woman who escaped through a cowardly act. The children at the safe house—they are the strong ones.

Anger courses through me. Anger at Cilla, at Evanson, at the circumstances that have brought us here. I stub out the cigarette and gaze at the New York skyline. With a deep inhale, I breathe through the anger.

Then I sit back down at my laptop and get to work.

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CHAPTER 53

Noah

“Let me talk to him,” I say. I check my phone again. My father has not responded to my last text about not spending Christmas with him. Not to me, anyway. It looks like his response is this vicious attack on Ethan. I can’t believe this is what I woke up to this morning.

“What will you say to him, Noah? That you’ve changed your mind, and you’ll be home for Christmas?” he demands. “That you’ve changed your mind and you’ve decided not to be gay anymore? Because that’s how it works, right?” Then with a sigh, he adds, “How long will we play this game, Noah?”

I drop my gaze. He walks across his office to stand in front of me, pulling me into his arms. “I’m sorry. You didn’t deserve that. I promised you I’ll stand by you when you come out, and this is not the way to support you. Forgive me, Noah.”

I lift my head. “You’re the last person to be asking for forgiveness. You’ve never done one wrong thing in your life. And I’ve done nothing but wrong. I’ve harmed you in so many ways. I’m the one who’s sorry, Ethan. I’m just so desperate to help fix this mess I’ve caused.”

“We both know that the fact that you won’t go home for Christmas is what sent him over the edge, but I don’t want to make you feel helpless. If you think it would do any good, then, go ahead.”

“I also don’t want to make things worse,” I say, suddenly not so sure of myself.

Ethan smiles and presses his lips to mine. “Trust yourself. Make a decision. Whatever happens, at least you tried.”

I kiss him back. How did I end up with this beautiful, intelligent, compassionate man? “I love you, Ethan. With all my heart, I love you.”

I dial my father’s number. He picks up on the first ring.

“Noah, son. Are you alright?”

“Yes, Dad. I hadn’t heard from you so I thought I’d . . . check in.” I chew on my thumb nail, my eyes on Ethan. He sits on the edge of his desk with his arms folded.

“Well, you said you’re not coming home for Christmas, so I didn’t think I was important enough for you anymore.”

The stab of guilt is inescapable. *Almost* inescapable. “It’s not that, Dad.”

“Then what is it, Noah? After everything I’ve done for you, you can’t at least make it home for Christmas?”

I’m drowning already. The tic in Ethan’s jaw makes me extra nervous. How do I answer? “It’s just that I’ve heard Christmas in New York is amazing, and I wanted to see it.” I’m already losing.

“So you couldn’t have invited me over there? You were home from Africa only two days before you left for New York. Between bible school and your Africa trip, I’ve seen you only a handful of times. I don’t even know what you’re doing there anymore. Since when do you keep such important things from me?”

Ethan is right. I shouldn’t have done this.

“Am I not your father?” he continues. “Do I not deserve at least some respect?”

My mouth is dry. My hands shake. I can’t find the words. Ethan pulls me to him. I glance up, shocked. He puts his finger to his lips. *Shhh*. I nod and allow him to pull me into his arms. He turns me around so my back is pressed into his front and he brings his arms around my middle. I sink into him, immediately feeling safe. I gather some of the courage emanating from Ethan and speak. “Dad, I wanted to ask you about Ethan’s conviction.” The words are weak, but they’re the best I can manage.

“Yes. I’m taking care of that. I’m not interested in Ethan’s life as long as it doesn’t involve you. I sent him an email telling him that I’ll tell the whole world about what he did to you if he ever tries to get in touch with you. I expect some appreciation for the lengths I would go to, to protect you, Noah. I’ve done it before, and I’ll do it again.”

“If you do that, then you’ll have to name me.” It’s my cheap shot over the fact that he’d kept my identity a secret the first time.

“Noah, I will do whatever it takes to keep you safe from Ethan. *Anything*. Even name you, if it meant keeping you safe.”

“I don’t need to be kept safe,” I say bravely.

“Well, I picked you up from the gutter. I have some say in your life.”

Ethan’s arms tighten around me. My fingers cling to his forearm. I harden my skin, forcing his words to bounce off me.

“But Dad,” I say in a half whisper. “Ethan has done nothing wrong.”

“I really don’t care, Noah, but, if you insist on protecting that heathen son of mine, then make sure you come home for Christmas and stay away from him. Do you hear me, Noah? It’s very simple. If you want me to forget about what Ethan did to you, then come home and never try to contact him. And quite frankly, Noah, I don’t think you’re being altogether honest with me. I can expect it from Ethan because he’s an all-round liar, but not you.”

Ethan turns me around. He moves his hand side to side in front of his neck. *Cut it.*

“Will you come home, Noah? I’ll let all of this go if you would just come home.”

My eyes roam over Ethan’s face. He shakes his head. *No.*

“Dad, I have to go.”

I end the call and fall into Ethan’s embrace. “You tried,” he murmurs against my hair.

The intercom buzzes urgently, and, within moments, Jerry Harvey strides into Ethan's office.

Ethan stands next to me, his fingers intertwined with mine, grounding me in the midst of this approaching shitstorm. He’s the one facing the storm, yet his eyes find mine repeatedly, concern for me shining in them. Although I have no right and I don’t have as much to lose as he does, I’m more afraid than he is.

Jerry adjusts his glasses.

“So there's no trace of your conviction apart from these copies?”

Ethan's response is tinged with frustration, “Yes, the NSA swore nothing would resurface, but it's clear my father took pictures of the documents. I need John Evanson to give up these copies.”

“And that tattoo in the picture? You’re sure it belongs to an officer in the NCPD?”

Ethan nods. “I cross checked every social media site. His wife even has a picture of him at the tattoo parlor with updates from start to finish. It’s Officer Purnell’s tattoo. No doubt. ”

“Our worst case scenario is that he publishes these documents online. We have Noah's statement if that happens.” Jerry looks to me for confirmation.

I nod.

Ethan's voice is measured. The softness in his voice that I’ve become used to is absent. “I'm not willing to let the worst case scenario happen. I need to avoid the PR nightmare it will cause if he puts these documents on

the internet. If he was just going around telling people about it, I could handle it as a deranged preacher with a bone to pick with his son. But he has evidence. I can't compete with that. My work depends on my credibility. This will destroy me. I need Evanson to back off."

"Maybe I should just go back, Ethan," I offer like a weakling. Our father made it clear that it's the only way he'll leave Ethan alone. I feel stupid even being here because none of this would be happening if I hadn't been so spineless five years ago.

Ethan turns to me with murder on his face. "No. We won't let him control us like this," he says.

"I know the DA," Jerry says. "I'll give him a call. I'll frame it as a coerced confession and a breach of due process. Irregularities in the police department at the time you were arrested. The tattoo is enough for us to use against Officer Purnell, that he gave John Evanson access to sensitive information. They'll probably call John Evanson in and demand that he destroy the documents because of the manner in which he acquired them. The officer will likely be disciplined. I'll put some pressure on the DA's office. They don't have time to deal with this kind of pettiness from a local preacher. They'll reel him in pretty fast."

Ethan's eyes leave mine to give his lawyer the go-ahead.

I offer Ethan a dozen apologies after Jerry leaves. He stands by the window, looking outside, but I don't think he's admiring the soft fall of snow. I stand next to him, feeling like I've sent him straight to hell all over again. "I'm so sorry, Ethan," I say. He gathers me in his arms, holding me close, but he says nothing for a long time. When he speaks, it's about his mother.

"My mother had a diary. An old yellow and blue notebook." He laughs mirthlessly. "She's the only person who knows what a monster Evanson really is. He destroyed the diary. She's too fucking dead to tell anyone about him, and no one will believe me."

Yellow and blue diary? I allow Ethan to bury me inside his chest. I know the diary he's talking about. Evanson didn't destroy it. It's hidden in his steel cabinet along with a hard drive and the photos he'd taken of me. And the pencil.

CHAPTER 54

Ethan

My intercom buzzes again four hours later.

Within seconds, Jerry stands at the doorway. He looks like he's been hit by a bus. "Have you seen the news?" he asks from the doorway.

No lawyer shows up like this, looking like shit unless something's gone down.

Jerry steps inside the apartment as Noah steps into the living room.

Jerry sets his briefcase and laptop bag on the granite countertop as he passes the kitchen. "I don't know how to tell you this, Ethan," he says.

I stare at him, my face blank, but my mind working like a fucking supersonic boom. Noah stands next to me, his hand on my arm. "He took the documents public." My voice doesn't even sound like my own. The words come out like the low, ferocious growl of a madman. My anger is immediate.

"They've got you on CNN," Jerry says.

Stunned, I spin around. "CNN? Why CNN?" I demand, as if Jerry made the call to broadcast my life internationally.

Jerry rubs his face. "You're an international ally, that's why," he says tiredly. "I called the DA's office as soon as I left earlier this morning and again a few minutes ago. They got to John Evanson too late."

I switch on the TV and find my life sprawled across the eighty-inch screen.

Noah gasps.

Fuck.

"Now, Jason, what we have here is a first-class socio-political scandal, wouldn't you say?" The pretty blonde on my screen turns to her co-anchor, her smile just managing to remain on this side of rueful. Jason, looking equally contrite, turns to the screen and replaces his smile with a serious news anchor face. He glances down at the small pile of papers on his desk, and I think he looks very important doing it.

Noah pulls me down onto the couch so we're both sitting.

"For those just tuning in, breaking news this hour. If the world's hunger problems or the crisis in Syria or China's economy boost didn't catch your

attention this morning, this certainly will. Today's story hits so close to home; the betrayal is palpable here in the studio and around the country and responses continue to pour in.

One of America's most generous philanthropists is a sex offender. We're talking about Ethan Salvatore, folks. Leaked documents tell us that Ethan Salvatore sexually assaulted his stepbrother, Noah Evanson, in North Carolina five years ago. The two had grown up together since Salvatore and Evanson were thirteen and eight years old respectively. And to take things one scandalous step further, we're learning the sexual assault charges and the subsequent conviction which led to Mr. Salvatore's incarceration five years ago has all been covered up. The question is by whom? We know Ethan Salvatore exploded onto the tech scene three years ago and much of his work is for the government. A natural conclusion is that someone in the government helped Ethan Salvatore walk out of prison with a clean record. Unconfirmed sources are saying it's the NSA."

Blondie takes over. "Ethan Salvatore is the Chief Technology Officer and co-founder of Salvatore Technologies, a security company which blasted its way to the top of the industry out of nowhere three years ago. Since then, Ethan Salvatore has worked tirelessly, defending the poor and the marginalized. But every face has a mask, and Americans are now calling for Ethan Salvatore's mask to be removed."

Noah pushes a drink in my hand. It's not even noon, but I take it anyway, seeing but hardly registering Noah's ashen face.

I watch the headlines glide across the bottom of the screen. African countries are rounding up BRICS allies, but there isn't much confidence that it's enough to destabilize the dollar. Trump will be the first former president to face criminal charges, and the Pittsburgh Synagogue shooter has been sentenced to death.

I watch in fascination as the man and the woman on the screen dissect my life in front of the entire world as if they know me.

Jason continues. "Ethan Salvatore is a well-known, and—until this morning, perhaps—a well-respected member of both the business and political worlds. He's the mastermind behind some of the world's most sophisticated security software. His work speaks for itself, and it's not hard to believe that he owns one of the most respected security firms in the world. His presence on the social scene is minimal. You won't find him at Fashion Week or ball games, but you will find him engaged in political

talks that centre around child hunger, LGBTQIA+ rights and, ironically, sexual abuse. Ethan Salvatore is also the head of an elite organization called Global Impact, where six of the richest people in the world came together to try and solve some of the world's biggest problems.”

The blonde smiles. “Let’s look at that in a little more detail.” Behind her, the giant LED screen lights up and my face covers most of the background. She turns to look at the picture someone in the control room must have found on the internet.

“There he is. Is this the face of one of the most deceptive men in America right now? It could very well be. This is the face of a man who fights relentlessly against human trafficking and sexual crimes, world hunger, and more. It’s also the face of a man who has just been exposed as a convicted sex offender.”

She turns to Jason. “Now Jason, what are our viewers saying?”

Jason nods vigorously, as if he went to college and got a degree in the subject of Ethan Salvatore’s Fucked up Life. “The questions are pouring in—how did our justice system allow this? And what does this really say about the rich and powerful in our country, and is it really this easy to buy freedom?”

Jason turns back to the screen. “Folks, this is a developing story, and we’ll keep you up-to-date on events as they unfold.”

I switch off the TV. My phone blows up immediately. Noah looks at my phone, watching the texts come in and names flash across the screen as one call is diverted to voicemail after a few rings only to be replaced by another incoming call.

“Noah, I need to deal with this. I’m not leaving you, because I know this affects you too, but can you give me some time to get a hold of this.”

He nods. “Yes, Ethan. I’ll be right here. I’ll do anything you need. I won’t get in your way. I’m so sorry, Ethan.”

I pull him to me, holding him close, squeezing his body against mine. “Call Ms. May and Mr. Tom. They need to know, or they’ll worry themselves to death.” And then I let him go to assess the extent of the damage caused.

I take Jono’s call. He’s livid and wants a dirty fight. I tell him we will fight dirty if we have to.

Jerry is on the phone with my PR team.

My Global Impact team has called for an emergency video call.

I take Florence's call next and give her as much information as possible so she can deal with the calls coming through to her.

I field a dozen more calls after that, starting with the Mayor of New York, and various business associates.

Conversations with each one hold a similar tone. Guarded sympathy. Half-measured encouragement to hang in there. And most importantly, they would be discussing 'the way forward'. Much business is to be lost over this.

As the face of Salvatore Tech, as CEO, Jono will face the world and stand with me, as he had done five years earlier when we were nobodies. I have never been more grateful for my best friend.

I'll meet with my executive team in thirty minutes. For now, I need Noah. I find him where I left him: in the living room, watching everything unfold on his phone.

"I can't believe he did this, Ethan," he says, looking absolutely shell shocked.

"Is he this deluded, Noah? Is he so confident that you'll remain silent, even after *this*?"

He nods. "Ethan, he *is* this deluded. He hasn't even considered the notion that I'd choose you. He refuses to consider that I'm gay. He truly believes you forced me. He lives in a world that exists only for him and where people are the way he says they are. And you were right. He's done this because I won't go back for Christmas. It's like the ultimate rejection for him."

"I won't let him win."

"We won't let him win, Ethan. It has to end here."

I pull him to me. "We won't let him win."

"What happens now, Ethan?"

"I'm meeting with my board in about thirty minutes. Your statement is now imperative, Noah."

He takes my face between his palms. "I'll scream it from the rooftops, Ethan. I'm so sorry it took this long."

I turn my face to kiss his palm. "You'll give your statement in two days. I will too. The PR team is working on it right now."

CHAPTER 55

Noah

Our father made good on his promise, and now the whole world is watching Ethan's life fall apart. Ethan is at his office building, trying to salvage whatever he can, and I'm at his home trying to stay out of the way.

For someone who, less than a month ago, was paralyzed over the thought of coming out, now I'll disclose my sexuality in the most public way possible.

I watch my phone blow up. It hasn't stopped flashing. Even switching it to silent hasn't helped me escape the endless string of messages and missed calls. The only texts I look for are those from Ms. May and Mr. Tom. They are beside themselves with worry, but I tell them that Ethan did none of the things being reported in the media. They beg to talk to him. I tell them he's too busy to take their calls, but that I'll keep them updated.

Now, I can't help looking through the latest string of messages to come through. One is from Brian Walsh, who had been earmarked to become my assistant earlier this year.

There is no judgment, Noah. We didn't know this terrible thing happened to you. But remember, if God could offer up Job to be destroyed by Satan so Job can prove his faithfulness, then we all can expect to be asked to step up and prove our faith. Ethan Salvatore's place is reserved in hell. I always knew he'd destroy everything he touched.

And then from Pastor Bobby:

Consider it a joy for what you are facing, Noah. The Devil handpicked you because you posed the biggest threat to his kingdom of darkness. Stand strong and fight the good fight. You are a soldier in the Lord's army, and He will bring you through this too. The homosexuals will not enter the kingdom of God, but don't worry, Noah, what happened to you does not make you a homosexual.

I have so many questions. Was it the Devil or God who made this supposedly terrible thing happen to me? According to my fellow brothers and sisters who believe I was sexually assaulted by Ethan, I ought to *count*

it all joy? Is that what they tell the real victims too? To be happy about being abused? That it makes you stronger? That it's God's way of making you prove your faith?

The bible talks about the scales falling from the Apostle Paul's eyes when he had a moment of clarity on his way to Damascus and I feel the same way, except the scales falling from my eyes are beginning to make me see my faith for what it truly is. An evil, inhumane, calculated form of mind control. The ultimate manipulation.

How could I belong to a faith that is so hateful to those not like us? How can I say that *my* God is a God of love when he kills people for not believing in him? When he sends them to burn in eternal hellfire if you don't love him?

Would a God, all knowing, all powerful, all loving let that happen? And not just let it happen but *ensure* that every person who didn't believe in him is burned in hell for it. Where is God's humanity? This is not love. Nothing about my faith is about love. It's about control. And domination. It's about stifling and harming those who are different, who choose to believe differently.

My phone blows up again. Jessica, asking me to call her back. Eight of those from her. It's terrible, but, I decide that I don't owe Jessica anything. I archive her texts.

The last few texts are from my father.

It's not your fault, Noah. It's all Ethan's fault. His sins have caught up with him. I had to protect you. You know I'll always protect you.

Protect me? Or ensure my silence? Does he believe that Ethan will give me courage to speak about the unspeakable things?

My father doesn't know that I have no desire to tell anyone anything about *his* sins. Mostly because I never want Ethan to know. My shame knows no end, and I can't let the past touch what I have with Ethan. I have to protect what we have at all costs.

I stare down at the text. I may have my secrets, but that doesn't mean I'm going to stand back and let Ethan be defamed any more than he already has. He gave up his freedom for me. I won't let him be destroyed a second time.

Another text comes through.

He will pay for what he has done to you. He was born into sin and he will die in his sin, but not you, Noah. I did what I did for you. It was all for you.

I shake with fury, and an uncontrolled wail begins deep in my belly.

What is Ethan's sin? Please. Someone tell me. What is Ethan's sin? The screams are silent. They're inside my head, but I hear them so loud and clear it feels like my head is splitting in two. I have to defend him. Hands shaking, I type: *There is nothing more beautiful than Ethan's soul.*

My father's response is immediate: *You're under the influence of the enemy, Noah. I have the whole church praying around the clock for you. I'm praying every minute of every day. I know you'll come back home. The Lord has already shown me that you will return to the fold.*

Through all my bravery, those words cause an involuntary dip in my stomach. The Lord has shown him? Like the Lord showed him that vision of the demon and the baby? He was right about that. The Lord had to have shown it to him because it was accurate. Ethan was the demon and I was the baby. It's creepy, and, if I'm being honest, a disgusting violation of my privacy, having God tell my father about me and Ethan, but . . . evil or not, it had been true.

What if it were true now too, that I'll return home? God showed it to my father in a vision. So it must be true.

I ignore the last text with the hope that the vision is false, or at least that I would have the strength of mind to choose for myself and not return. That is not home. My home is where Ethan is.

In two days, I'll come out, and this whole nightmare will be over. And then, it'll be just me and Ethan. There'll be nothing to hide and everyone will know that I went to that hotel with Ethan willingly, and all he did was try to protect me when I was not able to protect myself.

I delete all the recent texts from my father and the others, and then I text Ethan: *I want to fuck like brothers tonight.* Nothing, not even my father's insane delusion, will tear us apart.

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CHAPTER 56

Ethan

Jono is already in my office when I arrive. “Bro, how are you holding up?” He looks pissed, but I can also detect the worry in his eyes.

“Noah’s going to give a statement.” Finally, I tell Jono the truth.

“Five years too late.”

I sigh. “Better late than never, yeah?”

“I wish that father of yours ten eternities in hell, man.”

I stand by the window with my hands in my pocket, watching the soft fall of snow. This winter has been good. Maybe because I had Noah this time around.

I glance over at him. “You think I’m stupid.”

“I think you’re one of the unlucky ones who need to suffer for love.”

“Isn’t it worth it, Jono? To suffer for a little while if it means getting the love you know is meant for you?”

Jono shakes his head. “I watched you suffer in that house, Ethan. You think he didn’t abuse you just because you didn’t let him push you around. But he did. The way he treated you. How he tried to pit you and Noah against each other. I mean, how long have we been friends? I can’t remember a single time he gave you a Christmas gift or a birthday present. But Noah got a small mountain under that tree, right? Remember those big birthday parties he used to get? He was trying to hurt you with all that shit.”

“He did give me Christian books every Christmas.”

Jono scoffs. “Cruel fuckin’ bastard.” And then, “You’re going to make it through this, Ethan. You always make it through. And, when all of this is over, if Noah ever fucks up like this again I’m going to whip his ass.”

I grin. “If you ever touch him you’ll fuckin’ die, Blood.”

He returns my grin. “You fell in love with your stepbrother. I knew it right from the start, Ethan, but, even after five years I still can’t believe it sometimes.”

Florence sticks her head through the door, and after a brief overview, the three of us head to our meeting. My phone lights up with a text on our way. It’s from Noah. I respond: *You hot for your brother’s cock?*

I'm about to find out just how much of my life has fucked off to hell, but nothing will ever top Noah's incest kink. I'll always rise to the occasion. Unfortunately, I don't have time to wait for his response. I pocket my phone and settle into my chair.

While my team settles down, I remind myself that I have people who have chosen to stand with me. Employees all the way down the food chain who depend on their jobs to feed their families. I can't let them down.

Our Director of Public Relations lays out a strategy on how we'll respond as a collective. She outlines the protocols to assist our staff in dealing with the shitstorm currently underway on all social media platforms as well as protocols staff can follow if they are approached by tabloids for inside information. I approve them.

The financial report is staggering. Market sentiment is strong and aggressive. Shares have dropped by twenty percent, totaling almost one hundred million dollars.

Debbie, who manages our Social Outreach programs, shares her framework for how we'll safeguard the groups we work with and ensure that they are not financially impacted by these changes.

In the last twenty-four hours we've had a mass exodus. That hit the hardest because it means I've lost the trust of my employees on a scale that is almost irreparable.

I inform the team of my innocence, that although the police documents are real, the story is more complicated than that, and we'll be providing a statement in two days.

As the meeting draws to a close I reassure my team as best as I can. "We've lost contracts, partners, and money. Lots of money. But I promise to build this business back up again. I'll be here until the last employee walks out of this building, and only then will I walk away. As long as there are people who come here day in and day out to earn a living, I'll be here."

The meeting is adjourned, and I return to my office to finish a few outstanding projects. The work gives me a small amount of relief from the current shitstorm.

When Florence knocks and then enters my office, three hours have passed. "Ethan," she says softly. "There's a woman downstairs causing a scene, asking for a meeting with you."

"We said no interviews."

“I know, but she’s not a reporter. She sounds like someone’s grandma. She says she has something important to tell you.”

“No, Florence. We deal with the press and anyone else through our PR team.”

“Are you sure, Ethan? She says she’s from North Carolina and that she knows you. I can make ten minutes for her. I’m asking you to see her because she’s acting really weird, and I have a feeling it might be important.”

I sigh. “Okay. Ten minutes.”

Standing at my window, I gaze out into the cold New York winter.

My mother was a simple woman. She didn’t ask for much except to be loved. I would like to think I turned out like her. I have no need for the admiration of outsiders. I don’t need luxury to be happy. I just want. . . to be loved, and after my mother, I had never felt loved. Until Noah. Noah loved with his whole soul. He doesn't know it but there is a kind of safety in Noah’s love that makes a person want to slay demons for him. I wanted to slay demons for him. For us. I thought that was what I was doing when I agreed to the plea deal. He’d loved me so fiercely. Couldn’t I have at least kept his secret?

Florence returns. “Ethan? Your visitor is here. Her name is Althea Remington. I’ll send her in if you’re ready.”

I nod.

I don't know any Althea Remington, but she’s gone through a whole lot of trouble for ten minutes of my time. I greet her as warmly as I can when she steps into my office. Florence closes the door softly.

Mrs. Remington is a woman who’s clearly seen many, many decades. Her hair is combed neatly into a bun, an unashamed mixture of black and white. The age spots on her cheekbones must have seen many summers and her grayed eyes are sharp, the kind of sharpness that must only come with a long life of experience. She stands by the door with her hands clasped together and a handbag hanging from her arm.

“Ethan Salvatore.” She speaks but her voice breaks before she’s finished with the last syllable. I walk over to her and offer her my hand.

“Mrs. Remington, it’s a pleasure meeting you.”

She smiles up at me, but there are tears in her eyes. I frown.

“Ethan,” she says, bringing her shaking hand up to her eyes to swipe at a runaway tear.

“Mrs. Remington, are you alright? Is there something I can help you with?”

“No, no, son. Please. Please don’t mind this old lady. And I’m sorry for making such a fuss with your security.”

“Are you sure you’re at the right place?” She looks lucid but I have no idea who this woman is. And she’s just too weepy for my liking right now.

“Yes. I’m sorry. I’m sorry about barging through like this, but I had just enough money for a plane ticket to come out here and a little more to stay the night. I have to go back tomorrow. So, it had to be today, you understand, son?”

“Yes?” No. I don’t understand any of this. “Mrs. Remington, could you tell me why you needed to see me?”

I put my hand on her shoulder and steer her further into the office. “Please, sit down.”

Florence enters as Mrs. Remington takes her seat. She sets down a tray with tea, coffee, bottled water, and light foods and gives me a questioning look. I lift a shoulder. *I don’t know yet.*

“Something to eat, Mrs. Remington?” Florence says.

“Oh no, not for me right now, thank you, young lady. But maybe you can pack some of it for me if I get hungry later.”

“Yes, of course, Mrs. Remington.”

Florence leaves us alone once again.

Mrs. Remington picks up a cup of tea, and I take my seat behind my desk and wait. This is the strangest experience I’ve ever had.

“How is Noah?” she asks over her tea.

My first inclination is to demand how she knows Noah but reason comes in fast. As of three hours ago, Noah’s name was released to the public. He’s made international news alongside me. Surely this woman has seen the news. But she asks her question so *personally*.

Thankfully, she’s not crying anymore. “I was there that night,” she says.

It’s so soft, her voice, I barely hear her but when the words settle, I’m more confused than before, but still my heartbeat escalates.

“The night of Noah’s accident. I was there. At the hotel.”

My stomach drops to the floor. My eyes narrow. What is this woman’s agenda? “Mrs. Remington, I’m going to have to ask you to please tell me the reason for wanting to see me.”

She smiles over her tea. The kind of smile that your grandmother might

give you when she's proud of you. Which makes no sense since I don't know this woman.

"Oh, Ethan. Look at how you have grown." She sets her tea down. "Now, I'm going to start at the beginning. Don't interrupt me until after I'm done."

"Okay. Please go on."

"I was working at the Oakwood Inn Express on the night you came in there with your brother—" She looks at me sharply. I catch the *brother* as quickly as she does.

"I'm sorry. I know he's not your real brother. Let me start over. I was working at the Oakwood the night you and Noah came in. He wanted to go back outside. Something about a jacket?"

I nod with my heart in my throat, hardly daring to breathe because I don't want to distract her from her story—*my* story. My and Noah's story.

"You told him to let it go, I think. I didn't get all those words. I think you didn't want him to go outside again because it was too cold and you would've been right. You both went upstairs. Not long after, your father came blasting through the door. I wanted to stop him, but I had a bad knee—still got that bad knee. I couldn't move fast enough. A minute later, Noah came flying down stairs. He got into the car and sped off. By the time I managed to get to the front door, he'd already crashed into the tree down the road."

I reach up to rub against the tightness of my chest, an ache arising from the fact that a total stranger has just recounted the one hundred percent god damn truth about what happened that night. I wrack my brain trying to remember her, but nothing comes up. My memories are filled with me screaming for Noah over and over again.

"I was the one who called the ambulance," she says.

"Thank you." My voice catches in my throat. I want to cry, but I wouldn't be able to tell you why.

"Noah went with you willingly. They never came out with it, but I knew it was Noah they were talking about when word got around about your conviction. I never understood why you said you forced him."

"I had good reason to," I tell her.

"I'll bet you did. You're just like your mother. She, too, never did anything without good reason."

"You knew my mother?"

“She was the pastor’s wife. Everybody knew her. She was one of the best human beings I’ve ever had the pleasure of knowing. We lost a good woman, but you lost a mother. For that, I’m sorry.”

“Thank you.” I still don't know what to make of this woman.

“Now. Back to my story. Whatever reasons you had to do what you did, I respect them. It couldn't have been easy for Noah to have to deal with your father if he admitted to going up to that room willingly. But Ethan, after what I’ve been seeing in the news just this morning, I needed to see you. Your father, Pastor Evanson, is not the man most people think he is, if what I heard is true, and I do believe that what I’ve heard is true.”

“What have you heard?” I’m almost afraid to hear what this woman has to say.

“Now, this is not to fight fire with fire or do any kind of mudslinging, but I don’t think Pastor Evanson should be looking at the speck in other people’s eyes when he has a log stuck in his own.”

“What have you heard, Mrs. Remington.” Anticipation boils in my belly.

“Some children who have been talking. They’ve been saying some things about your father.”

“What kind of things?”

“Well, Ethan. I didn’t come all this way to mince my words or beat about the bush, so I’ll come right out and say it. About a year ago, some kids started talking about your father being inappropriate with other kids.”

Mrs. Remington pauses for my reaction. I give her nothing less than catatonic shock. I know my father was a monster to my mother, but this? Even my hatred for him had never led me down this path of thinking.

“Did you hear what I said, child?” Mrs. Remington speaks softly. Like she’s speaking to a child.

“Yes, Mrs. Remington.” My voice is hoarse and my chest is tight with something so scary I’m afraid to breathe.

“I needed to tell you this, Ethan, because he needs to face his demons. He’s hurt you and Noah enough, trying to get people to hate you over a whole bunch of lies.”

“My father . . . ?” Something grows inside my belly. A ball of fire. Burning. I don’t know if it’s fury or disbelief. That I’d always thought he was the vilest man on earth when, in fact, he might be worse than that.

“Thank you for coming here.” I whisper the words because I might finally believe in a god. This woman is a guardian angel. She must be. Here

is someone, a total stranger, who seems to know more about me and my life than anyone else.

“You must be in shock. I understand. But I needed to tell you this. I hope you can do something about it.”

“Mrs. Remington, as you can imagine, I have a few questions.”

“Yes, yes. I’ll answer to the best of my ability.”

“Where did you get this information?”

“Word gets around, Ethan. But to be precise, Daphne Coldridge, who used to teach Sunday school back in the day overheard some of the teens talking about it after church one day about a year ago. Ethan, I came here to give you this information because you have the means to do something about it. Or at least, you’ll know who to talk to. If it’s true, Ethan, that means a man of God has harmed children.”

The walls are closing in on me, and I’m suffocating with the thickness of the air. The words hit me like a freight train coming unhinged. Image after image races through my mind, memories of my mother’s life with my father. His cruelty toward her behind closed doors.

“Do you know who the children are?”

“Yes. Two girls. From what I heard, this inappropriate behavior took place when the girls were about fifteen years old.”

“Fifteen?”

“Fifteen, Ethan.” She shakes her head.

“Leave this with me, Mrs. Remington.” My voice is firm, belying the sickness in my blood. My mother was not the only one? How long has he been doing this? How many women . . . girls . . . has he done this to? Is that so-called righteous man of God a serial rapist? I know what he did to my mother. What did he do to the others?

I’ve despised him for as long as I can remember, but this . . . it’s beyond anything I could have ever imagined.

But I can’t let myself spiral. This is what my life’s work is all about. I need to get a grip. I have every resource at my disposal to get to the truth.

“I’ll get to the bottom of this,” I assure Mrs. Remington. She sets her cup down with a smile on her face. “I knew you would.”

I call my friends at the NSA. They don’t want to touch me because of the media coverage around my conviction, but I’ve made a few friends over there who’ll still bend over backwards for me. And those friends have friends at the FBI.

I need to get the intel on those children.

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CHAPTER 57

Noah

Ethan is busy. He tries to keep me involved, but mostly, he's too busy to stop to let me know what's going on. I get more from the news and social media posts, but the conspiracy theories have become so ridiculous, I've stopped reading them.

I try to give Ethan all the space he needs to clean up the mess I've caused. From what I know, he's mostly trying to keep his business from falling apart. When he's home, much of his time is spent on the phone with Jonathan Archer. They talk in a business language that goes over my head. The Board of Directors are aware of the statement Ethan and I will make and have voted to keep Ethan on. He won't lose his position at his company. Ethan's PR team has acknowledged their awareness of the situation while they prepare everyone involved.

I try to make myself inconspicuous. All I need to concentrate on is the statement I'll give. That's my only job: clear Ethan with the truth and hope it's enough for him to piece his life back together.

Although he reassures me when we're in bed later that it's all worth it, I don't believe him. I don't know how I can be worth all this trouble.

There is a small chapel about two blocks away from Ethan's apartment. I woke up this morning with the desperate need to pray. To beg God to please just take all of this away and leave Ethan and I alone to be happy.

The church is empty. The worn, wooden bench is hard beneath me, unlike the soft and cushiony seat I used to occupy at our church in North Carolina, while pretending to listen to my father's sermons and pretending to be the son he wanted me to be. I can almost hear the echoes of his voice now.

My phone sits in my pocket, heavy with his latest string of messages.

Noah, remember what the Lord commanded: Honor thy father and mother. You have no mother. How much more should you honor your father?

But I *do* have a mother. Why does he try to isolate me like this?

The next text says, *the prodigal son returned to his father's house. Come home, Noah and I'll welcome you with open arms.*

The realization of how my father always twisted the scriptures makes me sick. I'm only now beginning to see how much of my life he controlled, how he gaslit me into questioning my own decisions, my own choices right down to my choice of clothing. Making me second guess everything I know about myself. And he did it with a calm, soft voice. *Hoodies are for heathens, like Ethan.*

The text messages don't stop. They come in minute after minute. I can sense his desperation. Is he beginning to worry about what I'll do? Have I been the one with the power all along? I'd never considered this before. Is he getting desperate because I'm the one with all the power?

I settle my eyes on the pulpit in front. I can picture him standing at the pulpit, his eyes blazing with the fire of the Holy Spirit and holding his bible in the air. The same Bible he's been using as a weapon against me, a way to manipulate me into returning to him.

I steel myself against the building fury and stare at the glowing screen, my thumb hovering over the keypad. I want to scream at him, to tell him that he lost any claim to my respect or honor when he betrayed the trust between a father and his child. I just knew how to keep quiet. I was *obligated* to keep all our secrets.

I know it'll be useless to argue with him. He'll just distort everything and make it seem like God wanted it this way.

Ethan is the one who deserves respect and honor. Our father hates him, sees him as a threat to . . . to what? Is John Evanson trying to isolate me from Ethan for reasons other than the fact that he won't accept that I'm gay and in love with his biological son? Is he afraid of what I'll tell Ethan? With enough information, Ethan would annihilate him. And I am the one with the most damning details about John Evanson.

Another text: *Ethan has led you astray. Come back home. He's finished anyway now that everyone knows what he did to you. Don't stray from the righteous path, Noah.*

My phone buzzes with another message, but, this time, I turn it off. I take a deep breath, and pray one last time.

Heavenly Father, if you are real, please accept me the way you created me. Please accept Ethan the way you created him. Let us live and be happy. And if that is not possible, please leave us alone so we can find our own

way. Maybe people like us were not meant to serve and worship you, and, if that's true, then let me walk away from you in peace because I don't know any other way to be, other than the way I was created."

I leave the church. Not just the building. The institution of it too. I leave God. I reclaim my heart from a God who held me captive. I reclaim my mind from a father who held me prisoner.

I don't need a religious title to be a good human being.

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CHAPTER 58

Ethan

It's past nine p.m. when I pick my head up again, and I make my way home to Noah.

He went to church for the last time today, he tells me, when I walk into the apartment and I hold him while he cries for the life he is leaving behind because, I guess, even that can be hard too.

"Did you eat?" he asks me after he's dried his eyes.

"No. I'm starving."

"I ordered in. Come, let's eat." And after a while he chuckles against my chest. "You need to let me go so I can get the food, Ethan."

I let him go, lifting his chin for a kiss.

We eat in silence for the most part until Noah speaks up to tell me about his texts from the church people. "They won't leave me alone," he says

"They're just good Christian people, trying to save your soul," I say, sarcasm dripping from my voice.

"I get it, Ethan. I get how we must look to people on the outside. We're so harmful, I don't know how we've survived as a religious sect all these thousands of years."

We're done eating. I reach across the table to kiss Noah's lips. "*They*," I say. "Not *we*. *They*. You're not one of them.

"I have been for a long time, Ethan."

"You were never like that. People like you are the only thing good about Evangelical Christianity."

"I don't want to go back." He looks devastated.

"As a functional, intelligent human being with free will and empathy, you can do whatever you want," I say.

"But what if hell is real? What if we all die and find out God was real all along? It'll be too late."

I pull his chair closer to mine until he's between my legs. "If you die and you go to heaven and God asks you to name one good thing you did in this world, what would you say?"

He links his fingers with mine and he gazes at me with the universe sparkling in his eyes. "I would tell him that I loved you and you loved me,

and it was the most beautiful thing I'd ever known."

I'd meant to give him a lecture about how your good deeds and kindness as a human ought to be enough to get into heaven; that your disbelief in a single deity was no reason to be sent to burn forever. But Noah has caught me inside a web of pureness that stuns me into silence.

"Isn't that enough to be allowed into heaven?" I ask instead, after a while. There's a lump growing in my throat. And while I usually can handle the bigotry of the church and everything our father stands for, this moment, the words Noah has uttered, calls for the kind of fury that would start wars if acted upon. Noah has been *traumatized* by the church. His God has *abused* him.

There is no war I wouldn't fight to keep Noah safe. Spending two years in prison to protect him from the vileness of this world had been no hardship. I'd do it all over again for him. My attachment to the things this world has to offer disintegrated with the ending of my mother's life. With the exception of Noah, I find nothing of value in this world. But fuck me to hell, if I could, I would burn it down if it meant Noah didn't have to war with himself like this.

"I would risk hell for you," he says.

"And I would make a home for us there," I tell him.

We go to bed and we fuck like brothers. I'm deep inside him, his legs wrapped around my waist and he whispers all the things that would send us to hell.

"Give me all this dick, Ethan," he pants in my ear. Noah's devilry is hotter than the hell he's so afraid of.

"Take your brother's cock, Noah. Look at how good you take my cock. I'm going to fill this hole with my cum and then I want to watch you leak. I'm going to suck that cum right out of my baby brother's sweet, little hole."

"Hmmm, fuck yeah," Noah moans. He's such a fucking heathen when I'm fucking him.

His cock jerks between us, smashed between our stomachs. I slide against him, rubbing his pre-cum into our skin, and then I make good on my promise. Pumping into him, I let go, creaming his walls, and basking in his most ungodly string of expletives.

Pulling out gently, I flip him over onto his stomach. "Lift this fucking ass for me, Noah, baby," I tell him.

He gets up on his knees, pushes his ass up into my stomach. With both hands on his ass cheeks, I pull them apart. “Give it to me, little brother.”

His hole flexes and, fuck, my dick is semi hard again. Little dribbles of cum ooze out of his asshole. I swipe at it with my thumb. A sharp moan erupts from Noah’s mouth.

“More,” I demand, with my mouth on his hole. He opens up a little more, giving me some more of my semen. Slowly, he pumps my cum out of his ass and into my mouth. He moans uncontrollably and I think he loves this ass to mouth action.

I turn him onto his back again, swiping some of his cum off his stomach on my way up to his mouth. To my utter delight, he opens his mouth. I open mine and our cum drips into his open mouth. Some strings of cum land on his lips, dripping down the corner of his mouth. I bend to lick the runaway semen and deposit it back into his mouth. Then I kiss him, and he slips some of our combined cum into my mouth.

We kiss, obscene and blasphemous, exchanging cum until it’s all gone, and then we kiss like dying men who have found the essence of life inside each other. Grabbing and groping for skin and touch and connection, it’s not about our filthy sex anymore. It’s about trying to absorb each other into our fucking souls because we deserve this. *Dammit* we fucking deserve this. We deserve this unbearable love that we share. We deserve to have a love so vulgar and beautiful and raw and honest and fucking *free*.

“There is no God, no religion, no man on this earth who will ever take you away from me again,” I growl into Noah’s mouth. “You are fucking mine.”

He bites the corner of my lower lip. “And you, brother, are fucking mine,” he hisses against my lips.

Noah is finally free.

Mrs. Remington’s stay in New York has been extended, and she’s been upgraded to the best hotel in the city. She’s also been given a personal tour guide so she can explore the city at her leisure, courtesy of Salvatore Tech.

For what this woman has done for me, Noah, and for Evanson’s victims, no amount of luxury bestowed upon her will be enough, but I’m going to

make sure I get as close as I can to making her comfortable. Not just for now but for the rest of her life.

She's the one who called the ambulance and that saved Noah's life. I will forever be in her debt.

I've tracked down the girls who made the statements. Their parents are members of my father's church. The children attended summer camp. Noah must know them.

Next, was hacking into my father's phone. It was easy. All I needed was his phone number and a bogus text to open a link asking him to click on it to upgrade his software.

I won't bore anyone else, except for Jono, with the details but accessing a person's entire life from one stupid link that they opened is easier than taking candy from a kid.

"I'm not surprised, but I am kind of shocked," Jonathan says. He's sitting behind my desk, double checking that my code for getting into my father's laptop is enough to get the job done.

"Not more than me," I say.

"Have you told Noah yet?"

"No."

"Are you going to tell him?"

"I'm not going to tell him anything until I have everything I need to take to the FBI. I don't want him to be involved before that."

"Good call." He points to my laptop screen. "What do you hope to find?"

"Trick question. I'm hoping to find a secret life that's going to destroy him, but that's going to mean that children have been harmed. So, I don't know. But if there is incriminating evidence, then I want to find it."

The hack job on my father's devices comes up with nothing. I don't know how to feel about that, but there is a sense of relief that there's nothing. My contacts at the FBI come up with nothing too. Both families of the children involved have unequivocally refused to speak to the FBI. The children involved have denied all claims and the case has been closed.

I'm at a dead end. Noah's statement will have to be enough, and, hopefully things will die down and people will move on in a few months.

Within the hour Evanson blows up my phone, and four hours after that he's standing in my office, looking like the devil himself. The only reason he was allowed in here in the first place is because I need to look this man

in the eye and tell him that I won't stop until I get to the bottom of these accusations, despite the dead-end I've come up with.

"What kind of game are you playing?" If I'm not mistaken, he's frothing at the mouth. It's tempting to fall into the old pattern of dismissing him casually but this is not a game anymore. This is no longer about me pissing him off with just my existence. This man might be a predator and I've missed something.

"Sit down Evanson," I bite out.

He looks momentarily shocked but recovers quickly. "I don't think you know who you're talking to."

I shoot my shot. "I'm talking to a pedophile."

He sneers. "You got any evidence?"

"Yes."

I swear to God, on my mother's grave, on Noah's life, his eyes pales for a nano second. There is something here. I feel it in my bones. I have to find a way to the bottom.

"You sent the FBI to two of my most trusted and loyal members of staff. What did you think was going to happen? That they would arrest me on some idle gossip? Unlike you, I have evidence that you're the predator here."

"You did something to those girls." *I just need some fucking evidence.*

"Well, you must not have heard that they said exactly the opposite. Where is my son?"

I grind my molars.

"Your time is up. My assistant will see you out."

I leave him standing in my office but not before he hisses out, "I will get my son back one way or another. You won't take him away from me."

I take my file with everything I know about those girls home with me. Maybe I'll pray to Noah's God for an answer. But then I remember that there are millions of child abusers walking this earth and the Good Lord has done nothing to protect the children. If I'm going to find out the truth about Evanson, I'm on my own. Where there's smoke, there's fire, and, I intend to find the fire.

Noah is asleep when I get home. He has a long day ahead of him tomorrow when he gives his statement. I leave him to rest and grab something to eat. I'm sick of my office, so I settle on the couch in the living room and go over the information Mrs. Remington gave me. Then, I look

into the parents of the children who'd talked. Carbon copies of my father, that's what they are. Full-time ministry. Nice house not far from the church. Kids go to Beth-El Christian School.

I stare at the words I'd written down when Mrs. Remington told them to me.

Pastor Evanson asked to look at my privates.

Pastor Evanson asked if he could touch me for just a second.

Children don't say these things out of the blue unless they are true. Those kids denied it because they're scared. I *know* this, but my hands are tied.

I trace the words with my thumb, willing my brain to come up with something.

"What's this?"

I turn at the sound of Noah's sleepy voice behind me, just in time to watch his face drop in horror.

"What's this?" he demands, all traces of sleep now vanished.

Anger boils inside me that he would look so devastated after seeing the words on the paper. Noah may have had a gradual change of heart over the last five years, but would he truly believe that his father is capable of something like this?

"Who is this about?" he demands. He looks furious. And then, his voice hoarse, he adds, "*What* is this about?" But he already knows.

I set my jaw. Noah and I were never ones to lie to each other. "Two people spoke out about inappropriate behavior from Evanson," I say flatly.

"No," Noah whispers. He looks up at me. "Who are they?"

"It doesn't matter. We had it investigated. The alleged victims denied everything."

"It does matter. Who are they, Ethan?"

I frown. Noah isn't defending Evanson.

"I can't share that information with you. To protect their privacy."

Noah steps into my face. He's shaking. "Tell me their names, Ethan. Please. Tell me right fucking now."

"Noah, calm down," I ask softly. "I thought I would finally get a chance to let people see Evanson for the evil monster he really is, but those children—"

"Children?" Noah can't breathe.

My frown deepens. I understand how shocking and sickening even an allegation must sound, but this reaction is too much, even for Noah.

“Yes,” I say carefully.

“What are their names, Ethan?”

“Evangeline Duncan and Alison Jones.” Noah’s reaction is beginning to scare me.

Noah clutches his stomach. “Oh, God.” He looks like he’s about to vomit.

“You know them.”

He nods. “I taught them in Children’s Church when they were kids and then again at Youth church. And Alison Jones. Oh, God. Ethan. I reported Pastor Bobby’s inappropriate remarks about Alison’s body about five years ago. Are you saying *our father* was inappropriate with them?”

Noah needs to breathe. I’m not surprised at all hearing about Breasty Bobby. “We had the FBI look into it. Their parents were very hostile, and the children said they don’t remember making those comments.”

“But did it *happen*?” Noah demands. “They may not have remembered making those comments, but they would never have forgotten if it *happened*.” Noah is coming unhinged.

“They’ve denied everything.”

He stalks across the room. His back facing me, he stares out the window for a long time. Then, he spins around and glares at me. “Your FBI could do *nothing* else? They just closed everything up? Do you even know those girls’ parents? I’ve known them for years, Ethan, and they are the biggest bigots you’ll ever meet. Just like dad—just like *Evanson*.” Noah is shaking. “They are more than capable of covering all of this up to protect him. *Evanson*. To protect *Evanson*. To protect the church.”

“If it really did happen, Noah, they are refusing to bring charges against him. They won’t testify.”

Noah looks me dead in the eye. Fury like I’ve never seen before flashes in those usually calm brown eyes.

“I’ll testify,” he says quietly.

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CHAPTER 59

Noah

One of the first things I learnt when I went to live with Ethan and his father was the term *righteous anger*. Like when Jesus toppled the tables over when he found the men trading and making a profit inside the synagogue. Jesus accused them of turning his Father's house into a den of thieves. His anger was righteous because he was angry on God's behalf for the sin that was being committed. But what about the anger, the monstrous fury you feel when you witness a sin being committed against *children*?

Ethan gives me a blank stare. It lasts all of point five seconds, and I watch him connect the dots. He rises from the couch, lines creasing his forehead at first. And then, the disbelief.

I vowed that Ethan would never find out about my sickening past, but it's too late now. My righteous anger has superseded my need for self-preservation.

Ethan flies across the room. He grabs me by the shoulders. His heart is breaking in his eyes. I stand there, mute. I can't stop here, I know that, but to watch his heart break for me as realization after realization flashes across his face . . . I can't even breathe.

"No," he gasps, like he, too, can't breathe.

I don't know where to start. "He said I was the only one." I grab onto his forearms. "He *promised* there'd been and there would be no one else."

"Noah." Ethan's chest moves up and down quickly. Like he might suffocate if he doesn't consciously breathe like this. "Noah. Noah. Noah." He chants my name, searching my face, and, for one second I regret my confession. But I had to. The very foundation of our agreement—mine and Evanson's—was that it had only been me. I had been obsessed with it. That it would ever only be me. That he would never do it to another child. That was what all the fasting had been for. He lied. He broke the agreement.

"I failed you," Ethan rasps, moving his hands to the sides of my neck, never breaking eye contact. This is so much like Ethan. He never backs down, even from the hard things. Even now, he maintains eye contact, facing this thing with me.

"He failed. Not you." I can't have him blaming himself for this.

“I watched out for you. I never imagined . . .”

“No one could have, Ethan. I didn’t tell anyone.”

His eyes turn stone cold. “He’ll pay for this.”

I steel my resolve too. “He’ll pay for this.” Finally, this can come out. Finally, what Evanson did can come out.

Ethan doesn’t ask me for the details, and, for that, I’m grateful. He’ll navigate this with me with all the gentleness in his soul. I know he will. I also know that he will never let Evanson get away with it.

“He did it to my mother too,” he tells me quietly.

“Ethan, no.”

“It’s the only reason I exist today. He raped her when she was eighteen. He sexually abused her throughout their marriage. That’s why he hates me. He knows that I know what he truly is. Noah, I didn’t keep you close to me, but I checked on you all the time. I don’t know why I didn’t think he’d do it to you. Even when I got the intelligence on these girls, I never thought you’d also—”

“He promised me he wouldn’t do it to anyone else. I always worried that he’d done something to you,” I tell him.

Ethan pulls me into his arms. “I can’t believe this. I see you, Noah. I’m so sorry. I don’t know how to fix this for you, but we’ll make him pay. He’ll get what he deserves.”

“And maybe the others will speak up if I speak up,” I whisper into his chest.

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CHAPTER 60

Ethan

“Let’s go to bed,” Noah says. “Tomorrow, we’ll fight but tonight, let’s make love like we own all the stars in the universe.”

I wish I could share in his poetic mood.

I feel so ashamed looking at him, but I can’t hide this. I can’t hide *from* this. If he could endure it, then I can at least see it and acknowledge it.

He takes my hand, and we go upstairs. Noah undresses me. I stand there with my hands at my sides. I know not to ignore the elephant in the room. I’m not one to dance around things so I talk. “I feel like I don’t have the right to touch you,” I say.

He smiles up at me while he unbuckles my belt. “Do you want to know what the worst part about abuse is, Ethan?”

I nod.

“It’s how well we can function while living with this despicable thing. I function well despite what happened, and being able to do that means that I see logically how none of it could have ever been your fault. I don’t hold anything against you.”

“My mother used to tell me that sadness knows how to smile and pain knows when to hide, but we could always find the truth in the eyes.” My voice breaks. “Your sadness knows how to smile, Noah. How did I not know? How did Ms. May not know? Mr. Tom?”

His smile remains. “Your mom was right, Ethan. My pain knew when to hide.”

“But your eyes said nothing, Noah.”

“I know how to hide, my love.”

My love. Noah is giving me a sweet pet name in the middle of the hardest conversation we’ll ever have.

He slowly slips my belt out of its loops. “I’m a functioning survivor. I was programmed to protect Evanson.”

And then I can’t bear it anymore. “What did he do to you?” I ask, hearing the break in my own voice.

“It’s not as bad as you might think.” He stops, thinking. “Maybe that’s what makes it more insidious.”

“We don’t have to talk about it.”

Noah reaches up to kiss me. “I never planned to tell you about it. I thought you’d be disgusted. And after . . . after we started . . . after we fell in love, I was determined for you to never find out because it would mean . . .”

He drops his eyes but I lift his chin so we can face this together. “I’m listening, Noah.”

He doesn’t speak, and, for the first time, his ‘functional armor’ begins to crack. “You are perfect, Noah. Unblemished. Nothing could ever take away your pureness.”

“Do you promise? Can you promise me that?”

“I *promise* you.”

“You still want me even after . . .”

“If you’ll have me while my father’s blood runs in my veins, I will never, ever leave your side.”

He smiles up at me. “I’ll have you, Ethan, my love. All of you.”

I’m down to my boxers. He’s still fully clothed. This change in dynamic is new. Noah never takes charge.

“Thank you, Ethan.”

“No. Thank *you*. For not laying my father’s sins at my feet. I’ll make sure you get the justice you deserve.”

“And we’ll get justice for *Cilla* too,” he says.

I nod.

He hasn’t answered my question. About what my father did to him. I don’t push it. He’ll tell me when he’s ready, and I hope I have the courage to listen to everything he’ll have to say.

“I can’t tell you everything today, Ethan. I might break. I might break *us*. What I will tell you is that he liked to look. A lot of times he just looked.”

I want to tear everything apart. “How long ago?” I ask, my voice broken.

“The first time was just before you left home. Every time after that was after you’d left.”

A lump forms in my throat. “You were thirteen? Twelve?”

“I just turned thirteen. Sometimes I used to think he waited for you to leave.”

“I’d never have left if I’d known. Or I’d have taken you away, somehow.”

“You couldn’t have known because I dealt with it very well. It’s like your mom said. Sadness doesn’t always look sad, Ethan. And pain doesn’t always look like pain. Sometimes the horrible things look like happy smiles. You couldn’t have known.”

I don’t know how to ask him when it stopped. I don’t know what to say to him. How do people get past something like this? Noah should hate me. He should hate me for what *my* father did to him.

For the first time in my life, I feel the need to claim Evanson as my father. Like owning that connection to him somehow distances Noah from him. He’s *my* father. So, he’s *my* problem. I need to take some responsibility for this, even if it’s only by virtue of the fact that I am his son and he is my father.

“Stop thinking so hard, Ethan,” Noah says. He takes a step back and begins to undress. How different he is from the boy I kissed five years ago. My eyes eat up the skin he’s exposing to me little by little. The light muscles flexing around his arm when he reaches up to remove his shirt. The hollow between his collarbones and his neck. The slight rise of his pectorals which speak more of his genes than any kind of workout regimen. His flat stomach and —

He drops his sweats, and my eyes drop with it. Noah stands before me, naked and . . . most importantly, unashamed. He has come so far. I’m so proud of him. His cock greets me eagerly. I lift my eyes to meet his.

“Come here, Ethan.”

I take a step, closing the small distance between us. “I’m a victim. But I’m also a survivor, Ethan. Please don’t forget that when you look at me from now onward. You can tell me how sorry you are for me but also tell me that you know that I fought the best I could. Don’t forget that I carried this secret for many years, and, despite the terrible shame and confusion and betrayal, I managed somehow to hold the broken pieces of my heart together until today.”

I touch the tips of my fingers to the place where his heart beats. “Until today?” I whisper hoarsely.

He smiles, covers my hand with his and presses it against his heart. “From today, I’ll have an extra pair of hands for when I feel like I can’t hold myself together.”

“I’ll keep your pieces safe, Noah. I promise. I *promise*.” Tears fight their way to the surface, but really, it isn’t much of a fight. I couldn’t keep them

down even if I tried. I remember being so angry with him, sometimes, for not having enough courage. I was so wrong. How much courage must it have taken to live with this terrible thing?

I drop my head to his shoulder, and his arms come around me. My tears fall silently, wetting his naked skin. When I lift my head, he brings my face close to his and presses his lips to mine. Only then do I notice his own quiet tears. I press my cheek against his, our tears mingling.

“Thank you for these tears, Ethan. You don’t know how much your tears mean to me.”

“I don’t deserve to cry, Noah. I should be comforting you. Not the other way around.”

“Your tears bring me more comfort than anything in this world. Your tears tell me that you see me, and that all my ugliness is safe with you. And that is all I need to face what’s coming.”

“I love you, Noah. I’ll never stop loving you. There is no ugliness in you. You are perfect and pure. I’m so sorry for what he did to you.”

He kisses me again. I kiss him back. Soft and reverent. He pulls back with a smile. “Wait here,” he says. He walks to the nightstand, and I think he’s getting us lube. Instead, he returns with some red yarn and a pair of scissors. He cuts off two pieces and hands one to me. I eye the piece of yarn curiously. Noah takes my left hand in his. “Ethan, will you marry me?” he says. For a second I think he’s joking but Noah’s eyes search mine with an earnestness that tells me this is no joke.

“Yes,” I whisper.

His smile could buy salvation for the entire human race with its joy and purity. He turns my hand over and ties his piece of yarn around my ring finger. “I, Noah Evanson, take you, Ethan Salvatore, to be my wedded husband,” he says. “To have and to hold from this day forward, for better or for worse, in sickness and in health, for richer or poorer, to love and to cherish, until death do us part.”

He places a second piece of yarn in my palm and holds out his left hand. I take his hand and wrap the piece of string around his ring finger.

“I, Ethan Salvatore, take you Noah Evanson, to be my wedded husband,” I tell him, holding his gaze like I might fall into a terrible black hole of despair if I looked away. “To have and to hold, from this day forward, for ___”

I forgot the words already. Noah grins. “For better or worse . . . in sickness and in health . . .” he whispers.

“For better or worse, in sickness and in health, for richer or poorer, to love and to cherish, until death do us part.”

“You may now kiss the groom,” he murmurs.

I pull him to me, wrapping my arms so tightly around him I worry I might crush him. And then I kiss him.

We sink into bed together, Noah settling on top of me and his knees on either side of my hips. The gentleness in our lovemaking is new. “We’re married now. How do you feel?” Noah asks softly against my ear.

“I’m a little annoyed it took you so long to ask.” It sounds like we’re joking around, but nothing has ever felt so serious between us.

He laughs softly. “You are everything to me, Ethan,” Noah whispers against my neck, kissing his way down my body.

He slides his lips over my cock, and I have to exercise great restraint to keep myself from lifting my hips and ramming my cock down his throat. Noah catches the slight tilt of my hips and drops his mouth, swallowing me with a kind of expertise that sends the back of my head digging into the mattress. His tongue glides along the head of my cock, his mouth working me so confidently.

Noah comes up again to kiss me, pressing the bottle of lube into my hand, and I get him ready while he kisses me. This, what we’re doing now, is different. It’s holy, almost.

“You are everything to me, Ethan, my love,” Noah whispers against my eyes. His lips touch every inch of my face. “You are my brother.” A kiss to my cheekbone. “My lover.” Whispered kisses to my jaw. He sinks onto my cock. We both let out a soft sigh as our bodies connect in this way. “You’re my best friend, Ethan,” he whispers into my mouth as he begins to move. “And now, you are my husband.”

“And you are simply mine, Noah,” I whisper against his lips. “All mine. In every conceivable way, you are mine.”

I move to a seated position. Noah wraps his legs and arms around my back, and I pull him close, bringing my hand between us to wrap my fingers around his dick.

Pressed so intimately to each other like this, we make eternal promises to each other with our bodies. We fall apart close after each other—him first,

then me. It's quiet, but powerful, and it feels like the heavens have paused to witness this love we share.

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CHAPTER 61

Noah

With the new information I am able to provide, my and Ethan's statements are held off until later the next day. Charges need to be filed in North Carolina, so Ethan and I travel via a private jet and book into a hotel before filing charges with the North Carolina Police Department. Ethan's legal team is present, and I've never seen anything more intimidating.

After the paperwork, and seeing the words in black and white, detailing what Evanson had done to me, it still doesn't seem possible that John Evanson could be this much of a monster.

I tell them about the pictures he'd taken of me naked and where he kept them. I also tell them about the external hard drive that had digital copies of the pictures and possibly other incriminating online activities. Ethan can hardly stomach my disclosures, but he stays strong for us.

We return to the hotel afterward. Our press conference is in a few hours.

"I'll be with you, Noah. Every step of the way. When you feel frightened, just look at me and know that I would never, ever let anything harm you again." Ethan is sitting on the bed watching me change out of my formal clothes.

"I know." Tears fill my eyes. "I know, Ethan. You have already protected me with your life. You sacrificed so much because of my silence. Now I have to use my voice."

I go to him. His hands squeeze my upper arms, and his eyes search mine.

"He'll never control our lives again," he says earnestly. "We are not puppets. He will never have this kind of power over our lives again. He is a dangerous predator, and he will be punished for what he's done."

I nod vigorously. "I know, Ethan. I'll do whatever it takes."

"It will be our last fight; I promise you this."

I turn into his arms. "Our last fight," I reaffirm.

"I'll be right here. Whatever you need to get through it, say the word, and it's yours." Ethan looks like he's ready to gouge out his left eye if it were asked of him.

"I just need you to be here. That's all."

"I'm here. I'm here, Noah."

I take his hand in mine and bring our linked fingers to my lips. “Our last fight,” I repeat. “Together.”

He kisses our linked fingers. “Together.”

Ethan hasn't slept for three days, I think. Now, he dozes off on the bed, and I'm relieved that he'll get some rest before the press conference. My mind races with what's happened in the last few hours. Evanson will be arrested soon. There'll be a trial. There'll be justice.

My mind shifts to Ethan's mother. Evanson raped her. Ethan is the evidence of that. How does a person make sense of that? I can't imagine a life without Ethan. But he's here because Evanson is a sexual predator. I can't imagine what it must have been like for Ethan to live with that every day of his life.

Cilla needs justice.

Ethan's breathing evens out. I check the time. We have three hours before the conference. It's enough time for me to go back to our childhood home and look for Cilla's diary.

Ms. May must be beside herself. She's been following the news and I've tried to keep her updated on what's been happening. Mr. Tom too.

Now, I text Ms. May to tell her Ethan and I are done at the police station.

Ms. May: *Your father told me and Thomas to take some time off indefinitely. What's going to happen now, Noah?*

Me: *It's too much to explain in a text but Ethan and I are okay. Where are you now, Ms. May?*

Ms. May: *I'm at Thomas' daughter's house. I'm spending a few days here with them until we know what's going on with your father. I'm leaving that job altogether, me and Thomas both.*

Me: *I want to go over there. Where is Evanson?*

Ms. May: *He told us he'd be at church most of the day.*

Me: *Are the codes still the same?*

Ms. May: *Yes, they are. Are you going over there with Ethan? Where is he?*

Me: *Ethan is at the hotel with me. I'm going alone.*

I order an Uber and slip out of the hotel.

My heart beats a steady beat all the way to the house. As we drive through the familiar highway and then through streets I knew like the back of my hand, my chest becomes more and more constricted. We pass two churches on the way. My heart pains for the scene outside one of the churches. There's a bake sale taking place. Children run around with cookies in their little hands. Women and men mill around or stand at stalls, enjoying the outside. They all look so happy. Maybe sometimes the Christian faith *is* good.

Maybe Christianity is good for some people. Maybe there are countless ways to find yourself in this life, and for some people it's Christianity. But my story is one-sided. My story is about the religion that made victims out of its people. The same religion that keeps all those people out there selling cakes and cookies happy destroyed me. The terrible duality is the saddest, most confusing part of it all.

The Uber driver leaves me at the front gate of my childhood home. My nerves kick in. My palms dampen, and my breathing is shortened to shallow gasps for air. I sprint through the driveway and head for the prayer room as soon as I let myself into the house. The familiarity of the house claws at me, and my heart is torn in two. This is where I was sexually abused. This is also where Ethan kissed me for the first time. It is where I found a home and a brother and the love of my life. It is where I lost my innocence in John Evanson and where I found it again in Ethan.

Entering the prayer-room is like entering a different dimension. This is where you were supposed to meet with God. Instead, it's where I experienced hell. Maybe those two things are synonymous, anyway. Maybe we had it wrong all along. Maybe, God is the villain in this whole story of humanity.

I rush to the steel cabinet, third drawer. Evanson had always been so confident that he'd done nothing wrong, he never bothered to install any kind of security to this cabinet. My hands shake, hardly daring to touch the hard drive and the manila envelope that contains dozens and dozens of photos of me. And the pencil. Bile sits in my throat. Oh, God. The pencil. I gulp back my nausea, forcing myself to concentrate on the reason I'm here.

The diary is at the very bottom. Leaving the hard drive and envelope for the police to find, I pick up the diary.

The door creaks open.

Fuck. I tuck the diary inside my hoodie and turn.

John Evanson stands at the door with his arms stretched open. “You came back,” he whispers. His eyes are filled with tears.

“I’m in North Carolina with Ethan,” I say, trying to keep the tremor out of my voice.

“But you’re not going back, right?” His hopeful expression makes me sick.

“Yes, I am.”

His eyes flash momentarily, but I catch the twisted ugliness in them.

“I’ve told the truth. It’s time for you to face that truth,” I say, with strength in my voice.

“What do you mean, Noah? Hasn’t everything I’ve done been for you? For your benefit? For your comfort? Haven’t I provided you with a life you could never have even dreamt of having if I hadn’t rescued you?”

“I’m thankful for the things you did that made my life better, but you still must be held accountable for the bad things you did. To me and to anybody else you’ve harmed. You promised it had only been me. You lied.”

“Is this what this is all about, Noah?” He laughs like he’s caught me out. “You want me to reassure you that you were special to me?”

The question sickens me. “I want you to be held accountable for what you did.”

“I did nothing wrong.”

“You did.”

“You are bound by the penitent privilege. I asked for your council when you turned sixteen. Everything I shared with you is protected by the penitent privilege. You can’t break that trust.”

My body freezes. Is he right? It’s true that he came to me seeking counsel. I was young but ‘mature in the Lord’ he’d said many times. And he trusted me to protect his confession. Sickening fear grips me all over again.

“See, Noah. This is why you need me. To help you think things through. No church will ever accept you if they know you broke such a sacred trust. We both knew that I was under attack from Satan and I fell from grace a few times. The Lord tested me. He used you to test me just like he tested Job, and I had my moments of weakness.”

I stick to my script. “You need to be held accountable for what you did.”

“Stop saying that, Noah. I need to get you away from Ethan. All of this is his fault. This is how the Devil tempts us. We need to be strong, Noah.

Don't you understand?"

I remain silent.

"Not a single church will take you on, least of all mine, if you keep up with this, Noah. This is a vendetta. An orchestrated attack on a man of God. And you know what the bible says, Noah—touch not the anointed of God."

I inhale deeply. "I don't know the God you are referring to, who would protect pedophiles."

"Pedophile? After the way I cared for you, is that what you're going to call me? Do you know where you were when I picked you up, Noah? You were in a damned gutter. Filthy and starving. Your mother left you to die, and I picked you up and gave you a life."

My chest closes up. No matter how much I fight for air, I cannot get enough into my lungs. I feel light-headed and sick. My stomach churns. He's right. He did pick me up from the literal gutter. I remember the day. I remember the hollowness of my stomach from not having eaten. I don't know how many days I hadn't eaten until Evanson found me. I'd never worn a winter coat until Evanson bought one for me. I didn't know what a chicken and mayo sandwich was until I went to live with him. I would have been dead if it were not for him.

He knows me so well. "See, Noah? You know I'm right. And even if there is any substance to what you are claiming, how can you offer forgiveness and then retract it? How can you expect God to forgive you for your sins if you won't forgive others for theirs? Are you better than *Christ*, who hung on that cross for you and me both?"

My mind is breaking. It feels like when you're on a dangerous roller coaster at the carnival. At first you can handle the speed and the dips and peaks, but then it gets faster and faster, the dips hit your stomach harder and the peaks become more and more unbearable until all you can think of is that you need to get off this ride or you will surely die.

"Did I not call unto the Lord with all my heart and soul, and has he not forgiven me for any sin I may have committed? Are you saying you are better than our Father in heaven that He would forgive but you won't?"

Vomit sits in my throat. I don't know how to fight back. I don't know if I have an argument better than the one he's providing.

It's not lost on me that he says 'may have committed', as if what he did to me was up for debate but he berates me, filling my silence with every Christian logic he can think of. "If you become complicit in this, Noah, you

are letting the Devil win. You are opening a doorway and letting demons in, and their only goal is to destroy me. To destroy the good work I've done. The good work I dedicated my *life* to."

"You molested me," I whisper. "You have to answer for that." My answer is weak. Devoid of conviction. What kind of witness will I make on the stand? He'll win because I can't even *speak*.

"You felt safe."

"I didn't."

"You never asked for it to stop."

"I didn't know asking for it to stop was an option."

"You weren't some kind of toddler. That argument will never stand up in court."

I don't know if he thinks I'm stupid or if he really believes what he's saying. Either way, I was a child, and I tell him that.

"You were no ordinary child, Noah. You were anointed by God. Your level of maturity was beyond most adults. That was why I asked you to give me counsel. That is why the penitent privilege exists between us. You didn't confide in me. I confided in you so that means I am the one that holds the penitent privilege. Only I can release you from it. You are bound by God to uphold and honor the trust I placed in you."

Logically, I know it's absolute bullshit. But I feel a deep tugging inside of me. The call to bask in his approval of me. His need for me right now. He needs me to save him. And if I save him, then I'll be his hero. He'll always be grateful to me.

"It's all Ethan's fault. He ruined everything between us, Noah. I need you to see that. He was jealous. He was jealous of you because you were so perfect. Jealous of me because you respected me so much."

"Leave Ethan out of this," I whisper.

"No, Noah. I need you to see this for what it is. This is all Ethan's fault. He has a demon spirit in him, and he wants to destroy me. He wants to destroy you too. Think about it, Noah. If it were not for Ethan, none of this would have happened."

"You still molested me, with or without Ethan in my life." The words come out in a whine. Like I'm trying to convince him that the thing that happened, *happened*.

"Noah. He's finally gotten his claws into you, honey. Please, son. What can I do to make this stop for you?"

I breathe deeply through my nose. I can't stand this. My brain is broken. "Ethan hates you because he knows what you did to his mother."

Evanson's eyebrows lift in surprise. "What happens between a husband and wife is none of their child's business. He had no right to hate me. I am his father no matter what. That's why I got you. You were nothing like him, and that's why I loved you from the moment I found you."

"I'm in love with him," I say bravely.

His face contorts, his mask slipping for just a second before he rights it. "Look at what he's done. He's brainwashed you."

"I told him what you did to me."

"What did I do to you, Noah? I did nothing but care for you." His voice is calm and relaxed, but his eyes are raging.

"He didn't force me to go with him to the Oakwood Inn Express. I went willingly. It had been my idea to meet him that night."

"Noah, you don't know what you're saying. You don't know what happened. *I* know. *I* was there. You were in the hospital. You don't remember what happened. He forced you. You never let him touch you."

My fury over this continuous denial of the truth that I know explodes. "I *remember*. I *did* let him touch me. I *begged* him to."

Evanson's mask slips. "You are *mine*," he hisses.

"I am not."

"No one touches you but me."

Oh God. My stomach dips in disgust. Evanson is a sick, despicable man.

Evanson's eyes flick to the door, the sound of footsteps echoing through the space. Evanson's face pales for one second before he starts to move, coming to a stop in front of me, between me and the door. The atmosphere changes. The door swings open, and I know it even before I turn my eyes to the door.

Ethan.

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CHAPTER 62

Ethan

We're of equal stature and strength, but I'm the one moving with the stealth of a fucking *psycho*. Evanson is standing between me and Noah. His face is filled with rage, but this cunt is also fucking terrified. My body sings with adrenaline, my eyes zeroing in on Noah's small frame behind Evanson.

Noah steps to the side, his face filled with a mixture of fear and relief. Evanson steps to the side too, blocking Noah again.

I advance, my stride fluid and precise. I grab John by the lapels and shove him to the side. Taking Noah's face between my palms I bring my lips down onto his, hard and rough. Evanson's sputtering gasp from the side gives me so much fucking satisfaction. "Don't you ever fucking pull this stunt ever again," I spit out. Noah nods, his eyes wide with shock.

Then I turn to Evanson, reaching him in two long strides, and I press him against the bookshelf. "You will never lay your eyes on him ever again," I hiss, my voice low and dangerous.

Evanson is not ready to give up the fight. "That boy is mine. I won't let you have him."

I shove him again, my fist pressing against his throat. "You're finished."

He laughs. "*I'm* finished? *You're* finished. Did you see what I did? I destroyed your business. You have no friends left. Your money will only last so long. You'll never work again. No one will give you another chance."

My blood boils inside my veins, threatening to burst through my skin. I press into his throat. He heaves, struggling to breathe. Somewhere in the far side of my mind, Noah's voice reaches me. "Ethan, let him go. Let the police handle it." I tune it out.

"Noah is mine," Evanson sputters.

I incline my head to the side, taking a split second to make a decision about how much Noah should witness of what I'm about to do. I decide he needs to hear everything. It'll be sickening but Evanson deserves the most vile uncensored version of the truth.

"Yours?" I sneer, focusing on Evanson. "Did Noah beg you to never stop when you touched him?"

His eyes widen, and Noah's gasp reaches my ears.

"Did he wrap his arms around you and tell you how much he loved you when you finished touching him?"

"You evil son of a—"

"Son of a what, Evanson? Bitch? Did *she* beg you for more after you raped her?"

"You should thank me," he sneers. "You won't be standing here if it were not for me."

"Yes. Thank you. Do you want to know why I'll thank you? I get to live. I get to live and spend my life with Noah."

"Shut up, you devil."

He needs to hear it like this. He needs to understand Noah's unequivocal rejection of him. "I get to look at his body and touch him and you know what? He *asks* for it. He *wants* what I can give him."

"Don't you touch my son," he hisses, his delusion becoming more and more apparent.

"I have already touched him. I have touched him in every fucking imaginable way."

"Shut your damn mouth, you heathen. You didn't touch Noah. Noah would never let you touch him. You'll burn in hell like your mother." He's screaming in my face.

The harsh sounds of Noah's breathing reaches me. I tune it out again.

"He hated your hands on him. Your touch was despicable and vile. He *hated* it. He chose *me*. He chose *my* touch. I will protect him with my life, and you will pay for what you've done to him."

My hold on his collar hasn't let up.

"Noah doesn't love you," he spits out. "You're nothing but a demon trying to steal him away from me. The Lord showed me. Noah loves *me*. I'm his *father*."

"You are no one. You thought you broke him. You didn't break him. He's stronger than you'll ever be, and I'll be sure to remind him of it every fucking day of our lives together."

"Together?" Evanson is losing control. My words seem to explode inside his head. He shoves me back. Noah is between us in an instant. I try to pull him away but he stands firmly between me and our father.

"Yes. Together." Noah's voice is clear and strong.

Evanson stares at Noah, his eyes a blue inferno, raging. I tell myself that even if we have the same face, I will never, ever allow my face to bear such hatred.

“After everything I did for you, Noah? After everything I did for you? Your betrayal is greater than the betrayal of Judas.”

The door is shoved open and three police officers step inside. I pull Noah to the side.

“Mr. John Evanson. I’m Detective Montgomery, and these are my colleagues, Detectives Houston and Brennan. We have a warrant for your arrest, sir.”

The arresting officer nods sharply at me. “Mr. Salvatore. Mr. Evanson. Step aside, please.” Noah clings to me, and I hold him as close to me as humanly possible.

Evanson is either unable to or refuses to understand the gravity of the situation he is in. He looks around the room, shocked. “I’ve done nothing wrong. What is this about?” His mask firmly back in place, he speaks to the officers with pious innocence.

“You are under arrest for charges of child abuse.”

Evanson is read his rights, and he interjects repeatedly to say that he is appalled that anyone would accuse him of such a terrible thing.

“Please turn around, and place your hands behind your back,” Officer Brennan says. Evanson turns, his face twisting in unadulterated fury when his gaze meets mine. He shifts his eyes to Noah. I turn Noah’s body, hiding his face in my chest and denying him eye contact with Noah, while my eyes remain trained on him. He watches me tuck Noah into my body and away from him with the most demonic hatred I’ve ever seen.

“God will vindicate me,” he says while he’s being cuffed. “I’ve done nothing wrong,” he repeats, babbling the same words.

His voice gets louder and more unhinged as he’s taken away. “I’ve done nothing wrong,” he says, over and over.

I don’t move until the click of the main gates indicate that the police cars have left the property. Noah seems to be waiting for the same thing. As soon as the gates click shut, his body sags into mine. I have to hold him up. And then he lets it all out.

He sobs like a child. He sobs like he should have sobbed when John Evanson committed the vilest atrocities against his body. His cries echo his pain in ways I’m not able to catch or contain. All I can do is watch this

devastation pour out of him. He grips me tightly, and I pull him into me, trying to tell him without words that I will never, ever abandon him. Hoping my presence would provide some relief from his anguish.

But then he begins to talk. His words spilling from his mouth in gasps. His sentences hardly coherent for his uncontrollable tears. “It happened here, Ethan. In this room.” I try to stay strong so I can give him the safe place he needs to speak but the cracks in my soul are threatening to pull me into a terrible darkness. But what is this darkness compared to the darkness Noah has faced? “Tell me, Noah,” I whisper as I fight through the pain pouring out of him, fighting to meet him in the place my father had dragged him to.

“He made me sit on the couch, and he would stare at my body. Sometimes it felt like hours. The first object he put inside me was a pencil.”

Noah hides his face deep inside my chest, muffling his words. “The pencil is still in his drawer. He said it was his lucky pencil because it wasn’t just a pencil anymore. It was a reminder of my obedience and my purity.”

Noah once told me he would risk hell for me, and I told him I’d make a home for us there. This is Noah’s hell. And I have to keep my promise to make a home for us right here, in this hell we’ve entered. I can’t be afraid of Noah’s hell. I can’t pretend it doesn’t exist. If he can live here, then I can too. I can sit here with him inside his hell.

“What else,” I ask, even though I don’t know how I’ll keep from breaking too. I don’t know how to listen to another word about the man who gave me life and the unimaginable things he did to Noah.

“He kept dildos of various sizes and worked up to the biggest size over time. Sometimes he exposed himself to me while he penetrated me with those objects. Sometimes, when he exposed himself to me he would ask me to please look at him. And sometimes, he asked me to . . . to . . .”

Unchecked fury roars inside me.

“Sometimes I used my mouth, Ethan,” he wails. “I’m so sorry, Ethan. I’m so sorry.”

I have no skill for this. No prior training. Not even witnessing what my mother went through could have prepared me for this. I don’t know the words to make Noah better. My shoulders quake. I can’t keep my sorrow away any longer. I cry for Noah.

“I love you, Noah,” I choke out.

“Every time he brought me in here I would tell myself maybe one day Ethan will love me.” His voice breaks again, choking his words, and my tears flow.

“Ethan loves you, Noah,” I whisper fiercely. “Ethan loves you. Ethan loves Noah. Always. *Always.*” I tighten my arms around him. “Ethan loves you.” Oh, God. I can’t bear it. “More than his own life, Ethan loves you.” I can’t bear Noah’s pain. “Ethan loves you,” I whisper into his hair. My shoulders shake with this anguish. I feel his head move against my chest, nodding.

“Ethan loves me,” he chokes out. Noah’s childlike affirmation is unbearable. It’s like he’s not in the here-and-now. It’s like he’s thirteen or fifteen or sixteen again and he’s in this room and he’s escaping into his mind while my father is destroying him.

I could have been down the hall when it was happening. I can’t bear it. “Ethan loves you,” I whisper. Over and over, I whisper these words to him, unable to grasp how it could ever be enough for him but hoping that somehow it would be. I kiss his hair, then the side of his face, my lips dampening with his tears. “Ethan loves me,” he whispers over and over.

Noah clings to me, and we remain that way for a long time until eventually, he begins to loosen his grip. He reaches into his hoodie and presses a notebook into my hand. When I look down, everything inside me shatters.

“Is this why you came here?” I ask, my tears falling on my mother’s diary.

He lifts his face to mine. “She deserves justice, too.”

I try to speak past the lump in my throat, and fail. I can’t get a single word out of my throat.

“I love you, Ethan”, Noah whispers. “I have always loved you. You are the reason I believe the world is still good.”

It’s almost impossible to accept his words because I feel so responsible, but I’m not helping Noah by walking around this circle of blame. So, instead, I offer him the only thing I can: my word that I am and forever will be the one who will love him with all that I am and all that I have inside of me.

CHAPTER 63

Noah

Something occurs to me on the way to our press conference: Maybe we don't have to go back and try to fix everything from the past. Maybe dissecting the past and trying to understand every square inch of it isn't always necessary. Maybe one way to piece yourself together is to find moments of safety in the present. And then continue to build on those safe moments until you have so many that the safety found in each of those tiny moments is enough to loosen the hold of the unsafety of the past.

Ethan gives me those safe moments. He has since the beginning. In his unassuming presence in the early years and then with every word and action from the moment he touched his lips to mine in his bedroom when I was eighteen years old. Ethan has always made me feel safe.

And it is with this thought that I stand outside the North Carolina Police department with some semblance of confidence.

Ethan keeps my hand trapped in his. "Are you ready?" he asks, concern all over his face.

I nod. "Yes." I've had my meltdown. I'm sure I'll have many more in the weeks, months, even years to come. But for the moment, Ethan is next to me, and I'm okay.

I squeeze his hand. A smile touches my lips when I notice that he still has my piece of yarn tied around his ring finger. I do too, but seeing him with it makes me wonder how I came to be so happy after everything that has happened in my life.

Jerry Harvey quietens the crowd of reporters. My statement is simple: Pastor Evanson performed sex acts on me between the ages of thirteen and sixteen, including oral copulation by force and anal penetration with an object. Nude pictures were taken repeatedly over the three year period. I was a willing participant on the night Ethan Salvatore was arrested for sexual assault. I had been in a committed relationship with Ethan Salvatore for six months before the night in question.

Ethan's statement is no less sensational: "I was coerced into confessing to a crime I didn't commit. John Evanson threatened to pull the plug on Noah's life support machine if I didn't confess. Also, I did not believe I had

the right to disclose Noah's sexual orientation without his consent. At the time he was not able to make that decision."

The crowd begs for questions, but Jerry shuts them down, and Ethan and I return to our hotel. News has broken that John Evanson has been arrested. Ethan and I are headlining on every single news site. It's too juicy a story to let go of just yet. But no matter how many times our statements are forwarded, uploaded to news pages, dissected and commented on, plainly showing Ethan's innocence, the Christians prevail with the might of their God.

Ethan Salvatore corrupted the soul of a humble, young man of God.

If he wasn't guilty, why did he confess?

Noah Evanson is being coerced into providing a narrative that absolves Salvatore of his crimes.

Vicious attack on a great man of God. Pray for Pastor Evanson.

It's sickening.

"Come to bed," Ethan tells me after I've scrolled through social media long enough.

He holds me, and the need for the explosive sex we're accustomed to is secondary to the need to just rest in each other.

Evanson started on this path of destruction that brought us to this point because he refused to accept that I wanted to spend Christmas in New York. That had been the breaking point for him. Now, he'll spend Christmas in a prison cell. I wish I could say I didn't care. I wish I could say it didn't break my heart to know that John Evanson is sitting in a prison cell eating prison food on Christmas Day. But my heart *is* breaking, and my guilt is insurmountable. My logical mind tells me I don't need to feel this way, that Evanson is a perpetrator, a pedophile, and a despicable human being. But he also isn't. He's also a man who cared for me and for the people around him. He did a lot of good things too.

So much of my identity is tied to him. The way I speak, the clothes I wear, how I make decisions. Some days I don't know who I am. Without the constant surveillance—both internal and external—it's hard to decide how to behave in certain situations. Sometimes, I still feel watched. By God and by John Evanson. Their voices are still so loud in my head. The other

day I struggled to bring myself to put on a hoodie. It felt like I was betraying Evanson.

And then I swing back to the *truth*. Since the press conference, seven boys—now men, married with young children of their own—and three girls have come forward, detailing accounts of when John Evanson was inappropriate with them. Now in their late twenties or early thirties, they recount in their media statements instances when Evanson would ask to see them naked. Then he'd touch them and ask them to touch him. They were between the ages of ten and thirteen when it happened, and it happened at Youth Camp and Children's holiday club.

Three more boys come forward after that, stating that they'd been forced to have sex with Evanson on three different occasions. These incidents took place four years ago at Youth Camp. The same Youth Camp I attended and managed before I went away to study. One of those boys is Devin Sweeney, who'd attended the youth camp as an awkward new kid. I remember the day something felt off about seeing Evanson with him. I'd ignored my intuition.

Ethan and I share our first Christmas together, just the two of us. His friend, Jonathan, spends his first Christmas with his parents after five years, Ethan tells me, and Ethan's secretary also heads home for the holidays. John's arrest and upcoming trial still makes national news weeks after our press conference.

Ethan's lawyers are efficient, working around the clock getting us ready for the trial. Ethan is present most days.

I started therapy immediately after Christmas. I'm lost in those sessions, struggling to understand how to navigate these complex, confusing feelings. Ethan says I need to take it at my own pace, but it's hard because all I do is cry so hard I can hardly get a word out. My therapist is patient but I don't know if she's met a bigger cry baby than me.

Therapy also involves dozens of psych evaluations in preparation for the trial. What Evanson did to me is scrutinized on a microscopic, clinical level. In a way, it's helpful speaking about my abuse in that detached way, like it happened to someone else. At least I don't cry in those meetings. But that's confusing too, because watching myself explain the details of my abuse also brings the horror of it into stark reality. These terrible things happened to *me*. I endured these awful things. Often, I have to stop because it gets too much.

The words pour out of me when my attorney asks why I remained silent. Breaking down the dynamics of my relationship with John Evanson is sometimes more painful than explaining the physical violation of my body.

The trial begins three weeks after New Year. John Evanson pleads not guilty and will take the stand.

I take the stand in the third week of February. Ethan's presence in the gallery is all the reassurance I need that I'm not alone, and my direct examination goes relatively well:

"Mr. Evanson, when was the first time you heard of the term *clergy-penitent privilege*?"

"When I turned sixteen, when my father—John Evanson—told me that I was old enough to take up a pastoral role in the church. He told me the Lord told him that I was ready because I'd reached maturity both physically and spiritually."

"How long had John Evanson been engaging in sexual acts with you by this time?"

"Three years." My stomach turns and my eyes cling to Ethan's. His face is a stone mask, but his eyes give me courage.

"Thank you, Mr. Evanson. Please continue."

"John Evanson told me that since I now had a pastoral role in the church, I would be able to counsel anyone who came to me with any personal problems they were facing and that any information disclosed during the counseling sessions would be protected by the clergy-penitent privilege."

"Please clarify, Mr. Evanson. Were you given the title of *pastor* when you turned sixteen, and was this title given to you by John Evanson?"

"Yes."

"Please clarify for us. On what basis was this title given to you?"

"I was mature in the faith, actively involved in evangelism, music ministry, and youth ministry. I'd fulfilled the requirements of Beth-El Fellowship, and according to my father, I was ready for the role."

"And could you give us some examples of the type of problems people came to you with after you stepped into your new role as a pastor?"

"Teenagers having trouble at home. Kids who wanted to understand God on a deeper level but struggled to connect with Him."

"Were adults allowed to come to you with personal problems?"

"It wasn't explicitly discussed, but, if someone older than me came to me, and I could help them, I would."

“And how would you help them?”

My head begins to ache. I take a sip of water, hoping it will be enough to get me through so I can take a painkiller. “Mostly, I would pray with them. And then I’d pray for them during my own prayer time. I’d share scriptures I thought would help them and check on them from time to time.”

“Did you ever have to go on food fasts as part of your pastoral duty when counseling any member of the congregation?”

My heart beats too fast inside my chest. My attorney keeps her eyes trained on me, silently urging me on. I practiced for this. I know how important this part is but I’m frozen. My eyes search for Ethan’s face again. His mask has slipped, and his face reflects the devastation crashing through me. For a second I want to leap off the stand and shake John Evanson and ask him why he had to do it in the first place. Why did he have to drag us all through this destruction?

I answer the question. “Yes.”

“Were you asked to exercise the clergy-penitent privilege at any time during your time as a pastor at Beth-El Fellowship?”

The defense objects, citing privacy issues.

“Your Honor, I’m not asking for private details protected by the clergy-penitent privilege to be disclosed. I’m only trying to establish that Mr. Evanson had been called upon by members of the church to exercise such a privilege.”

The judge overrules. “You may answer the question, Mr. Evanson.”

“Yes,” I answer. *God, help me.* I know it’s fruitless to pray, but still I lift my spiritual eyes heavenward, desperate for guidance and strength. *Help me get through this.*

“Mr. Evanson, what is your understanding of penitent privilege?”

“The clergy-penitent privilege allows me to refuse to disclose information provided to me by the person seeking spiritual council.”

“So, similar to attorney-client confidentiality. Or doctor-patient confidentiality?”

“Yes.”

“And under what circumstances would you be required to break this confidentiality agreement?”

“If the counseling revealed information related to abuse, particularly of children.”

“Thank you, Mr. Evanson. Now, we know that the clergy-penitent privilege

is a deeply ingrained practice in Catholicism and perhaps the Protestant sect of Christianity, but is it something that applies to Evangelical Christianity too, to your knowledge?"

"It's a gray area for the various sects of Christianity. It isn't strictly upheld in Evangelical Christianity, but our church, Beth-El Fellowship, under the instruction of John Evanson, upheld the clergy-penitent privilege strictly."

"And when was this instruction issued?"

"Just before I turned sixteen."

"Was this just before John Evanson asked you to take on the role of spiritual leader and counselor?"

"Yes."

"Mr. Evanson are you currently in possession of information under this privilege?"

"Objection."

My eyes move across the room to where my father sits. His face is struck with disbelief, and, for a split second, I second guess everything. Maybe it didn't happen the way I'm recounting. Maybe the devil has gotten a hold of me and now I'm just another weapon for the enemy to destroy a man of God.

"Again, Your Honor, I'm only trying to establish that Mr. Evanson has exercised this privilege," my attorney says.

"Overruled."

"Yes," I answer. "I am."

"And if the information that you are in possession of contained details of child sexual abuse, would you be required to break this privilege and report it?"

"John Evanson provided guidance in that regard. If ever a person were to disclose information about child abuse under the clergy-penitent privilege, we were to report those to him, and he would make the final decision about how to proceed."

"Was it guaranteed that in all instances, all knowledge of child abuse would be reported?"

"We did not have that assurance, no."

"Mr. Evanson, we are here today because you brought charges of child abuse against Mr. John Evanson. Why didn't you report his crimes at the time they happened or even after?"

I focus my gaze on Ethan. He urges me on from across the room. His eyes are filled with apologies that don't belong to him. I turn my eyes back to my attorney. "Because John Evanson was protected under the clergy-penitent privilege."

The courtroom, while quiet before, now takes on a deathly silence while those present make the connection. While they connect the dots of what I have just revealed.

My father's attorney jumps to his feet. His objection is almost unhinged because he knows what this means for his client. The judge overrules.

"Mr. Evanson, could you explain what you mean by that?" my attorney says.

"Just before I turned sixteen my father introduced the clergy-penitent privilege rule. Two weeks later he gave me the title of *pastor*, with specific focus on prayer counseling. Two weeks after that, my father sought spiritual counsel from me."

A collective gasp ripples through the courtroom as the penny drops. Another objection from the defense. Another overruling. The judge tells the defense that in the State of North Carolina, I would be considered a *mandatory reporter* and in this unique situation where I am the alleged victim *and* the clergy, I can answer the question.

The judge calls the court to order.

"Can you elaborate, Mr. Evanson?"

"My father sought spiritual counsel from me about the abuse he inflicted on me between the ages of thirteen and sixteen."

"Can you give us the details of that conversation?"

I inhale deeply. I have the power. It's all up to me now. "My father confided in me that he had struggled with disturbing thoughts about me about two years after I went to live with him."

"How old were you at the time?"

"Ten years old."

"Thank you. Continue, Mr. Evanson."

"My father told me that the devil made me so—" I look for Ethan again. He holds my gaze, unwavering. *Be brave, Noah*, he tells me with his eyes. I bring my eyes back to my attorney. "He told me that it was the devil who made me so beautiful, and that was the reason he had to touch me. He told me that I was as much to blame for the attack from the devil because I

didn't try to stop him the first time and that we needed to work together to remove the sin."

"Did John Evanson acknowledge that what he had done to you was in fact a sin?"

"Yes, but he said he was innocent because it was an attack from Satan."

"Did he offer any other reason for why he believed he was innocent even after admitting to you that what he'd done was a sin?"

My eyes find Ethan's again. "He said he knew he wasn't a pedophile because if he was he'd have done it to his own son."

Ethan never looks away from me, but I see the turmoil in his eyes.

"How did John Evanson want you to work together to remove the sin?"

"By fasting." Ethan tries to maintain my gaze, but I think it's too much for him. He lowers his eyes. How many times had he asked me if I was fasting, not knowing the true reason behind it.

"Mr. Evanson, please clarify for the court. Did John Evanson ask you to go on fasts as a way to help him overcome the sin of abusing you?"

"Yes."

"And did you comply?"

"Yes, I did."

"Can you tell us why you complied?"

"Because I wanted to help him. Also because he advised me that he was taking me into his confidence and that anything that we had done together was protected by the clergy-penitent privilege."

"What did that mean to you at the time, Mr. Evanson?"

"It meant that I could not tell anyone about the things John Evanson did to me."

"And do you still believe that?"

"No."

"What do you believe now?"

"I believe John Evanson created the rules around confidentiality and spiritual counsel to prevent me from speaking out."

"Thank you, Mr., Evanson."

I'm exhausted.

After nine days of trial, I don't know if I can go on. Ethan's mother's diary has been admitted into evidence, and Ethan will be called to testify. I'll be examined by the defense.

Ethan's presence is the only thing keeping me together. But when the defense begins with their opening statements on day ten, even Ethan's presence begins to lose its power.

The defense attorney's stare wears me down. Involuntarily, I lower my eyes. He's already decided that I'm the guilty one, bent on destroying a faithful, upstanding man of God. He points to the screen on the left of the courtroom. Image after image after image of me and John Evanson in various settings. I know where the attorney is going even before he begins his interrogation. I breathe evenly through my nostrils, slow and steady, to keep my heart rate from skyrocketing. Just the way I'd learnt when my legal team prepared me for this testimony. *You're the innocent one*, they told me over and over. So, I cling to this truth even when I feel like the perpetrator. John Evanson's betrayer.

My face fills the screen. I'm happy. Laughing. Some images are candid photos where I'm looking at my father and smiling. I'm Judas, betraying God's servant with a smile and a kiss.

"Mr. Evanson, could you tell me whose faces are on the screen right now," the defense attorney says.

I clear my throat. "It's me with my father."

"And can you tell us when these pictures were taken?"

I chase after my breath, willing myself to remain calm. "That—that was about six years ago."

"Do you look happy?"

My mouth dries. I look to my attorney, then to Ethan. "Yes," I answer.

"Do you look like a boy who has a good life in this picture?"

My attorney objects. The question is leading. Sustained.

The defense pushes my father's lifelong good deeds, his kindness, and compassion for people down my throat, concluding with the fact that no sixteen year old would look that happy if something as terrible as what I had described had actually happened.

"Look at him, members of the jury," the defense attorney hurls across the courtroom, his round belly bouncing around in front of him like it had a life of its own, and his black beady eyes searching those of the jury members as if he'd shoved the truth up their asses and now it shone through their eyes.

"Look at him!"

"Does this look like a boy who is afraid of his father? Would a boy who is being sexually abused look this comfortable and happy with the man he's

claiming abused him?”

My psychologist’s testimony destroys the defense. I have a *fawn* response to trauma, she told the court. A type of response that forces a person to abandon themselves so completely in order to feel safe that they would even collude with their abuser. I was willing to accept responsibility for my abuse if it meant pleasing John Evanson and ensuring my safety. John Evanson had bred a co-dependent relationship so devious and manipulative that I truly believed that it was better to accept and forgive the abuse than to risk going to hell for tempting a man of God.

“Noah Evanson’s happiness shown in the images supplied by the defense correlates to the depth of how unsafe he felt in the relationship,” she says. “The happier you believe Noah Evanson is in these images, the more vile and heinous his abuse was. Noah’s happiness shown in these images is a testament to the extent of his trauma. Not the safety he felt with John Evanson.”

Austin and Winston Wallace testify as character witnesses for Evanson. They tell the jury how John Evanson nurtured and guided them as young, delinquent teenagers, and gave them a chance to live a good life. Pictures of them at their waffle place, *Wallys’ Waffle Wonderland*, are shown as evidence.

I’m reminded of how good Christianity can be when it is done correctly. Every night, after hours and hours of giving testimony or watching others give theirs, Ethan holds me in our bed, assuring me that it will all be over soon.

“You did so well, Noah. I’m so proud of you, Ethan says.”

I turn to him, kissing his lips softly. He won’t initiate sex between us, and I understand that it’s because of the terrible truths he’d become aware of during the trial, but I vowed that nothing would ever contaminate what we have. So, I go to him first, every time.

“Don’t treat me gently, Ethan. I don’t need it,” I whisper, stripping him of his sweats. I grab his hard cock and roll on top of him. “Fucking undress me, Ethan,” I hiss against his ear.

He’s hesitant at first, but I know how to bring out his crazy. “Don’t you want to fuck your brother?” I purr against his lips, dragging my tongue up the side of his face. He groans, lifting his hips to fuck my fist.

Ethan rolls me over until I’m underneath him. He strips me of my clothes and reaches for the lube. “I don’t want to hurt you,” he tells me while he

runs his lubed palm over my hole. I lift my ass, seeking more of his hand. “Don’t you fucking treat me like a victim,” I growl into his mouth. “I need you to fuck me like you fucking own me, Ethan.”

“You are the bravest, strongest person I know,” he says, biting down hard on my lower lip. I groan my appreciation for the stinging pain. “I love you so fucking much, Noah.”

“If you love me so much, then give me that fucking dick, Ethan, my love.”

We both groan as Ethan’s cock pushes deep into my ass.

“Don’t stop,” I beg. “Don’t ever fucking stop.” I wrap my legs around his neck, my thighs resting heavily on his shoulders. Ethan angles his hips and fucks up into me. But he’s still holding back. He’s not yet my bold, brazen brother. So, I help him relax.

“Fuck that ass, Ethan. Damage your brother’s fucking hole. Wreck me, Ethan. *Please.*”

He lets go, wrapping his fingers around my neck, then he fucks me like I belong to him.

We lie in bed later, quiet and contemplative. Ethan’s body is enclosed inside mine. I insisted he let me hold him like this. He’ll testify tomorrow, and I need to love him sufficiently tonight. He’ll extract justice for his mother tomorrow and he’ll need his strength.

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CHAPTER 64

Ethan

The courtroom is suffocating as I step up to the witness stand for the prosecution. My heart thuds loudly against my ribs, the sound of it drowning out the low murmurs of those who have come to hear my testimony. I glance over to where my father, Pastor John Evanson, sits with his hands folded in his lap. The man who once soaked and basked in the admiration of the community now faces multiple counts of child abuse.

The defense objected to the admission of my mother's diary. They argued that it is prejudicial and questioned its validity and authenticity.

The prosecution argued that the diary would establish a pattern of behavior spanning nearly thirty years. The diary would increase the timeline of Evanson's crimes and prove that he'd had no remorse or intention of rehabilitating himself.

The judge ruled in favor of admitting the diary into evidence, stating that the uniqueness of the case made the diary relevant to understand John Evanson's behavior patterns.

I take a deep breath, steadying myself as I prepare to share my mother's truth. At last, her voice will be heard.

"Mr. Salvatore, please state your name for the record."

Noah is in the gallery. I can feel his anxiety radiating from his body all the way across the room. I lock my jaw and bring my body under control. I'm not afraid. I've waited more than twenty years to tell my mother's truth.

"Ethan Salvatore," I reply. My voice is made of steel. I won't break. Cilla Salvatore needs me to deliver her story with conviction.

"Mr. Salvatore, you are John Evanson's biological son. Is that correct?"

"Yes."

"Mr. Salvatore, can you describe your relationship with John Evanson?"

"We don't have a relationship. My father and I have not had a typical parent-child relationship since I was a young child. I also no longer bear his last name, and I haven't since the age of twenty-two."

"Mr. Salvatore, can you tell us why you don't have a typical parent-child relationship with your father?"

"I was a witness to my father's abuse of my mother prior to her death."

“Can you describe what you saw?”

“When I was five years old, I woke up in the middle of the night. I went to my parent’s bedroom and found it empty. I called out for my mother, but I got no response. I heard sounds coming from the basement. I followed the sounds. The basement door was slightly ajar. I was able to see my mother on the ground. She was naked. My father had tied a brown belt around her neck. The other end of the belt was attached to the leg of an armchair. She was crying and asking him to stop.”

I inhale deeply, struggling to give this testimony with as little emotion as possible. Images of my mother’s gray eyes, staring back at me the last time I watched them, clogs my throat. Unwanted tears blur my eyes. I blink them away, but my grief for my mother and her pain is too much.

“Take your time, Mr. Salvatore.”

I find Noah in the crowd. His eyes shine with tears, but he smiles and nods his head.

“I watched this kind of interaction at least five times. If I couldn’t find her at night, I would go down to the basement and find them there. The last time I watched them she had picked her head up and saw me watching them.”

“Are you saying, Mr. Salvatore, that they left the door wide open every time?”

“No. After the first time, I broke the handle so that the door wouldn’t close shut. There would always be a space to look through.”

“Why would you have done such a thing, Mr. Salvatore?”

“At the time, I didn’t understand what was happening to her, except that she was in pain, and John Evanson was the one inflicting that pain. I watched them because I thought if she needed me to rescue her, I would be close by and I would help her.”

“Mr. Salvatore, according to local news articles, your mother, Priscilla Salvatore Evanson died peacefully in her sleep. However, the official records state that she died by suicide.”

The defense objects. “What is the question?”

Sustained.

“Mr. Salvatore, did you know that your mother had died by suicide?”

“Yes.”

“Do you know why that information was not in the local news?”

“My father didn’t want people to wonder why she would take her own life.”

“And do you know why she took her own life?”

“Yes.”

“And how do you know? Was there a suicide note?”

“There was no suicide note, but my mother left behind a diary. She wrote in it periodically over a seven-year period.”

“Do you have that diary, Mr. Salvatore?”

“Yes.” I place the diary on the stand in front of me.

“Mr. Salvatore, is there an entry on the day before Pricilla Evanson’s eighteenth birthday?”

I clear my throat to speak around the lump there. “Yes.”

“Can you read it to us?”

I don’t know if I can. I’ve read it hundreds of times but to add my voice to her words seems impossible. Noah urges me on with his eyes.

“August 28th,” I start.

“Tonight Pastor Evanson called me into his office to ask for my opinion on which of the two boys in our youth band should be promoted to lead singer. I told him Gerald was a better choice because he could pitch higher. He said Ronnie had a better face and should be in front. I said it was up to him.

He told me he’d give me a lift home, so I wouldn’t have to walk. Then he locked the door and tried to touch my thighs. I asked him to stop. He didn’t. John raped me.”

The courtroom is plunged into a terrible silence.

My attorney gives me a small smile. *Well done.*

I swallow hard.

“I told mom and dad, and we went to the doctor. I’m pregnant. Mom and dad say that I should marry John quickly. They were upset about how the child was conceived, but they said that nothing happens outside the will of God. The child was meant to be born, even under such circumstances. They’re going to buy John and me a house so we can raise the child in a nice home.”

The child. I am that child. I feel so broken.

“Thank you, Mr. Salvatore. Can you read to us another excerpt?”

I turn to a page about three quarters in.

“John told me that my body belonged to him and I am to submit to him in all things. I have agreed because it’s what the bible tells me to do, but I will have to ask him to stop taking me to the basement. I feel demeaned and am in constant physical pain because he handles me far too brutally.”

My chest closes up. The air is suffocating. *“John says the physical pain I feel during sex is because of Eve. That it is our punishment as women to feel pain because we caused Adam to fall.”*

Oh, mama.

“I hate my husband. I hate standing next to him at church and smiling for our congregation. I hate him so much. Dear Father in heaven, why did you allow this to happen? What lesson am I to learn from this? I trust you but I am so tired. Ethan —”

Tears flood my eyes. This time I can’t stop them. But I have to go on. My mother was the first in a long line of victims, and her words are important to this case if we want a jury to convict John Evanson with the maximum penalty possible. It’s important that I, Priscilla’s son, speak her words on her behalf. For her, I find my voice again.

“Ethan is my only joy in this life. If it were not for him I would have ended everything a long time ago.”

“Can you tell us if there are entries leading up to her suicide?”

I turn the pages, nodding. *“Fifteen days before her death, she wrote, Ethan came to the basement. He saw everything. He knows everything. I can’t live knowing my own son has witnessed such disgusting acts between his parents. Then ten days before her death, I can’t leave Ethan alone in the world. I can’t let him be raised by a monster. I’ll take him with me. We’ll go to heaven together. I’m a terrible mother for thinking these things but what is there in this world for me and Ethan? I can’t bear to leave him.”*

My attorney takes over, detailing the plan my mother documented to end my life and hers on June 21st because she wasn’t able to live with John Evanson’s abuse or my knowledge of it.

The cross examination tries to tear Priscilla apart, stating that her diary was not credible evidence because she was a murderer or at the very least a woman who would have stood trial for attempted murder if she had survived. We knew the defense would run with it, and we were prepared to take the chance as long as the jury got to hear the story of John Evanson’s first victim.

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CHAPTER 65

Noah

Ethan's testimony goes viral. Pictures of Priscilla are uploaded by people who knew her at school. Messages of sympathy come pouring in for her, and for me and Ethan.

Three weeks after Ethan's testimony, Evangeline Duncan and Alison Jones, who had at first denied that John Evanson touched them, come forward. Devin Sweeney testifies too. They are so brave.

Over thirty men and women come forward. John Evanson abused dozens and dozens of children over a nearly thirty-year period. Cilla was the first. I was one of many.

The trial drags on for months. Ethan and I try to piece together our lives. Therapy is hard. Sometimes neither of us wants to attend our sessions, but we try. Hearing the stories from so many survivors is the hardest.

Ethan and I turn a year older, enjoying quiet birthday celebrations. We plan a wedding for after the verdict is handed down.

Pastor Bobby is under investigation for allegations of sexual misconduct. Officer Purnell is being investigated for breach of process within the police department.

Ethan told me that my father had lied about his vision about the demon and the child. That everything has been planned to catch Ethan. I'm not surprised, but hearing it was crushing nonetheless.

And we endure months and months of vicious Christian attacks. An Instagram account has been created in support of Evanson, with the user name, @CAST_THE_FIRST_STONE. The account shows off all Evanson's good deeds and presents Ethan and me, and all other victims as 'agents of the devil'. The outrageousness of it all is mind-blowing. My phone wouldn't stop blowing up at the beginning of the trial with messages from Beth-El Fellowship church members. They tell me to get on my face and call unto the Lord for strength and mercy. To turn from my wicked ways and return to the Lord.

Many of the comments on the Instagram posts are enough to make you vomit and are posted by people who knew me when I was in the church.

They're praying for me, they say, but I should remember that the Lord will not contend with me forever. That God is a righteous God and will not be mocked. They use the scriptures to perpetuate fear, but I see through the manipulation now. I think the hardest comments to swallow are the ones telling me to forgive my father 'as God has forgiven me'.

I eventually have enough of it and delete my apps.

The story has garnered so much attention it's difficult for Ethan and me to go out in public without being hounded by cameras, even months after our testimonies. Ethan settles for working from home as much as he can, and he's assigned me a driver for my work. I've taken a permanent post at *Cilla's House*, handling some of the administration. It's a job that brings me untold fulfillment.

John Evanson's conviction and sentencing take place in June, eighteen months after I filed charges against him. It's poetic justice that he would learn his fate on the twenty-third anniversary of Priscilla Salvatore's death.

We travel back to North Carolina for the sentencing hearing. Ethan holds onto me as much as I hold onto him. We're both struggling, but is there an easy way to handle all of this? Sometimes, we just have to suffer through the hard parts, hoping the safety we find in each other will be enough to carry us for one more day.

Ms. May and Mr. Tom are with us at the hearing. They still won't forgive themselves for not seeing the signs. I tell them I never gave anyone any signs, but they won't listen.

John Evanson has deteriorated during his time in prison. Standing with his lawyer, he looks malnourished, and his once handsome face has lost its appeal. He shuffles forward, his ankles and wrists bound in chains.

Evanson turns back, catching my eye. Ethan's fingers tighten around mine. I don't look away. I need to face this.

John Evanson is convicted of one hundred and twenty four counts of sexual abuse, indecent conduct with minors, deviate sexual intercourse, and eighty-two counts of possession of child pornography—eighty-two print and digital photos of me. He is sentenced to two hundred and forty years in prison.

The judge addresses him.

"Mr. Evanson, in all my years in this court, I have never seen such meticulous premeditation. I have never seen such a calculated effort to conceal one's true nature. You used your position and power as a spiritual

leader to harm others, mostly children, for nearly thirty years, and every interaction with the survivors of your abuse was carefully planned out.”

I shift closer to Ethan, squeezing his hand.

“Mr. Evanson, the court has determined that you are a particularly dangerous predator because of the lengths you had gone to in order to conceal your crimes. You are, indeed, a danger to society, Mr. Evanson. Particularly heinous, is the degree of manipulation you employed when you set up the rules based on the clergy-penitent privilege to protect yourself. You had full command of your senses when you used the trust instilled in you to conceal your crimes. The abuse of Noah Evanson is the worst I’ve ever seen because of its insidious premeditation. The control, coercion, and manipulation is truly an indication of the horror human beings are capable of inflicting on people they claim to love.”

I fight through the tears. Judge Johnson is right. I’m shaking. Ethan pulls me into his arms, pressing the side of my head into his chest.

The judge continues. “Mr. Evanson, you went to great lengths to isolate Noah Evanson, and, particularly, you went to great lengths to isolate him from Ethan Salvatore, and I can only say that you did these things to ensure that Noah Evanson never felt close enough to anyone to disclose your abuse of him.

Mr. Evanson, I must also say that your biological son, Ethan Salvatore, has not been spared from your crimes. And I believe your vendetta against him was largely due to the sound knowledge he had of the kind of predator you are. You have caused both your children to suffer and you did it while under the pretense of being a dedicated, upstanding father and spiritual leader. You have caused insurmountable harm to both your children.”

Judge Johnson’s words fall on a silent courtroom. It hits me like a wrecking ball that everyone, including me and Ethan himself, had forgotten how much he must have suffered since he was six years old.

And for the first time, I see Ethan as a survivor too. Just because he was strong, it doesn’t mean he didn’t suffer.

We stop at Priscilla's grave after the sentencing.

Ethan talks to her. “He’s paying for what he did to you, mama. For what he did to Noah and all the other children. You don’t have to worry about seeing him in heaven. He won’t get there.”

I squeeze his hand, and, for the first time in twenty-three years, Ethan cries for his mother. His tears fall onto my neck, wetting my skin, and I

accept them gladly. I absorb Ethan's quiet grief into my skin, into my heart, and into my soul. For all he has done for me, surely I can hold him in my arms while he allows himself to grieve for the mother who tried to take him with her.

"She loved you so much, Ethan," I whisper, cradling his head against my shoulder. "She didn't know another way to try and fix everything."

His head moves.

"I love you, Ethan. I love you so much."

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CHAPTER 66

Ethan

It's been two weeks since John Evanson's sentencing. Video clips continue to circulate of him exiting the courtroom in his orange jumper and his ankles and wrists in chains. He looks disheveled as he gets into the waiting police car, but he still smiles at the police officers, thanking them for holding the door open for him.

I'm not pleased with the twinge of sadness after seeing him like that. In therapy, Noah and I learned that part of healing from trauma is the obsession over why it all had to happen in the first place. Why the selfish decisions made by other people had to have such a profound impact on our lives. My sadness is over why it all had to happen in the first place, and I try not to confuse it for sadness over Evanson's fate.

We also learnt that sometimes there are no answers. Noah says we should find safe moments in the here-and-now, and maybe that will help us not to look back too much. Maybe it'll work. I don't know yet. My therapy sessions are hard. The truth is I don't want therapy. I don't want to *get better*. Because getting better means I'll stop grieving for my mother. And my grief is the only lifeline I have to her. I'm so afraid I'll become so happy that I'll forget about her.

Despite my struggles with therapy, I still go.

Noah and I have a strong support system. Ms. May and Mr. Tom check up on us constantly. Even Mrs. Remington texts regularly.

Jono is pleased about the outcome of the trial, but he told Noah to never pull that shit again. Noah agreed and hugged Jono, thanking him for being my best friend.

Today, I have a surprise for Noah. What good is it that he'll soon be married to the best cyber security expert in the world if I'm not able to locate his mother and bring her to him?

Her flight landed ten minutes ago. She'll be in our home in just over thirty minutes.

Noah is upstairs reclined on our bed, freshly showered, and once again obsessed with online talk about our father. "I thought you were done with social media," I say lightly from the doorway.

He looks up at me, shaking his head. "I think I'm addicted to the stupidity of people," he says.

I laugh. "What are they saying now?"

Noah turns his phone around. It's an Instagram post of Daniel from the bible, when he had been thrown into a den filled with lions for not worshiping the king's god. "Listen to this," Noah says. "God will shut the mouths of the lions, and, even while imprisoned, Pastor Evanson will rise up and rule the lions. Though he is chained, as Daniel was, he is free."

He shakes his head. "Like, what does that even mean?"

"You've got to get a new hobby," I say, joining him on the bed.

Noah pulls me to him, kissing me hard on the lips. "There's this one hobby I enjoy more than all the other hobbies."

I kiss him back. "Oh yeah, and what's that?"

"Pseudo-incest."

"Hmm. That's great because it's also my favorite hobby."

Noah tries to seduce me with his pseudo-incest hobby, but he's about to meet his mother. He should at least not have his ass full of demon semen right before.

"There's something I need to tell you," I murmur into his mouth.

"Okay. Later. Let's have sex now."

I pull away, holding him off.

"But I need to take care of all this god juice," he moans with his hand inside my pants. Fuck, but Noah is one horny motherfucker.

"Noah, baby." I take his face between my palms and force him to concentrate. He fusses but doesn't try to seduce me anymore.

"I found somebody," I tell him

He frowns. "Okay?"

"Her name is Emily Walt—"

Noah's eyes widen and then he bursts into tears, throwing his arms around me. "Walters. Emily Walters," he wails.

I hold him tightly against me. Sometimes I feel stupid that we're two grown men who always end up crying when our mothers are involved, but I also know from therapy that no pain is stupid, no matter how old you are.

"She's on her way here," I say, stroking his hair.

He pulls away. "Here? To our house?"

I nod.

“My mother is coming to our house, Ethan?” Noah’s tears are that of a child. I kiss them preciously.

“You should wear something decent,” I tell him with a soft smile, waving my hand over his sweats and old t-shirt.

His eyes get big again. “Oh my god, I should get changed. What should I wear, Ethan?” And before I can answer, he adds, “How did you do it, Ethan? How did you find her? Was she still in prison? When did she get out?”

I walk over to the closet to help him. “She got out three years ago on good behavior,” I say, handing him a pair of black pants.

“Three years ago? Should I wear a tie?”

“Yes, three years ago. She was too scared to contact you. And yes, wear a tie. It’s polite to wear a tie.”

“Oh, Ethan. When did you find her?”

“Only two days ago.”

“Why didn’t you tell me sooner?” He buttons up a white shirt and begins to knot his tie.

“I wanted to be sure she’d come.”

Noah turns, throwing his arms around me. I kiss him gently. “I love you so much it doesn’t seem possible such a thing should exist, Ethan.”

I pull him closer to me, kissing him hard. “And I love you in that same impossible way, Noah, baby.” I let him go, handing him a pair of socks.

He pulls on his socks, slips into a pair of shoes, and then stands back. “Is this okay?”

I nod. “Prettiest boy I’ve ever seen. Brush your hair.”

He does, and then we wait. His body vibrates, and I just hold him, saying nothing. When the bell chimes indicating Emily Walters’ arrival, Noah goes into a full scale panic. I hold his hand while he gulps for air and crushes my fingers.

“Ready?” I ask softly, when we get downstairs.

He can’t stop shaking.

“Some people deserve our forgiveness, Noah,” I say gently.

He nods. “Like Cilla.”

A smile touches my lips. “And like Emily.”

Emily steps out of the elevator, and Noah is a seven-year-old boy again. He flies to her, but he doesn’t make it all the way. He drops to the floor a

few feet away from her, and she meets him there, dropping to her knees and gathering her son close. The lump in my throat forces tears to the surface.

“Mom,” Noah says and I can hear the crack in his voice.

I stand back, giving them their space, but I can’t keep my eyes from devouring this moment between Noah and his mother. Noah gets to have his mother back. He gets to touch her. Hold her. Smell her motherly scent. His joy is my joy, and, watching them, I try to remember the last time I hugged my mother while she still breathed, and, when the memory won’t come, I try to imprint the scene before me into my head.

Noah rises with his mother. His tears can’t be contained and the same for her.

He pulls her across the room and when they reach me, Noah takes my hand in his. “Ethan,” he chokes out. “Ethan . . .”

My Noah can hardly speak. I bring our joined hands to my lips, kissing his knuckles gently.

“Ethan, this is my mom,” he finally manages. “Our mom.”

I turn my eyes to Emily Walters. “It’s nice to finally meet you, ma’am.”

She throws her arms around me. “Thank you,” she says. “Thank you for what you’ve done for me.”

I’m almost broken with the feel of a mother’s arms around me.

Noah kept his promise. He shared his mother with me.

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Epilogue

Ethan

I'd never thought about happy endings. It never occurred to me that I could have one. But now, looking around the art gallery, I understand why people chase after it with so much passion. It's hard to explain what it feels like to look around your life and realize that everything is just as it should be.

Today is the grand opening of Jacob Watkins' art gallery—the first survivor-focused gallery in New York. Today's show is named *I am Innocent* and all the photos around us are of survivors. Among them, a portrait of Cilla Salvatore. She gazes up at me from the wall, her gray eyes soft and full of life. I want to remember her like this. The way she was before Evanson.

The guests today include all the people who fight alongside us against the destruction of innocent lives: Cilla's House staff, every single one of John Evanson's victims and whose words sent him to prison for the rest of his life, Jacob's models, and members of the Global Impact team, who dedicate their financial gains to our cause.

I'm acutely aware that the story of my life is filled with many terrible things. Mine isn't a fluffy tale, but I chose this life. I chose to look at all the ugliness in the world with unjudging eyes. It may seem like a burden too heavy to bear sometimes, but I'll try to bear it as long as I can because, when you look past the pain and sadness, you find human beings so resilient and filled with hope when they know that they have us beside them, urging them on. To walk alongside people while they build themselves back up is a powerful form of healing.

Noah is lost somewhere among the guests. I haven't seen him for almost the entire evening but all I have to do to find him is look for our youngest guest

tonight: a nine-month-old baby on his first trip from Louisville to New York. Noah has spent almost all of his time with that little baby.

My eyes find him near a portrait of another survivor—Axel Saxon, husband to one of our Global Impact members. Axel Saxon’s portrait is a powerful testament to the resilience of survivors. His portrait shows a strong, healthy man with a powerful glint of determination in his eyes. His long blond locks frame his face, and you can see the joy radiating from his smile. Even after the worst pain, happiness is possible.

Axel Saxon is not just a domestic and sexual abuse survivor. He’s also a cancer survivor, and, like Jacob and all the other survivors in this room today, he’s no longer ashamed of what he had to survive. And Axel, along with the others, are not just survivors, but overcomers.

My mother wasn’t an overcomer, but she held on as long as she could and I must honor her efforts even if it hadn’t been enough to stay.

Noah is sitting on the floor cross legged with the baby on his lap. A smile touches my lips. He’d make a great father one day. Emily sits next to Noah, brushing his hair with her fingers. She gazes up at him in very much the same way my mother used to look at me, with so much love in her eyes.

Noah’s wedding band catches the light as he rubs the baby’s back. I touch my thumb to the one on mine. We said our vows in a quiet ceremony with a few guests in Mr. Mauri’s Italian restaurant a week ago. Jono, Ms. May, Mr. Tom, Florence, Mrs. Remington, and Noah’s mom witnessed our short exchange of vows and the signing of the register. Noah is now Noah Walters Salvatore. He will never bear the name *Evanson* again.

Jacob Watkins walks over to me. He’s come so far since the attack. “Ethan, I’m so happy you and Noah made it,” he says.

“I wouldn’t have missed it for anything, Jacob.”

“Are you ready to say a few words?”

“Yes.”

Jacob calls the guests to attention.

I take the podium. “Hi everyone. Thank you all for coming and thank you, Jacob, for sharing your incredible talent with us today. Also, I thank the ones who were brave enough to share their stories with the world. Your strength humbles me. We’re here to celebrate you today.

When Jacob told us he wanted to open a gallery that shows the faces of those who have overcome heinous crimes committed against them, I knew it was something we needed to pay more attention to. I agree with Jacob’s

sentiment that we should not allow for survivors to be ashamed of what happened to them. As you all know, my husband and I came out of the biggest fight of our lives just a few short weeks ago. We understand, first hand, the devastating impact of sex crimes. John Evanson raped and repeatedly abused my mother, Priscilla. She was so ashamed she chose to take her own life. He almost destroyed Noah's life. Many of you here today are survivors of John Evanson's crimes. You are ending the cycle of victim shame."

I tip my glass to the crowd. They raise their glasses. "To the survivors. The weight of shame belongs to the perpetrators who tried to break you. Never carry burdens that are not yours to bear."

Noah steps forward, kissing me on my lips. "Thank you for your selflessness, Ethan. Cilla would be so proud of you."

"Thank you, Noah."

"Ethan."

I turn. "Sebastian. Glad you made it. Noah, this is Sebastian Stone, one of my business partners." Sebastian's husband, Colt, walks over to us. "And this is Colt Hanson, Sebastian's husband."

Noah shakes hands with them.

"We're on our way out," Sebastian says. "But Spencer wants to stay and spend some time at Cilla's House."

I nod. "Make any arrangements with Florence. Where is Spencer?"

Colt grins and tips his chin to the end of the room. Spencer Grange is deep in conversation with Jono. Jono towers over him, and Spencer gazes up at him like he found God.

Sebastian and Colt say their goodbyes, and Noah pulls me across the room. "Come, I want to see the baby again."

I laugh. Noah is so broody.

Axel Saxon grins at Noah as we approach him, Eli Saxon and their son. "Are you back so soon, Noah?" Axel laughs. His son reaches up to grab his long blond curls.

Eli lifts his hand in greeting. I greet him in sign, making sure to keep my body angled toward him so he can lip read with ease.

Eli signs. I look to Axel to interpret. "Thanks for inviting us. We're happy to be a part of something so amazing," he says.

"And we're grateful for all your support," I say.

Eli smiles. He points to the baby and signs. Axel interprets. “Noah is obsessed with Atticus.”

Noah laughs and takes the baby from Axel. He comes to stand close to me. “Isn’t that just such a beautiful name?” he tells me. He, too, angles his body, so Eli can lip read.

I rub my thumb across the baby’s cheek. Little Atticus has a head full of blond curls and red cheeks, like Axel. He babbles back when Noah baby-talks to him. “Very beautiful,” I murmur, but truthfully, I’m talking about Noah too. Noah with a baby in his arms is the most beautiful thing I’ve ever seen.

Eli and Axel leave early because Atticus begins to fuss. Bedtime, Axel said. Noah slips his arms around my waist and rests his head against my chest. “They look so happy,” he says.

“They’ve been through a lot. They deserve it.”

He looks up at me. “We deserve it, too, don’t we, Ethan?”

I press my lips to his forehead. “We deserve it, too.”

His eyes track the Saxon family until they’re out of sight.

“You want a baby, Noah?” I ask him softly.

He looks up at me. “Do you?” he asks.

“Yes,” I say.

I’ve never seen Noah look so happy.

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Epilogue

Noah

It's been nearly two years since I first came to New York to work for Cilla's House. Our father has been in prison for nearly the same amount of time. He maintains his innocence from behind bars, refusing to accept that he will spend the rest of his life in prison.

Ethan and I decided to keep the house in North Carolina. Ms. May and Mr. Tom stay on the property. We visit regularly, making sure to visit Cilla's grave every time.

My mom moved to New York and lives in an apartment not far from us. She's doing so well and she sometimes helps us at *Cilla's House*. She's not the drug-addicted shell of a woman she was when she forgot me outside our apartment building nearly twenty years ago. She's the mother she was when she held me at night, telling me one day we'll be okay.

I'm still struggling to let go of my faith, and my fear of hell is still very much a part of my thought life. But I'm learning to accept, little by little, that leaving the church was the right thing to do. Why should I go where I am not wanted? Maybe one day I'll find a spiritual home, but, for now, everything I need to live a good life, I already have. And I'm enough, just the way I am.

I continue to work full time at *Cilla's House* and I have a whole new set of friends. Melanie Davenport stayed on at *Cilla's House*, and she can't get over how I actually married Ethan Salvatore. Spencer Grange and I have been working well together. But I'm a little worried that I'm jealous of my other friend, Axel, because he has a baby and I don't.

I turn down the covers on our bed when I hear Ethan's footsteps coming up the stairs.

He comes up behind me, pulling me into his arms. “Happy birthday, baby brother,” he whispers in my ear. “Baby?” I turn around, slipping my arms around his neck. “I’m twenty-five, Ethan.” I flick my tongue across his lips. “I’m an adult. And I can do adult things.”

He bites my bottom lip. “Yeah? What kind of adult things?” he says, slipping his hands into my sweats and grabbing my ass. “Hmm, my favorite thing,” he murmurs, his fingers sliding over my jockstrap. “Get on the fucking bed, and let me look at you, Noah, baby.”

I comply. I’m so horny, I could die. My body pulses everywhere as I get up onto the bed, settling on my knees, my back facing Ethan. He stands at the foot of the bed.

“Ah, fuck, Noah. Look at this hot fucking ass.”

I lower my chest to the bed, my hands stretched out in front of me. Ethan slaps my knees apart, causing my legs to slide further apart and my ass to lift further up, and he pulls me to the edge of the bed.

“Your ass was made for jockstraps, Noah,” he groans, as his hands grab both my ass cheeks and exposes my asshole. He drops to his knees, and then his mouth is on me, sucking at my asshole with his devil’s tongue. I push back into his face, dying from the pleasure of Ethan’s mouth.

He rises, turns me around until I’m on my back with my head hanging over the edge of the bed. Then he shoves his cock into my waiting mouth. I suck that dick with all my might while Ethan leans forward to slide his palms down my chest, reaching for my cock. He rubs me over my jockstrap, and I squirm with the need for his hand on my bare skin.

Ethan gives me what I want. He reaches inside my jockstrap, sliding his thumb over the head of my dick and then further down to massage my balls. I spread my legs to give him more room while I choke on his dick. His middle finger sinks into my ass, and I lift for him, groaning around his cock.

“You’re beautiful, Noah. Look at you. You’re so fucking beautiful,” Ethan whispers.

He drags his palms back up my chest, squeezing my nipples on the way up, then, he wraps his fingers around my neck and fucks my face to kingdom come. His fingers will leave marks.

“How’s that, birthday boy? Is that good? You like my cock down this pretty throat?”

I groan my answer, protesting when Ethan pulls his cock out of my mouth. “What was that, Noah, baby?”

I wrap my hands around the back of his thighs and pull him closer. “This cock belongs down my fucking throat, Ethan. Now, fuck my face.”

He does, and, when he’s done my face is wet with his pre-cum and my saliva and my throat is sufficiently abused. I adore the messiness.

Ethan bends and kisses me hard in this upside down position. I suck into his mouth harder when his fingers on my neck tighten.

He pulls his mouth away, shoves me up onto the bed, and flips me onto my stomach. He gets rid of his clothes and settles on his knees in the middle of the bed. Then, he wraps his arm around my midsection and pulls me onto his lap, pulling at the strap of my jockstrap and then letting it go with a loud smacking sound. Back to chest, with his arms banded around me I sink down onto Ethan’s cock. He tilts his hips, giving me just the right angle, and I die of happiness.

“Fuck that ass, Ethan,” I beg. “Fuck me hard. I wanna feel all that cum swimming inside me.”

“Such a dirty little boy, Noah. You’re such a dirty fucking boy, aren’t you?”

“So dirty for you, my love,” I moan, while I pump my dick, and Ethan plows my ass like I’m the best summer harvest he’s ever had.

I come, hard and vulgar, getting off on the dirtiness of our fuckfest. Ethan shoots his load inside me, coming harder than I’ve ever seen before.

He pushes me gently onto my stomach, drops his body onto mine, covering me from my heels to the back of my head. “I love you so fucking much, Noah,” he whispers, the softness in his voice covering me as much as his body does.

“I love you more, my beautiful husband.”

“I have a surprise for you tomorrow,” he whispers. “Two surprises.”

I try to turn but he’s got me pinned to the bed with his delicious weight.

The surprises are more than I ever could have wanted. In the kitchen the next morning—Saturday—Ethan hands me an envelope. I don’t even have to read the full document. “We’ll adopt?” I cry into his chest, the papers between us.

“It’s a long and daunting process, but we have everything we need to make it happen.”

I kiss him from neck to forehead, leaving not even an inch of his skin untouched. “I love you. I love you so much,” I tell him over and over.

He laughs, trying to keep up with my kisses. “Now for your other surprise.” The other surprise involves fetching my mom from her apartment and a short drive into the city.

And when I see where Ethan has brought me, I can’t stop the tears. I have never met anyone who makes me cry as much as Ethan does. He catches my tears in his thumb, telling me what a pretty cry baby I am.

Then, wrapping his arms around me, he whispers in my ear, “Your first pride parade.”

“You remembered?” I choke out.

“You can’t wish for things and think I won’t try and make them come true,” he says. Then, he pulls my mom into his arms and she laughs, loud and delighted. “Thank you for your son, Emily,” he says, kissing her on the side of her head. My mom wraps her arms around his waist and pats his chest in the most mom way I’ve ever seen. I watch them for a moment, my heart filled with so much happiness I might explode. Ethan looks so happy. I swallow a lump in my throat. He deserves this. He’s paid a terrible price for this happiness and he deserves it.

I once asked Ethan in a drunken stupor how it was possible to be happy if you’re gay. I think it’s the same way straight people or anyone else on the spectrum can be happy: when they are left alone to be who they are.

“I love you, Ethan,” I tell him. “Our beautiful thing didn’t end.”

He smiles down at me. “No, it didn’t.”

“You have made all my dreams come true, Ethan.”

“And you, dear brother, are my dream come true.”

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A note from jen

Dear Reader,

Thank you for pushing through to the end. This was a big-ass book, and I promise to never do it again. I don't think either of us can handle this kind of commitment again, lol.

I think I've finally said all the things I wanted to say about religion. I had a few false starts with my previous books, where I touched on the subject. but I was still pretty afraid of exploring religious trauma further than a few sentences here and there.

I wrote this book scared, because . . . what if I *do* end up in Hell for writing it? I've decided I'll risk Hell if it meant living a life free from the condemnation of religion.

If you have struggled with religion, please know that you are inherently good, not inherently sinful. And only you can decide what happiness looks like to you.

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About Jen

Jen lives in Johannesburg, South Africa, with her husband, three children, and two Maltese poodles.

Her love for reading began with her father, when she would check out Louis L'Amour books from the library for him.

Jen is an uncontrolled consumer of Chinese, Thai, and Korean dramas.

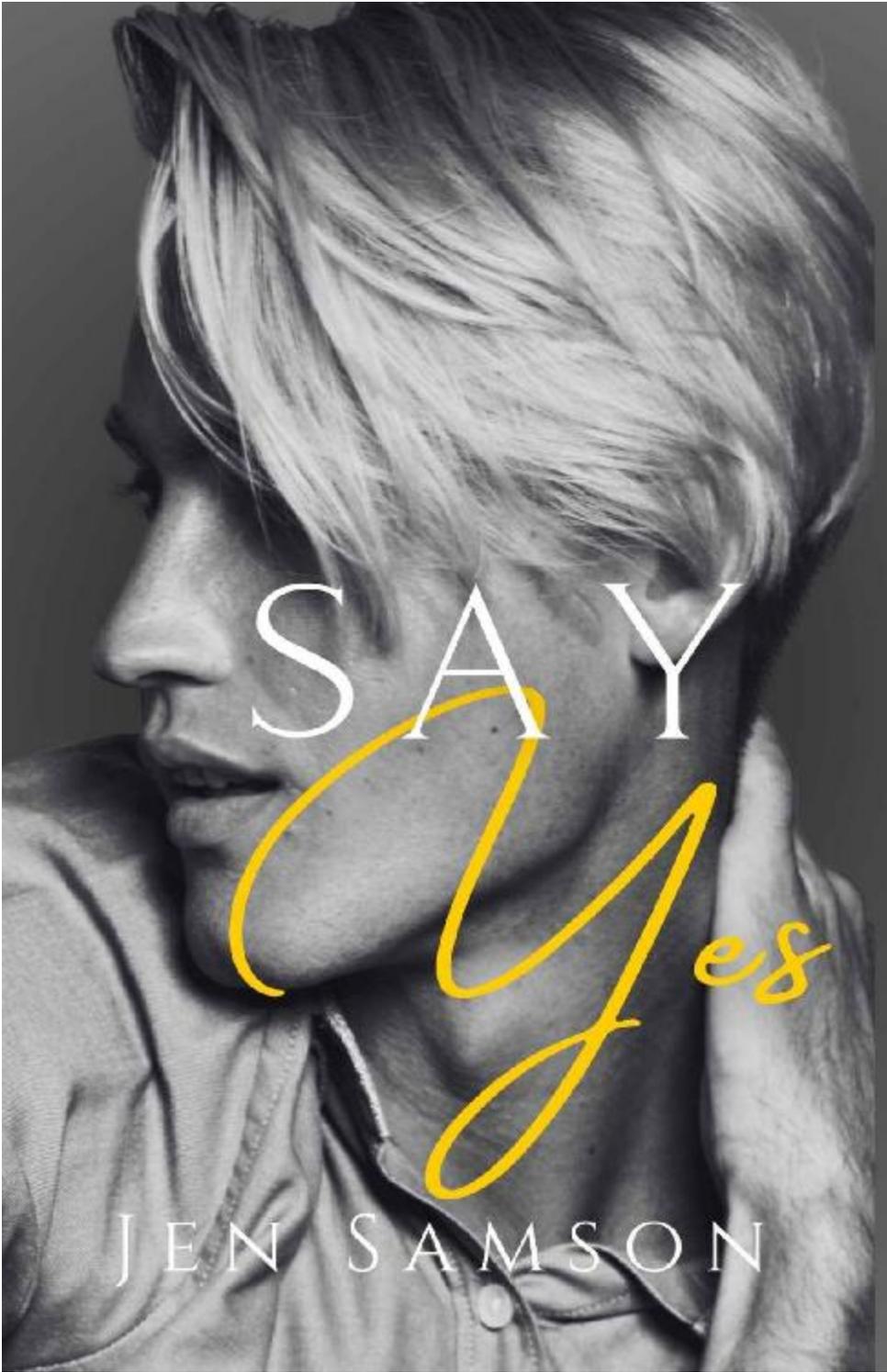
Her love for the Korean pop band, BTS, is infinite.

Please stay in touch [using this link](#).

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Say_yes

Jen Samson



It began the very first moment their eyes met across that boardroom table, at a meeting Colt Hanson should never have been at in the first place.

Sebastian Stone is unlike any man Colt has ever encountered and his quiet, innocent world is rocked when Sebastian discovers his secret and then reveals his interest in him.

But Sebastian has rules that Colt will have to accept if he wants to get close to Sebastian. Colt agrees, and both men enter into a sexual arrangement that will have Colt questioning everything he knew about himself, while he uncovers, layer by layer, Sebastian's painful history.

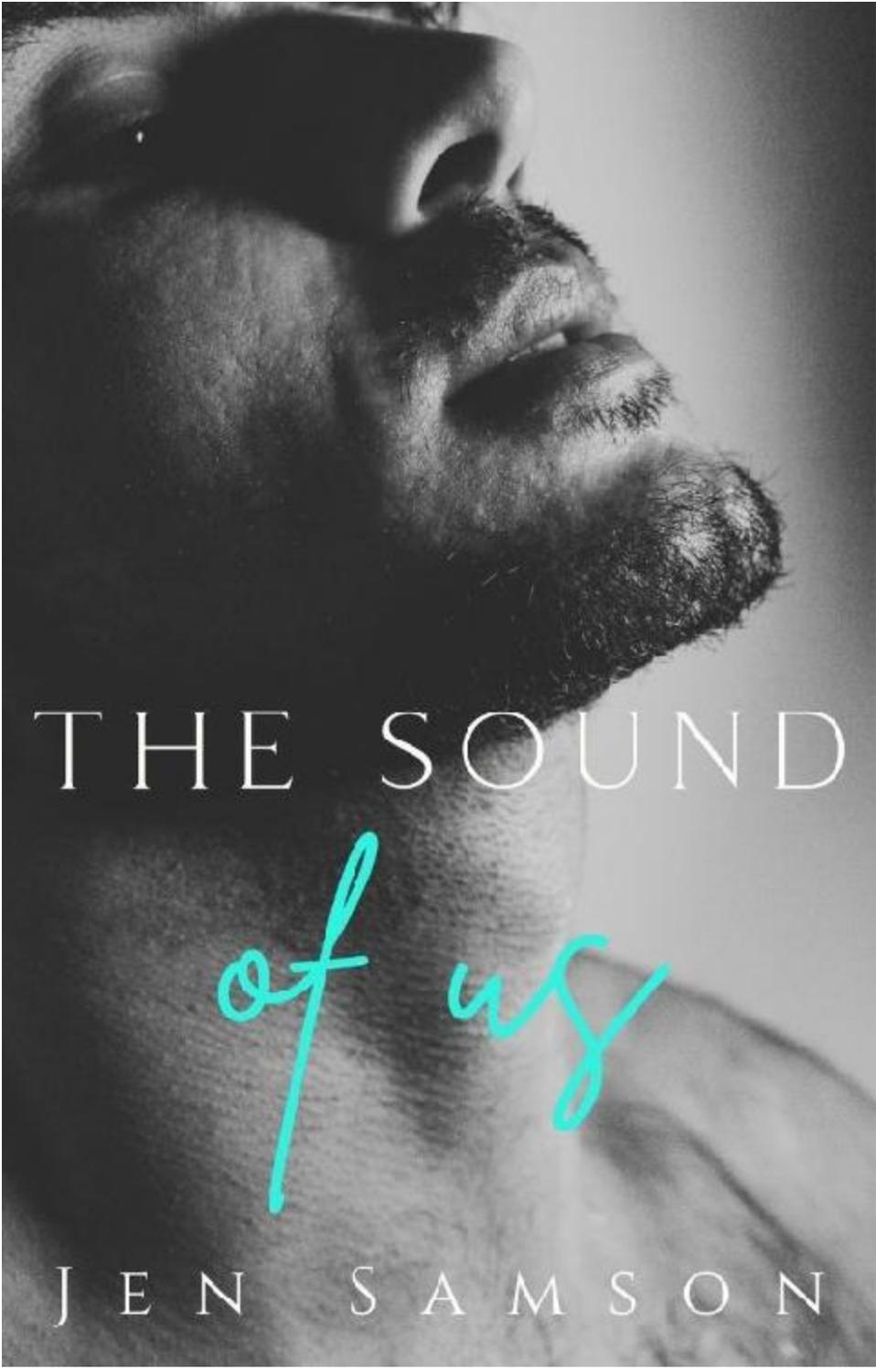
You can expect:

- BDSM elements
- Hurt/comfort
- CEO/college graduate
- Traumatic recollections
- HEA

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The Sound Of Us

Jen Samson



How many vows, made to God and your spouse, would you be willing to break for just one taste of the truest love you've ever known? For just one moment of tenderness?

Till death do us part is what Axel Davis promised his husband ten years ago, when he was only eighteen. Even now, his devotion to the marriage was unshakable, despite the bruises, the humiliation; the ever-present fear of the unlicensed gun that sits on the nightstand if he ever tried to leave.

But when a newcomer shows up in their small, forgotten town in Eastern Kentucky, Axel can't ignore the sound of his beating heart and the unspoken melody between them when he lays his eyes on Eli Saxon.

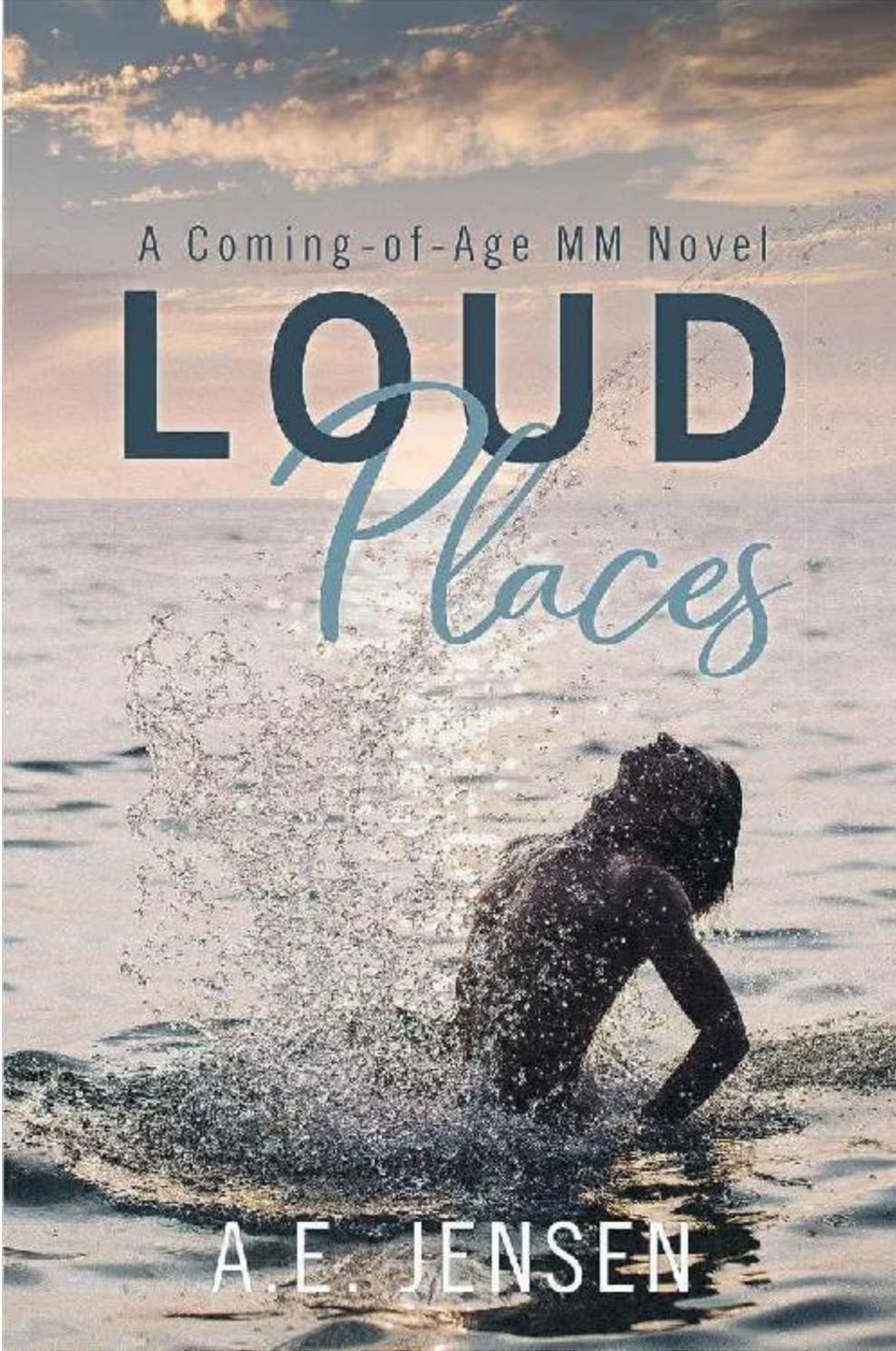
The war between fidelity and an inextinguishable passion escalates when Axel comes out of remission, and then he has to decide: how many vows will he break for Eli, a man who can neither hear nor speak, but whose touch is a language Axel's soul understands?

The Sound Of Us is a high-heat, emotional, small-town romance about the complex, painful journey of someone who vowed to always be faithful to his marriage, but who found that the desperation to be known by another had become unbearable.

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LOUD PLACES

AE Jensen



A Coming-of-Age MM Novel

LOUD *Places*

A.E. JENSEN

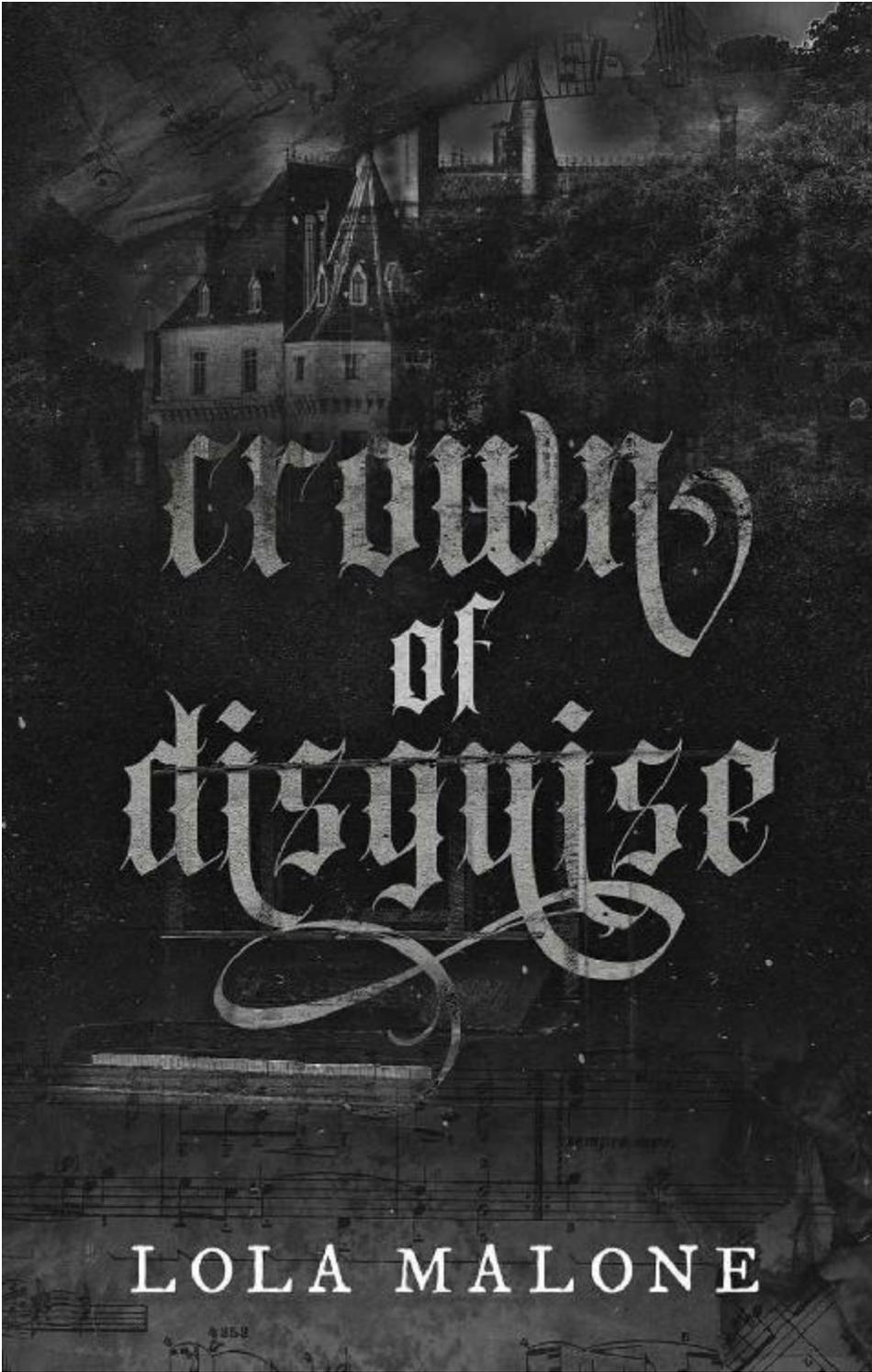
Loud Places is the story of Ethan and Matty. And of Avery and Austin. It's a story of being lost. Of searching for freedom. And of finding your path and your place in the world. And perhaps, love.

Please note: Loud Places is an MM and not an MMMM romance.

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Crown of Disguise

Lola Malone



WHAT TO EXPECT:

MM enemies to lovers

Elite boarding college in France

Secret brotherhood

Hurt/comfort

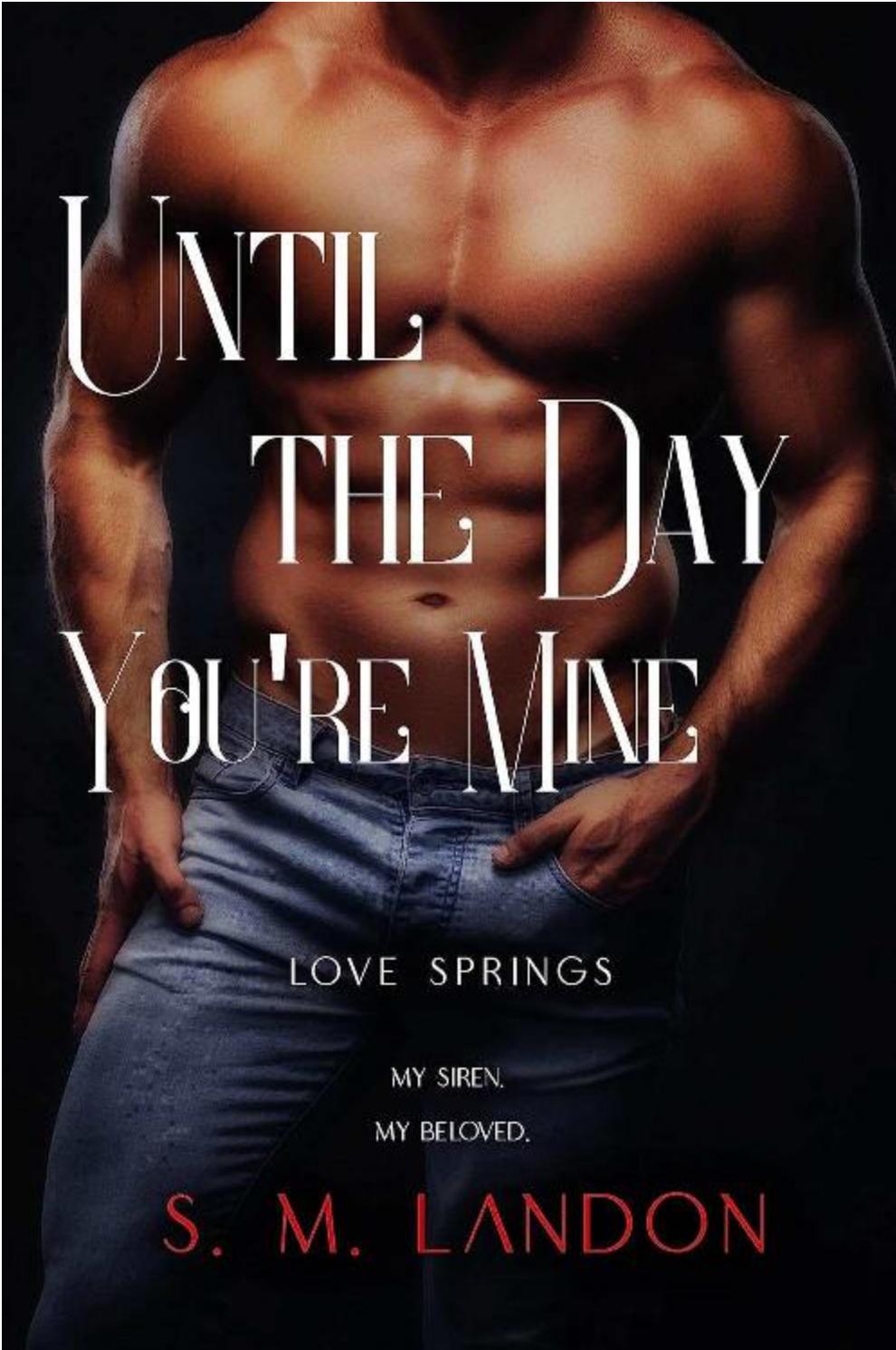
First times

Primal Play

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Until the day you're mine

SM Landon

A photograph of a very muscular man from the waist up, wearing blue jeans. He has his hands in his pockets and is looking directly at the camera. The background is dark.

UNTIL
THE DAY
YOU'RE MINE

LOVE SPRINGS

MY SIREN.
MY BELOVED.

S. M. LANDON

MM Contemporary romance

Slow Burn

Best Friend's Brother

Hurt/Comfort

Domestic Violence

Emotional Trauma

New Beginning

Found Family

Baby Fever

HEA

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Additional content warning

Thank you for putting your wellbeing before your curiosity. Here is more information. Please contact me if you need any more details.

Child abuse - one of the main characters has been sexually abused. This is hinted at throughout the book to avoid a shock-value experience when the truth is revealed. The character recounts some of the events, one of which includes being penetrated with an object. You will find a few lines in chapter 62 and chapter 63.

I have taken care to treat this part with dignity. Please note, there is no on-page sexual abuse. There are recollections, and these recounts are told with as gentle language as possible.

Potentially discomfoting fantasies - There is no biological connection between the two main characters, however, one of them has a sexual fantasy that involves pretending to be real brothers in sexual situations. Both characters feel safe in these situations.

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