



Nobody

LIKE US

his
future



her
present



NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHORS

Krista & Becca Ritchie

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A Note From the Authors

Nobody Like Us is the thirteenth book in the Like Us Series. Even though the series changes POVs throughout, to understand events that take place in the previous novels, the series should be read in its order of publication.

Nobody Like Us should be read after *Unlucky Like Us*.

LIKE US SERIES READING ORDER

1. *Damaged Like Us*
2. *Lovers Like Us*
3. *Alphas Like Us*
4. *Tangled Like Us*
5. *Sinful Like Us*
6. *Headstrong Like Us*
7. *Charming Like Us*
8. *Wild Like Us*
9. *Fearless Like Us*
10. *Infamous Like Us*
11. *Misfits Like Us*
12. *Unlucky Like Us*
13. *Nobody Like Us*

Character List

Not all characters in this list will make an appearance in the book, but most will be mentioned.

Ages represent the age of the character at chapter one of the book. Some characters might be older when they're introduced, depending on their birthday.

THE HALES

Loren Hale & Lily Calloway Maximoff – 25

Luna – 21

Xander – 17

Kinney – 16

Ripley (grandchild) – 1 year, 11 months Cassidy (grandchild) — 1 week

THE COBALTS

Richard Connor Cobalt & Rose Calloway Jane – 25

Charlie – 23

Beckett – 23

Eliot – 21

Tom – 20

Ben – 18

Audrey – 15

Maeve (grandchild) — 5 weeks

THE MEADOWS

Ryke Meadows & Daisy Calloway Sullivan – 22
Winona – 16

THE ABBEYS

Garrison Abbey & Willow Hale Vada – 16

THE SECURITY TEAM

These are the bodyguards that protect the Cobalts, Hales, and Meadows.

Kitsuwon Securities Inc.

Security Force Omega Akara Kitsuwon Meadows (boss) – 29
Thatcher Moretti (lead) – 30
Banks Moretti Meadows – 30
Farrow Redford Keene Hale – 30
Oscar Highland-Oliveira – 33
Paul Donnelly – 29
Quinn Oliveira – 23
Gabe Montgomery – 23
Kannika “Frog” Kitsuwon – 19

Price Kepler’s Triple Shield Services *Security Force Epsilon* Jon Sinclair

(lead) – 40s O’Malley – 29
Ian Wreath – 34
Vance Wreath – 27
Chris Novak – 30s
Greer Bell — 30s
Ryan Cruz Jr. – 20s ...and more

Security Force Alpha Price Kepler (lead) – 40s Tony Ramella – 30
Bruno Bandoni – 50s ...and more

DECEMBER

“All of this has happened before. All of this will happen again.”

— *Battlestar Galactica*

PAUL DONNELLY

I'VE BEEN AVOIDING funerals most of my life. Didn't make it to my grandmom's when she croaked. Skipped out on mass for deceased aunts and uncles. Been to one wake for a cousin. But that was because I was thirteen and hungry and they had roast beef hoagies. I'm not big on death. It feels like the conclusion of something—and I'd just rather keep on running, keep on going, than celebrate any kind of ending.

On the grassy hill of a cemetery a little outside Philly, it hits me like a burst of cold December wind.

My first funeral is for a Calloway.

Not my mom.

Not my dad.

A fucking *Calloway*.

I'd laugh at the sheer shock of it—but can't laugh during a funeral. I have manners and all—even if everyone in the cemetery has been eyeballing me and Luna rather than the coffin that'll descend into the freshly dug earth.

Feels like we were the ones who died.

Like half the people here are lowering us into the ground.

At least I'm with her. In life, in death...at least I'm with Luna Hale.

I scrape a hand through my hair.

Yeah, I'm not dead yet. Luna leans into my shoulder, her warmth radiating against me, and my left arm is already around this girl.

I look down at her. Residual glitter is still stuck in her light brown hair, the strands sparkling, and her round cheeks are rosy from the biting winter

air. Her black puffer jacket is too short to warm the length of her body, but I tuck her close to me.

She's mine. She's all mine, but from across the wooden casket, I spot a fortysomething woman with deep auburn hair yanked into a taut bun. Luna's therapist. If she could chuck stones, I'd be pelted to death by now. She would rather I let Luna go.

It's worse when I spot Luna's parents. Her mom practically turns her face into her husband's chest just to avoid me. Like I'm truly disease-ridden and toxic waste.

My stomach clenches.

It's not about me. She's just upset about who died. It's upsetting. This death. This whole thing. I try to convince myself, but it's also clear she's doing her best not to make eye contact with me.

Luna senses her mom's avoidance, and she shifts uneasily. I squeeze her in a side-hug.

A light layer of snow blankets the dewy morning grass. Everyone is standing, hundreds in attendance to pay their respects, and I only feel like a special invitee because I can see the gravesite. I'm not two or three rows behind friends-of-friends and other security.

I am on-duty though. Had to keep the press and paparazzi out of the cemetery, but I managed to sneak up to the front to be beside Luna. I'm Epsilon—been that way for three days—and my fellow SFE brethren are looking at me like I deserve to be shoved in the hole. O'Malley, most especially.

I meet the intensity of his glare with one of my own.

Fuck him.

My blood courses hatefully, and I despise this feeling. I want to release it, but after all that's happened, I can't figure out how. I'm afraid to live inside hatred, maybe more than I am to live inside the past.

I glance back down at Luna—she's worth everything. She's my everything. But I'm still partially in her world. One foot in, one foot out. Like with a big enough gust of wind, I could be blown away from her.

She springs on her tiptoes to whisper to me, "It kinda feels like we're being stared at."

I dip my head to whisper back, "Accurate assessment, I'd say. They're probably just jealous."

"Uh-huh," she says, her voice tense.

We both know they're not envious of the hell we've been going through. No one in their right mind would be.

They're also not envious of what happened to us three days ago—the same day we learned a Calloway died. Also known as the day another member of Luna's family walked in on me giving her head. History repeats itself in strange ways, and I don't know what it says about me that this happened yet again.

What didn't repeat: Keeping it under wraps.

Her entire family got wind of it today. Hence, being eyeballed during the funeral like we're the ones in the casket.

I'd say we already had some metaphorical or spiritual death of sorts, but it's not that easy to put me to rest.

THREE DAYS EARLIER

PAUL DONNELLY

“LET’S GO, MY FURRY FRIENDS.” Arkham and Orion lead the way into the Hale House. While Luna, Maximoff, and Farrow talk on the front lawn about the sudden death in the family, I give them a minute to themselves. Letting the Hales have this family moment. So I offered to bring the dogs inside.

Boxes of Christmas lights are on the front brick porch. I’d been stringing them on the roof before Maximoff dropped the bad news. I collect my phone and radio nearby, in a bit of a daze.

Life giveth and life taketh.

I’ve got experience with death of relatives, but not necessarily death of *loved ones*. I can’t say how everyone will react, but I know it’ll matter to a lot of people in the families.

I breathe out an odd heaviness on my chest and enter the Hale House. Nudging the door shut with my foot, I slip farther into the foyer.

It’s still quiet.

I can’t hear any creatures stirring except the big burly canines below me. They pull me into the living room, and I barely need to crouch to unleash the two towering Newfies.

Freed, they trot through a cracked door, on course for the kitchen. That’s where their doggie bowls are, and I’m sure they’ve got food on the brain. Before I move, that same kitchen door opens wider, but Orion hasn’t backtracked for extra pets.

Loren Hale graces the living room, winter coat gone from when he checked up on the progress of the Christmas lights outside. He’s wearing a

long-sleeved black tee, arrowhead necklace, and jeans. Cell phone to his ear, his brows are all knotted up, his lips drawn in a serious line.

He's staring right at me.

I freeze.

Should I go back outside? Feels like I'm in an old spaghetti Western with Luna's dad, and his sharp gaze is a warning that he'll pull a pistol if I so much as breathe wrong.

Except he's not verbally kicking me out. He's not waving me to go.

So for better or worse, I stay put.

"Yeah...yeah," Lo says to someone over the line. His voice is strained, almost somber. "I know that." He hasn't stopped looking at me.

I wind the leashes in a loop, gauging the temperature of the room. *Tense*. Prickly? Maybe that's just the hairs rising on the back of my neck.

Death.

Dead.

Someone has died, and it'd be easier for me if I enjoyed sitting in discomfort and morbidity—but I don't. Never have. Probably never will.

"I'm not putting out a statement, Daniel," Lo snaps. "*Seriously*. Okay, great...conversation over." He hangs up, then pockets his phone, still staring me down.

I bet he thinks I'm a bigger intruder hanging around during a family death. I nod to him. "I'm sorry for your loss," I say. "I know he must've meant something to you."

Lo's face contorts, perplexed. "What the hell are you talking about?"

What am *I* talking about?

His confusion mounts.

Fuck...

Me.

Shouldn't he know?

I'm more frozen. "You don't know?"

"Know *what*, Paul?" He shifts his weight.

I scrape a hand through my hair. Fuck, *fuck*. How could he not know? "Are you fucking with me?" I ask him. *Say yes*. I almost make the sign of the cross. I feel Catholic in my heart sometimes, even if the church didn't want me.

"No," Lo says, verging on anger. "I'm not fucking with you." His eyes are knives.

I assumed he'd been talking to his *publicists*. Wouldn't they want him to send out a press release about the deceased family member? I ask hurriedly, "What was that phone call then? The statement you're not putting out—"

"None of your business," he snaps. Then he expels a sharp breath, rethinking and glaring at the ceiling. "Daniel—a longtime board member of Hale Co.—wants me to say that my *daughter* didn't write any of her leaked stories." He emphasizes *daughter* as if I don't know he has one.

Pretty certain she's the girl I'm in love with.

I nod a couple times. "'Cause you sell strollers and diapers, not smut. Which doesn't make much sense since sex is what produces babies..." I trail off. He's glaring, and I'm trying my best not to crack a shadow of a smile.

"I'm not in the mood, Paul."

"I could get you in it."

"Or I could get you out of it."

Neither of us are smiling. "That, too," I mutter, not wanting him to revert to the original topic. I'm stalling. "Maybe this Daniel guy should read Luna's fics. He might like 'em."

Lo wheezes out a brittle laugh. "Yeah, the only thing Daniel Perth likes is when I say *yes*."

"Her fics are pro-baby," I defend. "The warrior princess on Demos has like five of them." I cock my head in thought. "He may not like that they have horns though."

Lo's brows scrunch. "He couldn't give a shit what she's written. He just cares about numbers, and he's correlating the blowback from her stories with our profit margin—and it's a *dumb* correlation. There's about a thousand other fucking things that could point to the profit loss." He's heated, but he sighs out. "It's been an ongoing thing, not that you needed to know any of this." He claws his fingers through his light brown hair. "Don't tell Luna about it."

"Wasn't planning on it." It'd just hurt her to know there's discord at Hale Co. from the fallout of her writing. At least...I think it'd hurt her. But she's been handling the leaked fics a lot better than she did before her memory loss.

I'm about to make a quick exit, but as soon as I chuck the dog leashes in a wicker basket, Lo says, "You better not go."

I've wanted him to tell me that.

More than he'll ever know.

You better not go. But he's not pleading with me to stay because he's grown a liking to me—I have answers and he looks like he could butcher me for them.

Lo adds, “Not before you tell me what’s going on. Why’d you say that? *Sorry for your loss?* Who were you talking about?”

“Maybe someone else should tell you...” I crane my neck over my shoulder, expecting Maximoff or Farrow to enter by now.

No one does.

It's just me. Alone. With Luna's dad.

“Why?” He's more pissed. “You and me. *Trust.*” He motions from his chest to my chest, as if the trust meter between us is teetering towards empty again.

“I'm just not the one who should tell you, I don't think.”

His face screws up in several emotions. “You said *sorry for your loss.* You said *he meant something to me.* You know what I'm thinking? If it's that goddamn bad, then my phone would be blowing up. Ryke would be calling me. He would've already told me himself.”

“I have no clue why your brother hasn't called you yet,” I say. “Maybe he's taking a bubble bath.”

Lo shoots me a look like I'm not helping.

I thought it was a funny image. I scratch the back of my head, turning to go.

“Did someone die?” Lo finally asks.

Slowly, I twist back.

I see on his face he doesn't fully believe it, but he's breathing harder like he might.

I stay quiet, a noiseless confirmation.

His shoulders arch, cheekbones sharpen. “Who?” Fear flickers in his eyes. He reaches in his pocket for his phone.

“Greg Calloway,” I tell him. “Your father-in-law.”

Patriarch of the Calloway sisters. Creator of Fizzle: the behemoth soda company that rivals Coca-Cola and Pepsi. Husband to the Crow. Grandfather to Luna.

Greg was old. I'm guessing it'd be expected at some point, but he'd been healthy for his age. It came suddenly.

“How?” Lo asks.

“Heart attack in his sleep.”

“No, *how did you find out?*” His breathing heavies again.

If I answer this, am I throwing Luna’s older brother under the bus? I take too long to respond.

Lo looks murderous. “I swear to God, Paul, if you don’t tell me, you are going to rise up my shit list—and I’ve just bumped you down.”

“So you do like me—”

“*Paul.*”

Maybe not by much.

No one said this was a secret. If it turns out it is one, I can ask for forgiveness later.

“Maximoff. He told me,” I reveal, just as the front door opens and in walks Maximoff Hale.

PAUL DONNELLY

I CAN BARELY MEET Maximoff's eyes.

Farrow with their two babies and Luna aren't far behind him. They shut out the cold winter, entering the warm living room where the wood-burning fireplace is lit. Flames crackle and spark, and I'm thinking I should skulk away from this family matter. Find a dark corner or something. It doesn't really involve me.

"Who told you about Greg?" Lo asks his son.

Maximoff hasn't even unzipped his Patagonia jacket yet. He casts a brief glance at me, tension thickening.

"You didn't know?" Luna asks her dad.

"No, I didn't know." He's staring down Maximoff now.

Luna sends me a wide-eyed look that says, *oh no*. She's on edge. Maybe for me. Maybe for her brother. Maybe even for her dad.

I want to tell her there's no hole too deep that I can't climb out of. That I'd do whatever it took to help her out too. That despite all the bad luck we've encountered and every misstep I've ever made, I know we'll still come out on top. Hope is the main thing keeping my head above water. I'm more terrified of ever losing it.

"Dad," Maximoff says slowly.

"How do you know, and I don't?" Lo asks.

"Grandpoppy Lo." Ripley cuts into the strained air. "Do you have-have a..." The little boy stares up at Farrow for the word.

"Popsicle," Farrow says. "He's been talking about them all the way here." To Luna, he explains, "Lily always gives him one."

It's a past that Luna can't remember. She seems appreciative of being kept in the loop.

Lo squats and makes a funny face at Ripley. "You want a popsicle? In the cold?"

Ripley nods his head vigorously. "Please?"

"Okay, Iceman." He stands. "We'll get you a popsicle. Only because you're my *favorite* grandson, but shhh." He puts a finger to his lips. "That's a secret between you and me."

Ripley nods, taking the secret-keeping business seriously. It's cute and all, and maybe Baby Ripley has softened Lo's sharp edges.

But Lo doesn't lead the little boy into the kitchen. Instead, he tells Farrow, "Popsicles are in the freezer. I need to talk to your husband."

"He's not at fault, Lo," Farrow says, defending Maximoff.

"And I'm not blaming him," Lo retorts. "I'm just trying to figure out what the hell happened."

"It's fine," Maximoff says to Farrow. "Take care of our kids. I'll just be a sec." He's unstrapping two backpacks from both his shoulders. They likely contain diapers and formula. Farrow takes one backpack. In the other hand, he's gripping the baby carrier where their newborn is fast asleep.

"I'll get that," I reach for the second backpack to help, looking forward to an exit. *Hopefully with Luna.*

"You. Stay," Lo says.

He's speaking to me.

It's not a hallucination or mirage.

"Why?" I glance around, trying to find the joke. Not even the couch has answers. Rug isn't funny either.

"Because this is what happens when you're the messenger." He gives me a half-smile. "And I don't believe in that old motto about them."

Don't shoot the messenger. Alright, yeah. He's prepared to shoot me down, right out of the sky.

Been there before. Experienced that.

Something tells me he's just keeping me on my toes. Not letting me get too comfortable in case he still needs to throw me outside like yesterday's trash.

Mission accomplished. I feel sprightly. Ready to be hurled in any direction.

“Dad,” Luna says, more protectively but also uneasily. She glances from him to me. She has no memory of her dad *seriously* hating me. Like wishing the bubonic plague upon my firstborn sort of hate. Joke’s on him though because I’ve never wanted kids.

“We’re just talking,” Lo assures her.

“He loves talking to me,” I tell her with the cock of my head. I think she’s smiling at my accent on the word *talk*.

Lo wasn’t kidding when he said he’s not in the mood. He has no rebuttal for me. No sharp-tongued quip back. Feels weird that I miss it.

Farrow hesitates to leave Maximoff in the crossfire of the unknown, but he’s got his hands full. So he ushers Ripley into the kitchen. Luna takes Maximoff’s second backpack and follows Farrow out. When they’re gone, I just try to imagine Luna smiling.

It leaves me with a warm fuzzy feeling that’s a whole lot better than the pained look on Lo’s face.

“Does your mom know?” Lo asks his son the second the kitchen door shuts. They’re squared off in front of the crackling fireplace, and I stand behind the sofa, furniture separating me from them.

“Aunt Rose is telling her,” Maximoff says. Must be why Lily was at the Cobalt Estate early this morning. I stopped by the Hale House to help out since Lily is still on crutches. Only she wasn’t here.

I lean against the back of the couch. Not saying a word.

Lo stares at the wall, unblinking. His cheekbones are razorblades. “So what—I’m the last to know?”

“Uncle Ryke said he’d tell you—”

“He’d tell me...but only after he told my own son.” Lo raises his phone. “I haven’t gotten a call from my brother or from Connor. Wonder why.” I hear the hurt in his voice. “Which one told you first?”

“I was on a three-way call with them—”

“Jesus,” Lo winces.

“—they want to tell you *face-to-face*. Uncle Ryke said he’d be here soon, and I haven’t known for that long either. I just found out on the drive over here.” He motions at the foggy window. There is no Christmas tree around, no strand of garland over the fireplace mantel, no mistletoe hanging in the entryway, nothing to show we’re five days out from the holiday. Other than the lights I was stringing on the roof outside, the Hales haven’t had time for Christmas cheer.

My family stole that kind of joy from them the instant they assaulted Lily and kidnapped Luna, and if I could give back what they took, I would.

I'm trying.

I've been trying.

Lo stares off again. "They could've looped me in on that call. Christ, Rose could've told Lily *and* me together. Instead, I'm here." He slaps a hand to his side. "I'm *here*, and I learned from a *bodyguard*."

Wish he would've called me Luna's boyfriend, but I guess I'm not that yet. Luna and I are in a "no labels" pool. Looks murky here.

"I'm sorry, Dad," Maximoff says empathetically. "Ryke was supposed to be the one to tell you."

Lo cringes. "*Christ*, don't apologize for my brother. I love him more than anything, but he should've *never* told you before telling me."

"What does it really fucking matter?" Maximoff asks.

"Because you're my *son*, and pardon me for wanting to know the heavy shit in this family before my kids do."

Maximoff takes a tensed breath. "I'm not a child. I'm twenty-five—"

"I don't care if you've reached five-hundred-and-fifty. I'm still twice your age, and I'm *your father*."

"He didn't want to tell you over the phone!" Maximoff shouts, then lets out a deeper breath, trying not to yell. "He *cares* about you. Everyone fucking *cares*, Dad, and after everything you've been through—everything you saw and heard with Mom and Luna—no, we didn't want to tell you over the phone. *We*." He points to his chest. "I was a part of that, so if you're going to be pissed at Ryke, at Connor, at whoever else for caring about you, you can add me to the damn list too."

Lo looks away, his eyes glassing. He seems to choose his words carefully as he says, "I'm not upset that you care, bud. But I'm your parent. That doesn't change because I...because life for me is harder some days. I'm *still* your father, and it's not your responsibility to look after this household like an interim parent. It never has been. It *never* will be."

"I don't think it will be," Maximoff says strongly. "I never thought it would."

The conviction in his voice is heard loudly, and they hold each other's gazes with weight and history I really can't make sense of.

This is a heavy moment that I probably shouldn't witness. I take a few steps backward. I glance at the kitchen door. Wonder if I could sneak

out...?

Lo nods a couple times, then his eyes dart to me. *Shit*. I stay still as he says, “I’m mainly upset no one believed I could hear about Greg Calloway’s death while I was alone.” As if I can’t read between the lines, Lo informs me, “They thought I’d go grab a bottle of Macallan that doesn’t even exist in this *dry* house.”

Looks like I’m stuck here.

“I can vouch that it didn’t happen,” I say lightly. “Been here the whole time.” *Strangely*.

Lo waves to me like I’m greater evidence of his sobriety. He speaks to his son. “And just so you know—and what I’ll be telling your uncles—this isn’t close to anything that could knock me over. The fact that you all thought Greg ‘I’m a shit grandparent’ Calloway would put me on my ass is insulting.”

My brows jump.

Lo is on a roll, barely pausing. “Sure, I loved him when he made amends with your mom and when I saw him only as her father. He was decent to Lil. He loved her more than her mother ever did. But I *hated* him when he started letting his wife treat my children like dog shit while favoring Rose and Connor’s kids. You might as well have been invisible to him.”

“He wasn’t always visible to me,” Maximoff says under his breath.

“It wasn’t on you to make that effort. You’re the *grandchild*. You’re supposed to be doted on and loved, and he couldn’t do either for you.”

I blink a few times, remembering my grandmom. She’s smoking in her recliner as I leave the apartment to find a bite to eat. It’s eight p.m. She’s not even looking at me. Not even as I unlock the door.

“As far as I’m concerned,” Lo continues, “he’s been dead to me for years. So has your grandmother. Any tears I shed will be ones of absolute joy.”

My lips begin to rise.

“Jesus, Dad,” Maximoff grimaces.

“What?”

“I can’t celebrate Grandfather Calloway’s *death*. He meant a lot to the Cobalts. Janie loved him, and Sulli always talks about the chocolates he’d sneak her as a kid.”

Lo stares at him for a long moment. “God, you’re such a Hufflepuff.”

Maximoff groans.

“You have your mom’s heart.”

“Dad.”

“That’s a good thing. Keep it. You don’t want mine. It’s ugly.”

“It’s not,” Maximoff refutes.

“That’s exactly what she’d say.” He smiles at him.

Maximoff starts smiling back, and it’s good to see their relationship hasn’t imploded. Seems like it’d take several dozen nuclear bombs to make a real dent. I try not to think about my dad. About the relationship I’m constructing from some desolate post-war wasteland.

I know I’ll never have what Maximoff has with Lo.

I’m not wishing for what can’t exist, but I’m hoping for something better than I had. My dad’s clean. That’s a start, I guess. I can tell myself it’s a personal choice—to reconnect with Sean Donnelly—but it’s still more out of necessity.

He’s ensuring our family, the Donnellys, don’t believe I ratted them out. They think I’m loyal to them because of my dad. Hell, my dad doesn’t even know I’m the reason most are behind bars.

I think he’d kill me if he found out.

LUNA HALE

I'VE THOUGHT about eavesdropping a hundred and one times, and I've also wished for supersonic hearing. Alas, my ears are still of the average variety. I only pick up the anxious grumble of my stomach.

"You think my dad will kick Donnelly out?" I ask Farrow while digging through the freezer-burnt popsicle box. I try to find the best one for Ripley.

"He better not," Farrow says, slipping a protective look at the door. It's reassuring knowing that Farrow will throw himself in front of Donnelly if need be. I imagine Donnelly standing opposite my dad and maybe even my brother. It's a sad picture, and my heart pangs.

If he leaves, I'll leave with him. I try not to overthink the instinct.

I shut the fridge. Ripley is waiting patiently at his kiddie table, distracted by Arkham and Orion who lie close. He reaches for their fur.

"You like banana?" I ask, peeling off the plastic packaging.

Ripley inspects me with hesitance before nodding. *Can he see I'm not the same? I'm not her.*

Original Luna is still lost in my mind, but she's also in the pages of the diary. I found her in manuscript-form today. Hope glimmers brighter. I also try to hang on to Donnelly's words about Ripley just being timid around everyone.

The nearly two-year-old reaches up for the popsicle, and I place the stick in his hands. He holds tight.

Farrow asks him, "What do you say to your Auntie Luna?"

"Thank ew." Ripley licks the popsicle, beaming up at me like I'm the coolest, best aunt.

I smile back. Okay, maybe I'm not such a lame OG Luna replacement. I slide on a barstool at the kitchen island, the glittery hard-bound diary before me. While I might be able to learn a lot from myself in those pages, I also never want to stop building on the relationships that mean something to me.

So I ask Farrow, "Did the two of us talk a lot about Donnelly?"

He tilts his head back and forth, considering. "Not too much." His sleeves are rolled, revealing a cascade of tattoos, and little Cassidy is in his inked arms while he feeds her a bottle. "I have a feeling you kept the majority of your thoughts about him to yourself."

With the diary in my possession, it's not as frustrating hearing this.

Farrow adds, "It's not like I was an over-sharer." His face tenses while chewing on a piece of gum. "I could've told you or anyone else how much I love that shameless motherfucker—that he's been my family. But I never even came close to that."

"You just did," I say quietly.

Farrow takes a slow breath.

I lean forward. "I wonder if I was scared that you wouldn't like me with him."

His brows lift with a barbell piercing. "I wouldn't have been unhappy about it."

I start to smile. "Really?"

"You make sense together," Farrow says. "You've likely always made sense since you first met him, but I didn't really see it until later."

He knows Donnelly better than I do, maybe even better than I *did*. "You've seen him with other girls, right? Did they make sense with him too?"

Farrow arches his brows again. "No."

No is a good answer but not a completely satisfying one. I want a million words of explanation. "Why not?"

"Because most of the girls I saw him with—they just wanted to get *laid*. You've seen him." He jerks his head to the door. "He looks like a fun night. Not like someone you take home to Mom and Dad."

It's hard for me to see only the surface of Donnelly.

My first glimpse of him at the hospital—he was more than just the sexy scattered tattoos, the intriguing piercings, the sculpted muscle and lush chestnut hair. He was loving in the way he approached me. In the way he

held me. He was daring. In the way he fought to stay at my side. And his magnetic, luminous smile always seemed to touch his blue eyes.

I could write a thesis on the Attractiveness of Paul Donnelly, but it suddenly hits me.

“I never took him home,” I realize.

“You tried,” Farrow refutes.

My dad didn't want him here. Not until it was safe, I've gathered. But it is now. “He's here now,” I say, more to myself. *Please let him stay.* My mind reels over what Farrow is telling me. “Donnelly said he doesn't really go slow, but he wants to try to go slow with me.”

“Yeah?” Farrow adjusts the bottle against Cassidy's little lips, but his eyes are mostly on mine. “You don't want that?”

I say nothing at first. Guilt washes over my face, burning my cheeks. But I let it out, “I want *fast*. Like super-sonic speed *fast*. And maybe I'm just like all the other girls he's hooked up with—because I, too, would love to get laid by Donnelly.”

Farrow's lips stretch in a smile. “It'd be more disconcerting if you didn't want that from him.”

“So...maybe you could tell him that it's okay to go fast? Step on the gas pedal? Don't locate the brake.”

Farrow sucks in a breath between his teeth. “Luna—”

“Farrow,” I plead.

“—he's eight years older than you. You can't remember having sex. I'm not telling him to do shit if he thinks it's too soon. The one thing Donnelly is careful with is *you*.”

I groan, my forehead pounding the counter. “I don't want him to be careful,” I slur together. “Not with this. I want him to destroy me. In the sexiest, hottest way.” I say it to my lap but loud enough that Farrow hears. I lift my head.

Farrow chews slower on his gum. “Whatever your kinks are—you need to tell him, not me.”

I don't even know if it's a kink. It's not like I have experience in the realm of sex or relationships, and I suppose that's the issue. I trace my fingers over the glittery diary cover. Did Original Luna document all her sexual exploits?

“What is that exactly?” Farrow asks.

“My diary.”

His eyes narrow on the cover, no title or words. “No shit?”

“I just found it this morning.” I’m tentative to open it, so I push it aside and watch Cassidy drink her milk. Farrow asks if I want to feed her, and my heart grows, excited for baby snuggles. Once the soft newborn is in my arms, I tilt the bottle so she can easily suck out the milk. “Hi there, little teeny tiny Cassidy,” I whisper, her tufts of hair hidden under a purple cotton beanie. She’s a brunette girl, but her hair color could have been inherited just as likely from Farrow as it could’ve from Jane.

Her eyes are a deep, deep blue, but those could also change color as she ages too. Maybe they’ll morph into brown to match Farrow’s.

A strange, ugly feeling twists inside of me. I realize how much I *don’t* want her to resemble Jane. I hate that I’m wishing against the possibility.

“What’s wrong?” Farrow asks me, his palms on the island.

I look over at him. He’s in a casual lunge, not at all worried about me holding his baby, let alone feeding her. A pain sits on my heart. “Did I ever offer to donate my eggs?”

Farrow is taken aback.

“I didn’t?” My pulse races. “No—”

“Why didn’t I?” I ask him fast, breathing harder. “I would’ve wanted to.”

He combs his fingers through his ash-brown hair. “Shit.” He glances at the door, like maybe he’s hoping Maximoff will come assist him with this conversation.

I frown. “You would’ve said *no*,” I realize—maybe that’s why I never tried. I knew his answer. “You would’ve picked Jane—”

“No,” he cuts in, his eyes glassing but he fights away the rise of emotion. “If you offered, it would’ve been harder not to pick you.”

My ribs clench around my lungs. “I wonder if I thought you wouldn’t choose me, so maybe that’s why I never tried.”

“Maybe,” he breathes, “but Maximoff would’ve wanted to go with Jane.”

I try to understand before the tidal wave of hurt crashes forth. “How come?”

“Probably because you’re younger, and he’d have a point.” Farrow pops a bubblegum bubble, then chews again. “And also the same reason why we

might never use his sperm. Hale genetics.” He lifts and lowers his brows. “Addiction.”

Oh.

I blink a few times and cast a tiny glance back at Baby Ripley. He’s still enjoying the banana popsicle and babbles to Arkham. I look back at Farrow. “He’s a child of addicts too.” They’re already raising a son who has addiction in his lineage.

“Which is why I don’t give a shit about your parents’ history of addiction.” He tips his head. “Your brother overthinks a fuck ton. I think he’ll come around one day, but not right now.”

I tilt the bottle of milk higher. I’m not vying to see myself in their baby. That’s not where the jealousy stems. It has more to do with being the sister I wish I could be. The one who’d make this big grand gesture for two people I wholeheartedly, completely love.

Given the chance back then, I didn’t take it. I hate that I didn’t take it. “Maybe it’s too late,” I say quietly, “but if you’re ever thinking of having more kids, I’d be willing to donate eggs. I want to help you both if I can.”

Farrow nods a couple times, emotion returning to his eyes, but before he can speak, the door flies open. Donnelly saunters in, no one else, and he shuts the door gently behind him.

Just seeing him makes my whole being inflate with oxygen, with life. He makes my blood-cells sing.

“From my fresh newly-sprung experience,” Donnelly tells Farrow, “if you’re ever thinking it, don’t drop bad news on Loren Hale’s lap. He’ll fling it back at you.”

“Man, why the fuck did you tell him Greg died to begin with?”

My grandfather died. I haven’t been thinking about it much, but now my stomach tosses.

“He cornered me,” Donnelly refutes, standing beside his best friend. “I’m almost positive he loves putting me in positions where I can’t escape. Probably because he knows I can worm my way out of a lot.” He acknowledges me with an up-nod and a smile, one that softens when he sees the baby in my arms.

“You want to feed her?” I ask him. “She has a quarter of the bottle left.”

“Nah, that’s okay.” His face is unreadable. “She looks comfy in your arms.” He gives me another smile, and I send one back.

We professed our love to each other on the front lawn, his family is locked away in jail, and so today does feel like a renewal for Donnelly and me. A fresh start with the version of myself who only has a diary and a month of experiences with him. The newness is exhilarating and nerve-wracking because I can't figure out where we go from here.

But I feel that it's somewhere *up* and not down.

"You hungry?" Donnelly asks, opening the fridge. At first I think he's asking Farrow, but they both look to me for the answer.

"I could eat," I say, fighting a smile. Is this what a boyfriend would do? Butter and jelly my toast? Pop my Pop-Tart? Butterflies flap in my stomach until I think, *has a guy made me breakfast before? After a hookup?*

I stifle a wince, not loving the idea of being with anyone but Donnelly. It makes my body squirm even picturing a strange set of hands roaming over my thighs, over my hips and breasts. Like...a violation, but why would it feel *violating* when somewhere deep-down I chose those random guys? It was a choice.

Original Luna's choice, but she is me.

I know that.

Donnelly examines the fridge's contents, then glances at Farrow. "Think Lo will mind if I crack some eggs?"

"He'll definitely say something."

"And I'll definitely say something cuter back." Donnelly grins, and Farrow rolls his eyes, to which Donnelly just laughs. He pulls out a carton of eggs, a bag of shredded cheddar cheese, and a package of thick-cut bacon.

Cassidy has finished her bottle, and just as she fusses, Farrow takes her in his arms. She calms in his strong cradle, then he finds a burp rag from his bag and lies her against his shoulder, patting her back. He's a natural, but this is also his second, I remember.

I think someone told me Baby Ripley came into Farrow and Maximoff's life close to the newborn stage.

"What's with Dad and Moffy?" Xander suddenly strolls into the kitchen, his hair tousled from bed. Erebor, his Newfie pup, joins mine near the kiddie table, and I hear Baby Ripley giggle at the entrance of a third dog. "They're acting weird." He slides on the stool beside me. "Like they just completely stopped talking when I came downstairs."

Farrow and Donnelly exchange a quick glance, maybe not sure how to drop this news to my younger brother. I just go ahead and say it, “Grandfather Calloway passed away. We just heard.”

Xander rubs his forehead, his face cinching, but like me, he’s not all too moved. “Sucks for Mom.”

“You weren’t that close to him?” Donnelly asks, but I get the feeling he’s also asking me. His eyes drift to mine.

“Not really.” Xander hunches forward, elbows on the counter. “What’s this?” He points to my diary, and I’m about to explain.

“Did you hear who died?” Kinney stomps into the kitchen, a phone in her hand. Unlike Xander who only has on plaid pajama bottoms, my sixteen-year-old sister wears a full face of goth makeup, turtleneck sweater, and black overall-dress.

“Did you?” I ask her.

“Audrey just told me.” Kinney crosses her arms, zeroing in on the person at the stove. “What’s he doing here?” She’s eyeing Donnelly like he’s an enemy encroaching on her territory. Her Newfie even lets out a low growl at her heels.

“Making breakfast,” Donnelly says, chucking eggshells in the trash. “Want some?”

“Who invited you?” Kinney barks.

“I did,” Farrow says before I can.

Kinney is disbelieving.

“He’s cool, Kin,” Xander says to her. “Chill.”

Kinney throws up her hands. “Are we just going to act like his family didn’t almost destroy ours? They *hurt* Mom and Luna. Am I the *only* one who cares?” Air vacuums out of the kitchen. I can hear the rapid *thump* of my heart.

Donnelly is frozen.

“I want him here,” I tell my sister.

“Well, I don’t,” Kinney glares at him. “Not until you go back to your messed up family and make sure, with absolute certainty, that they will never, ever, *ever* hurt my sister again.” Raw pain flares in her eyes, and I can almost see how distraught she must’ve been that night I was kidnapped.

Donnelly looks sick to his stomach, and I have this urge to pull him away from Kinney, from this situation entirely.

Farrow interjects, “Kinney, you don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“I know exactly what happened,” she retorts.

“He’s done *enough*.” That’s not Farrow. It’s my dad. He’s standing in the doorway, Moffy beside him, and he tells Kinney, “Put down the pitchforks.”

“*Dad*.”

“*He’s done enough*,” Dad says so severely that Kinney blinks back a surge of sudden tears, then races out of the kitchen, pushing past our oldest brother.

“Kinney,” Moffy calls after her. I hear her heavy footsteps up the staircase, and her dog Salem trots after her.

Guilt tightens my dad’s eyes. “Can you go talk to her, bub?” He’s asking Xander. And with a nod, Xander exits to go check on our little sister. I think about running after her too, but I want to show Donnelly I’m here for him. The pieces of my heart attached to him win out, and I swallow sisterly guilt like an oversized pill with no water.

A lump is in my throat, but some relief washes it down. I just witnessed my dad fiercely defending Donnelly, and I chart the evidence under *my dad likes him*.

“Raiding my pantry?” he asks Donnelly with a disapproving cock of his head. *Uh-oh*. “Go ahead. Help yourself to the eggs, the stale Froot Loops, the curdled milk. Don’t forget the good stuff. Rat poison, top shelf.” He flashes a half-smile. *Rat poison*? My mouth falls open.

Donnelly grins. “Appreciate you sharing your favorite food with me, Papa Hale.”

“Luna’s dad,” he corrects, then shakes his head at me, like I’ve chosen to fall in love with the most grating specimen on planet Earth. On the contrary, Donnelly is the most mesmerizing earthling I’ve met thus far.

I doubt anyone could trump him.

“I’m making your daughter food,” Donnelly tells him. “That alright?”

Dad wears another dry smile. “Only if you fear my every waking move while you do it.”

“Dad,” I say with widened eyes.

“What? He’s in *my* house. I’m your father.” He unspools a bag of bagels and slips one in a toaster. “No guy you’re dating should feel at ease while they’re here. They need to know with one wrong move, I will have them *sobbing* in their ugly little pickup trucks with their testicles rolling halfway down the street and into the sewer where they belong.”

Donnelly glances back from the sizzling eggs. “I don’t have a pickup truck, Luna’s dad.”

“I’ll put you in one.”

“Now you’re buying me a car?”

Farrow bursts out laughing which makes me smile, especially as Baby Ripley giggles, and even my dad can’t hide the rise of his lips.

Dad asks me, “Are you spending the night?”

I rushed to my childhood house to show Donnelly the diary, and I hadn’t given much thought to plans afterward. My first thought: *Wherever Donnelly is, I want to be.* But I hesitate to even draw attention to him in relation to this question.

Too obsessed. Too attached, he’ll think. Then he might pull us apart tonight.

“I…” I start to answer, but the door breezes open again.

This time, my mom appears, splotchy-cheeked and hobbling on crutches. Her reddened eyes instantly find Dad. “Lo, I—”

“It’s okay, Lil.” In a blink, they’ve collided, his arms woven around her gangly frame. He speaks quietly to her, and both Farrow and Donnelly say *sorry for your loss, Lily.*

She wipes at the corners of her eyes. “It was just unexpected…no one saw it coming…” Moffy abandons the bacon to hug Mom. I hop off the barstool to give her one too. She asks us how we’re doing.

“Fine,” Moffy answers.

“Okay,” I nod.

“That’s good.” Her voice shakes a little but she intakes a breath. “Sorry, what were you saying, Luna? Before I walked in? I cut you off.”

“Dad just asked if I was spending the night,” I tell her.

Mom perks up like a reinflated helium balloon. “Yes, you should. Farrow, Moffy, and the babies are already staying. We’ll all be together. Wouldn’t that be nice?” She smiles at Dad like it’s the warmest picture she could imagine. All her kids under one holiday-lit roof.

It’s not so comforting for me, not if Donnelly isn’t in the picture too. The urge to look at him is too strong to resist now. He’s half-turned towards me while he babies the scrambled eggs in the skillet, pushing them around with a spatula.

Does he look as glum as I feel?

I turn back to my parents. “Can Donnelly stay?” I ask.

“No,” Dad says the same time Mom says, “Yes.” Their heads whip to each other. “Lily.”

“Lo,” she counters. “She’s twenty-one.”

The sharpest lines of his face seem to twitch. But he looks straight at Donnelly. “You stay, you’ll be in the guest room. The lawn saw enough *kissing* to last a lifetime.”

Mom makes a confused face.

“From *them*,” Dad clarifies. “This house loves when we kiss, love.” He nuzzles into her neck with playful kisses, and Mom flushes, clinging tighter to him.

While they’re in their own world, my lungs have already expanded in a deeper breath. Especially seeing Donnelly’s emerging grin. He slides a bowl of scrambled eggs to me. “How’s the bed in the guest room?” he asks me quietly, leaning on the island.

My heart pitter-patters. He’s accepting the invitation to spend the night. I take the fork from him. “I’ve never tested it out,” I admit, and if my eyes say, *I want to, with you*, I sincerely hope he can read them.

PAUL DONNELLY

“MY HOUSE RULES. No sex under my roof. Do *not* break it,” Lo warns with a cold glare. He shoves a bed pillow in my chest. He can’t be any blunter.

“Dry house,” I say. “Got it.”

He’s unamused. Not tickling his funny bone tonight, *also got it*. “You want your dick wet?” he asks. “Don’t even *think* about my daughter. Think about the freezing pool I’m going to drown you in. It’s right outside.” He points to the window that faces the backyard and then flashes a half-smile. “Night, Paul.” He pats my shoulder, leaving me alone in the guest room.

Now I’m lying on the queen-size bed, not even crawling underneath the fluffy white comforter, and I’m thinking about my swimming skills. Think I can stay above water alright.

That shouldn’t be my initial thought. I should probably be thinking, *don’t fuck Luna*. For more reasons than just her dad’s house rules.

But I’m not planning on sneaking into her room. The temptation is down the hall, and I’ve got enough control not to slip in there. *Slipping in*. Yeah, that just makes me picture her pussy, and my mind is wrapped around her soft body, the intoxicating floral scent of her skin, her hair, and the fucking noises she makes when I rake my hands down her hips and clutch her thighs.

My breath goes shallow. “Fuck.” I dig the heels of my palms in my eyes. “Someone just *died*, Paul.” I cringe just hearing my own name from my own mouth, not even knowing why I’m using it. Other than the more Lo says it, the more I’m reassociating the name to myself. Feels fucking weird.

I drop my hands. Luna's pussy isn't even a bad thing to dream about. I could be stuck on a sick turntable of disturbing past events. Like the kidnapping, the row house. My family. My father. My *mother*. Fuck.

My face screws up. Yeah, I'd rather be descending into the gorgeous unearthly depths of Luna Hale. No contest.

I palm my dick against the black drawstring pants I'm wearing. Borrowed the bottoms from Farrow. With no underwear on, I easily feel the outline of my swollen head and my cock piercings. I imagine Luna up against the wall. My body pinning her there.

No one else is able to see her. No one else is able to touch her.

Just me.

The visual is a hot stroke down my hardened length. My muscles flex, and I pump myself one more time.

The sudden death isn't shadowing a need for Luna, and it's probably because I didn't know Greg all too well. I'd feel more like an insensitive prick if the Hales were grieving, but only Lily seems to be truly affected.

I spent most of today on the roof, stringing up the rest of the multi-colored lights. Hale House looks merry and bright now, and I even helped Xander put up a flocked pre-lit Christmas tree.

But I didn't get a minute alone with Luna. Felt like Lo made sure of that. He stood behind me when I dug in the musty attic for a box of ornaments. He was around the corner when I attempted to steal her away into the laundry room.

I tried not to believe Luna's therapist put him up to it. Except, Lo took me aside and insinuated I needed to be careful with his daughter because of *trauma*. Not the first warning he's dished out to me. Doubt it'll be his last.

It's not like I've forgotten what she went through. What I went through. I'd rather just focus on what makes me feel good than what makes me want to punch a hole through the wall.

Misery isn't a bed I like sleeping in, and somewhere along the way, it's become miserable to be away from her. I know that too, which is why I keep glancing at the door.

She's right down the hall.

I'm best buds with the two-horned devil on my shoulder, and typically, I'd give in to these impulses (life's too short and all) but I'm not pressuring her like that. She's mentally a *virgin*.

I let out a tight breath. Without my sketchbook, I've been drawing on post-its I found in the guest room's mostly empty dresser. I outline a drawing of an abominable snow-alien, stopping midway through as the conversation with Lo hits my brain again.

I end up texting Farrow.

When you stayed here with Maximoff, did Lo tell you about the "no sex under my roof" house rule?

I press send. They lived at the Hale House when the townhouse burned down, and they hadn't been married.

He replies after a minute or so.

FARROW

No. I didn't get that talk. Did you?

Pretty much. Got the third degree again. Guess he really hates my dick.

I text back. My eyes ping around the many black-framed X-Men movie posters—a shrine to Lily and Lo's adoration of Cyclops, and maybe Rogue...and that shape-shifting chick who I would've said with absolute certainty was a blue alligator until I watched the films.

I send:

You think he has cameras in here? Like a nanny cam?

FARROW

I wouldn't put anything past him, man. Just sweep the room.

I'm about to do just that, but before I can shift a muscle, the door creaks open. I prepare myself for another round of the Loren Hale Petty Special, which he seems to reserve solely for the guys looking to fuck his oldest daughter.

That's not all I want to be to her. Yeah, I want to fuck her, but shouldn't Lo be treating me different somehow? The way he's been talking, he's lumping me in with *all* the guys who could possibly date Luna, as if I'm just a mile marker on the road and not the destination.

You're not special, Paul.

I grind my teeth, but the ache in my jaw subsides the second Luna pops her head in the room. *It's her.* I feel my smile rising.

"Can I come in?" she asks.

"Only if you know the secret passcode," I tease.

"Have I forgotten it?" She speaks so quietly that I question whether I was supposed to hear.

I shake my head slowly. "No. You didn't forget." I'm not dredging up inside jokes that she can't remember. "I'll give you a hint." I bow forward, hanging my arms on my bent knees. "It's in the top five greatest places on my planet."

Luna hasn't emerged fully in the room. I only see her cute round face. Her amber eyes are sweeping me in slow, meticulous strokes. As though engraining the surface and depth of me for future memory.

"Your arms," she says.

Another smile edges across my mouth. "*My* top five," I clarify. "Not yours."

"Your arms are likely the greatest place to be for lots of humans," Luna says, resting her temple on the doorframe. I look into her, her gaze tunneling deeper into mine, and the intensity surges a powerful feeling in my body.

I've never had someone believe in my worth the way that Luna does, and she's staring at me with the same bottomless love she used to. *Keep your shit together.* I run my fingers through my hair. *Don't think about that night.*

I check her out. "I only care about my arms being the greatest place for you."

Her growing smile causes my lips to curve higher.

"Need another hint?" I ask.

"Uh-uh," Luna shakes her head. "A great place on earth for you...might be..." She thinks hard, her mind probably circulating through all the conversations we've had since she woke up in the hospital. "...Wawa?"

"Winner winner, ham hoagie dinner." I gesture her forward with two fingers. "Come on in, space babe."

As she peels her face off the doorframe and enters, I take in her attire. Black baggy sweatpants, the waistband rolled, and a lime-green tank top, but it's her sneakers and a sweatshirt bundled in her hands and a backpack on her shoulder that sound alarm bells in my brain.

‘Cause she isn’t dipping into my room looking to be eaten out. I know this is something else before she says it.

“Do you want to sneak out with me?” She searches my gaze, and I take too long to reply because she adds fast, “I don’t even know if it can be called *sneaking out* since I’m an adult...and it’s not like I live here, but it kinda feels like sneaking, I guess.”

I spin the ballpoint pen between my fingers. “You planning on inviting your bodyguards?”

“No, I was...I was actually thinking of going alone. Without them and without...”

“Me?”

Flush ascends her neck, and I try not to stiffen but my joints aren’t working right at all.

“Yeah, but then I realized that I’d rather go out with you. Hence, this pitstop.” *She’d rather go out with me.* My head whirls a mile a minute, recalling a talk I had with Luna pre-amnesia. She told me about a past I wasn’t a part of. Where she would sneak out. Where she would ditch her bodyguard. Where she would explore Center City late at night with no friend or family in tow.

This time, it’s different.

This time, she wants to do everything with me. And she has no clue she’s subconsciously replaying events of her life but including me in them. How do I even tell her? Am I supposed to? *Don’t fuck up her recovery.*

She watches me slide the pen behind my ear and climb off the bed. “Is that a *yes*? You’re coming?”

I slip her a smile. “Beats hanging out here alone.” I snatch my jeans off the floor. “Plus, the blue alligator chick won’t stop staring at me.”

Luna sees the X-Men: Days of Future Past poster. “Mystique is an intense bean.”

“Think her yellow eyes have been trying to penetrate my soul.” I collect my Scorpions band tee off the armrest of a brown leather chair, then find my boxer-briefs on the cushion.

“In that case, she’s the mutant enemy. No penetration of Donnelly is allowed on my watch.” She crosses her arms in an X formation, the sweatshirt hanging over her shoulder.

“You gonna fight her on my behalf?” I grin.

“To the very death.”

“No dying without me, Hale,” I say seriously and grin wider as she observes, with this adorable pensive expression, how I’m moving across the room. Luna has always been insightful, perceptive, but the writer-brain in her has materialized tenfold since her memory loss.

All the tools she’s used to create fiction, she’s been wielding to solve the mysteries of her life. She’s been hard on herself about finding answers, but I think she’s coped better than most would. I’m glad she has the diary though. Seems like it’ll remedy most of the things that’ve been frustrating her.

She sees me thumb the elastic band of my pants. “I can wait for you downstairs...”

“In a hurry?” I drop the drawstring bottoms. Buck-naked and unashamed as I step into boxer-briefs, I smile over at Luna. Her lips have parted, her cheeks rosy, and there is no other way to describe how she’s staring other than she’s soaking in my full existence. Not just my cock or tattoos, but the casualness in which I’m getting dressed.

“Not anymore,” she mutters. “You’re a peculiar person, you know.”

“I don’t know,” I enunciate the words, sounding clearer, and I button my jeans. “Tell me about it.”

That’s when she pinches the green kyber crystal around her neck, the necklace I gifted her this morning. I’m still wearing a blue one, the chain colder against my skin. “I thought I’d come in here and need to convince you to sneak out with me,” she admits. “Or in the very least, I’d have to convince you to let me go without my bodyguards. Wait—we aren’t calling them, are we?”

I should most definitely text Frog and Quinn—maybe have them secretly tracking our whereabouts. But that’d entail lying to Luna, and I’m not doing that. I could be upfront about how she needs them, but in this moment, I just want her to need me.

I can take care of her.

It’s just one night.

No one needs to know.

“Wasn’t planning on it,” I tell her, pulling the Scorpions tee over my head.

“Okay, good,” she nods, more to herself, then releases her hold of the kyber crystal. “I guess I just appreciate how easy this was. So...thanks.”

“No need to thank me.” I shove my wallet in my pocket, coming closer to her. “I want it as much as you do.”

Luna clings harder to my gaze, and I inhale a lungful of the pungent honeysuckle scent wafting off her. It whirls toxically around me, and we seriously need to go or else I’m gonna shove her against the wall, the mattress, some surface where I can feel her warmth against me.

“You driving?” I ask, my throat hoarse with pent-up arousal, but I clear it.

She tucks a piece of hair behind her ear, still flushed. “Um...actually, I wasn’t sure.” She crinkles her nose. “I don’t have a car here, and if I take my parents’, they’ll hear the garage. So that leaves us with a rideshare?”

Safety-wise, catching an Uber is a decent plan, but we wouldn’t be able to talk much in the car. Sue me for wanting more alone-time with her. “I have an idea.” I motion to the hall. “Go out the front door.”

Quietly, we exit the guest room and tiptoe down the stairs and out the front entrance. As soon as the December cold hits us, Luna yanks the sweatshirt over her head. “You need a jacket?” she whispers.

It’s chilly, but I’ll survive. “The cold doesn’t bother me. This way.” I jerk my head to the driveway, and when we reach the curb, I let her know we’re walking to the two mansions owned by Triple Shield, only one street away in the neighborhood. “I have keys to a security vehicle.”

“Are you allowed to take it even if I’m not your client?” Luna wonders. It’s not that she’s not my client. It’s that she pays Kitsuwon Securities for security, not Triple Shield, so my new boss won’t like me using Epsilon resources for her. If I were still Omega, there’d be no issue.

“Not really, but I won’t tell if you don’t.”

“Your secrets are always safe with me,” she says softly. “But maybe too well since I’ve forgotten three years of them.”

“Nah, that just makes you the best secret-keeper around.” I slide my arm around her thin shoulders, hugging her closer, and Luna leans her weight into my side while we walk. Feels natural, being with her in the darkness and quiet of the night.

I’ve already signed my contract, so I’m officially Epsilon *today*, which is why I’ve been given this shiny set of car keys. But I’ve been a bodyguard long enough to know SFE is anal about the Range Rovers. And by SFE, I mean *O’Malley*.

A strange dark piece of me is delighting in this pea-sized payback. Where I'm taking his baby for a joyride with my...with Luna.

Anyway, fuck him.

The Range Rover is parked on the curb, and once we're inside the SUV, I crank up the heaters to warm Luna and the cold black leather interior, then I pop up the GPS on the nav screen. "Where we headed?" I ask.

She digs out her phone. "I was thinking this place. I've never been, but it looks interesting." She flashes me her screen—a Yelp review of a local dive bar.

Thirsty Goose.

I go still, unblinking for a stifling second.

"What?" She frowns, then rereads the reviews. "Is it a shitty place or something? There weren't that many pictures."

"Not shitty. It's a cool bar. They've always got free salted nuts and they usually play nineties rock." I grip the steering wheel loosely, then tighter as I drive out of the neighborhood. "But you've been there before."

She elevates in her seat like I plucked a shooting star out of the sky for her. "When did we go there?"

My muscles cramp. "We didn't go together."

Luna sinks back down. "We didn't?" Her brows pinch, as if she's trying to grapple with that lost memory. "I went alone?"

I nod. "You only told me about it."

She eases back against the seat, then after a minute of silence, she glances at me. "This is my favorite timeline—the one where you exist with me."

It surges through my chest, and I try to look at her, but I need to lean out the window and punch the security code on the gate. When I'm back inside and stepping on the gas, I reach out and hold her hand.

Despite the pain we had to crawl through, all she had to endure with my family, I'd say the timeline where I get to see her smile and blush and hear the brightness of her laugh—that is, and will always be, my favorite.

Just got to make sure I don't fuck it up.